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GEORGE CURRY AND THE POLITICS OF FOREST CONSERVATION IN NEW MEXICO

By ELMO R. RICHARDSON*

WHEN George Curry assumed the governorship of New Mexico Territory in August, 1907, he was popularly hailed as a harmonizer of the factionalism and discontent which threatened to disrupt the Republican Party there. As a former Rough Rider and military governor in the Philippines, he was a close friend of Theodore Roosevelt who considered Curry "one of the very best men I know anywhere."¹ Although a longtime resident of New Mexico, Curry had been absent from the Territory long enough to avoid the factions which had grown up during the administration of Herbert J. Hagerman in 1906 and 1907. He was therefore, it seemed to Roosevelt, the ideal man to reunite the Party.²

The administration of public lands had been the greatest source of disruption among New Mexicans and was the most critical problem facing Curry's administration. Hagerman had thought that he represented Roosevelt's policies but he did not understand the people or conditions in New Mexico. His attempt to institute administrative reforms succeeded only in antagonizing the Party leaders. When Hagerman ratified a "grossly improper" acquisition of public land, Roosevelt demanded and received his resignation. At the same time, the Territory was deluged with investigators from the Departments of Interior and Justice, and their interference in politics and government seemed unwarranted and abusive to many New Mexicans.³ Resentment against these federal agents crackled forth in a speech by Territorial At-

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1. T. Roosevelt to P. B. Stewart, Apr. 16, 1907, and to O. McHarg, July 31, 1907, printed in Elting E. Morison ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: 1951-1954), V, 649-650 and fn., 739-741 and fn., hereinafter cited as Morison, *Letters of T.R.* A biographical sketch of Curry is in Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexican History* (Cedar Rapids: 1912), II, 562-563, fn. 472.

2. Morison, *Letters of T.R.*, V, 740, fn.

3. On the Hagerman administration, see Twitchell, *op. cit.*, II, 549-561. On the land fraud see Roosevelt to Hagerman, May 1, 1907, printed in Morison, *Letters of T.R.*, V, 658-662, and Hagerman to Roosevelt, May 15, 1907, printed in Twitchell, *op. cit.*, II, 558-559, fn. 468.

torney General Albert B. Fall at Curry's inauguration; Fall believed that the arrival of Curry meant the continued development of resources by New Mexicans and the withdrawal of the investigators.⁴

Although Curry was a personal friend of Roosevelt the President, he did not share the views of Roosevelt the conservationist. He was a stockowner in southern New Mexico where his ranch adjoined the Lincoln National Forest. His views on forest reserve policy, the most important aspect of conservation, were consequently those of the users of the grazing lands in the reserves. These users believed that federal regulations were detrimental and were administered with discrimination against ranchers. Since stockmen were prominent in the economy and politics of the Territory, their view of federal policy generally prevailed among New Mexicans.

In previous years, Miguel A. Otero, the predecessor of Curry and Hagerman, had used his political popularity to maintain a working agreement with federal officials, in spite of local discontent among settlers and ranchers in the Territory.⁵ His success was partly due to the comparatively small area which was withdrawn for reserves before 1905. Thereafter, extensive additions to the reserves and a more vigorous administration by Gifford Pinchot's Forest Service combined with the unpopular rule of Hagerman, who carried out Pinchot's directives without question, to intensify the usual discontent on the subject of land and resources. A measure of this discontent was expressed by the New Mexicans who attended the Public Lands Convention, convened by the critics of conservation in Denver in June, 1907. Among them were former Governor Otero and Solomon Luna, one of the leading sheepowners of the Southwest. Although these delegates were not as vociferous in criticism of federal policy as

4. Morison, *Letters of T.R.*, V, 757, fn.

5. Eg.: B. Hermann to M. A. Otero, July 10, 1899, T. Ryan to Otero, Mar. 20, 1899, W. M. Miller to Otero, June 20, 1899, G. Pinchot to Otero, Dec. 10, 1904, Miguel A. Otero Papers, Historical Society of New Mexico. Evidence of local discontent furnished to the writer by L. F. Kneipp, at that time ranger-in-charge of the Pecos River, Jemez and Taos Forest Reserves; see also T. B. Catron to P. Perea, Nov. 23, 1899, Thomas B. Catron Papers, University of New Mexico Library.

some of their fellow westerners, they declared that the users of the forests could best determine their own use policy.⁶

During the first months of his administration, Curry plainly indicated that his public land policy would be based on the realities of local interests rather than upon the enthusiasms of federal agents. When his friend and fellow stockowner, Attorney General Fall, denied that the Alamogordo Lumber Company had fraudulently acquired 20,000 acres of timber lands, Curry firmly supported Fall, vigorously criticized the activities of the federal agents, and went so far as to offer his resignation to Roosevelt. The President believed, however, that Curry's removal would throw New Mexico affairs into chaos, refused to accept the resignation, but instead instructed the federal investigators not to meddle with territorial officials. In October, the case against the Alamogordo Lumber Company was dropped.⁷

Victorious in this first skirmish, Curry turned to the other source of discontent among his fellow New Mexicans: the federal forest policy. In November, after receiving letters of complaint from citizens of Lincoln County, he asked local Forest Service officers to accompany him to the disaffected area to discuss adequate protection of the rights of small settlers, especially those of Mexican descent.⁸ But the discontent deepened, and in January, Curry's neighbors in the county claimed that the exclusion policy was ruining the immediate area and causing many families to leave because they could not pay the fees for the use of the reserve.⁹ Curry's indignation exploded in a letter to Chief Forester Pinchot that same month. Professing admiration for his work, Curry nevertheless asserted that Pinchot did not understand the problems of the West. In the teeth of the claim that few complaints came from New Mexicans, Curry stated that "practically all

6. *Daily Optic* (Las Vegas), June 19, 1907; *Albuquerque Journal*, June 23, 1907.

7. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Aug. 22, Oct. 26, 1907; G. Curry to O. McHarg and to C. J. Bonaparte, Aug. 17, 1907, *George Curry Papers*, Historical Society of New Mexico, hereinafter cited as *Curry Papers*. Roosevelt asked Curry to remove Fall as Attorney General because his usefulness had been "hopelessly impaired" by his remarks at Curry's inauguration. Neither this removal nor the subsequent divergence of views on federal conservation ended the close personal and political friendship between Curry and Fall.

8. D. D. Bronson to G. Curry, Nov. 29, 1907, *Curry Papers*.

9. J. W. Owen to G. Curry, Jan. 22, 1908, *Curry Papers*.

the people of New Mexico are opposed to enlarging the reserves now established and are in favor of reducing same." The forest policy, he continued, no matter how desirable in principle, was being administered so as to do injustice to a large number of people. Curry pointedly remarked that the "true friend of the President is the man who tells him of conditions just as they exist." Therefore, since he considered it his primary duty to protect the welfare of the people of the Territory, Curry threatened to appeal beyond Pinchot to Roosevelt and Congress even if it cost him his position as governor.¹⁰ Having gotten his way in the matter of the federal agents, Curry obviously felt that he could again use his friendship with Roosevelt as a weapon. Pinchot, who was even more assured of Roosevelt's trust, told Curry that forest policy was primary to all other considerations, although he meant to attend to the problems which had arisen in New Mexico.¹¹

Roosevelt called Curry to Washington in January, 1908, arranged a compromise in order to end Party strife in the Territory, and dropped most of the investigations of alleged land frauds.¹² At the same time, Curry, accompanied by other New Mexicans including sheep baron Luna and Holm O. Bursum, a power in the territorial Republican organization, called on Pinchot to discuss the crucial relationship of forest policy and range control. Some of these New Mexicans considered the defeat of grazing regulations more important than the burning issue of statehood. The immediate result of this conference was the opening to entry of several thousand acres of proposed addition to the national forests south of Albuquerque. These and other examples of Pinchot's "corrected mistakes" pleased Curry immensely, and he in turn consented to the withdrawal of other lands for forest reserves.¹³ The

10. G. Curry to G. Pinchot, Jan. 13, 1908, Curry Papers.

11. G. Pinchot to G. Curry, Dec. 28, 1907, Curry Papers.

12. Morison, *Letters of T.R.*, V, 863-864, fn.

13. J. W. Owen to G. Curry, Jan. 22, 1908, Curry to Owen, Jan. 30, 1908, to M. Sanchez, Feb. 11, 1908, to W. H. Andrews, Feb. 11, 1908, G. Pinchot to Curry, Feb. 19, 1908, Curry Papers; W. C. Barnes to H. A. Jastro, Feb. 3, 1908, Jastro to Barnes, Feb. 13, 1908, Will C. Barnes Papers, Arizona Pioneer Historical Society, hereinafter cited as Barnes Papers. Barnes had been inspector of stock for the Territory. He later became assistant to Albert F. Potter, head of the Forest Service Grazing Division, and as such retained the confidence of New Mexican stockgrowers and worked closely with Curry in bringing about their support of the federal forest policy.

coincidence of these two conferences might seem to imply that Pinchot was instructed by Roosevelt to pour additional oil on the troubled waters of New Mexico politics. In view of the integrity of both men, and their devotion to a firm conservation policy, this implication cannot stand. It seems more likely that both the fraud cases and the reserve boundaries were doubtful enough to encourage their abandonment in return for party harmony and for desirable additions to the forest reserves of New Mexico.

These conferences marked the beginning of understanding and friendship between Curry and Pinchot. Thereafter they not only made forest policy acceptable to New Mexicans, but laid the foundation for a new popular view of federal conservation. Curry concluded that New Mexico was more vitally interested than any other western state in the satisfactory administration of resources.¹⁴ Confronted with complaints over use restrictions and forest boundaries in subsequent months, he personally undertook to end local unrest by working with, not against, the federal officials. When, for example, sheepmen of Cuba (New Mexico) petitioned for the elimination of 150,000 acres from nearby national forests, Curry asked Forest Service officials to go to the area. These agents circulated petitions among the local residents to permit those opposed to eliminations to express their opinion also. In spite of misunderstanding and pressure from the sheepmen, and despite propaganda to the effect that the land would be sheeped to death, the resulting boundary adjustments generally satisfied the users of the forests.¹⁵ On an earlier occasion, Curry called Albert F. Potter, an Arizonan who headed the Forest Service Grazing Division, to Santa Fe to consult with him and with representatives of every part of the Territory on the subjects of boundary adjustments and further additions to the reserves.¹⁶ Curry corresponded with forest supervisors on behalf of settlers and promoted consultations between these officers and citizens. He personally investigated local conditions and opinion before confirming or

14. G. Curry to H. W. Kelly, Aug. 6, 1908, Curry Papers.

15. *Albuquerque Journal*, Sept. 9, 1909; C. Hightower to G. Curry, Aug. 31, 1909, E. H. Clapp to Curry, Sep. 15, 20, 1909, Curry Papers.

16. G. Curry to S. Luna, to R. Gallegos, to C. Spiess, and to H. O. Bursum, July 18, 1908, Curry Papers.

temporarily delaying additions to national forests.¹⁷ In all of these actions, he was confident that Pinchot would meet New Mexicans halfway on future forest problems, and he assured his superior, Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield, that when boundaries were adjusted to exclude non-timbered land, the federal policy would be satisfactory to the people of the Territory.¹⁸

In the wake of this new attitude of co-operation between New Mexicans and federal officials, Curry publicly displayed his own conversion to conservation. In May 1908, many months before Roosevelt's Conference of Governors on Conservation made its recommendations, Curry established a temporary Territorial Conservation Commission. When the legislature met in March of the following year, this Commission was permanently established in law and an appropriation was made for its activities. Some of Curry's original appointees to the Commission included Luna, then President of the New Mexico Sheep Growers Association, a merchant lumberman, and members of the National Committees of both parties.¹⁹ Although eastern conservationists might have viewed such appointments as unwise, Curry exhibited characteristic political wisdom in bringing the interests and influence of the Territory's economic and political leaders into the Commission. He also promoted understanding of federal conservation among New Mexico lawmakers by inviting Pinchot to address the Territorial Legislature in March, 1909. Pinchot also talked with delegations of stockmen in Santa Fe at the same time.²⁰

Curry appointed W. A. F. Jones, secretary of the Commission and friend of Pinchot, to be New Mexico's delegate to the first National Conservation Congress held in Spokane, Washington in August, 1909. Jones told the Congress that

17. G. Curry to G. Pinchot, Jan. 19, 1909, to A. Montes, Feb. 6, 1909, A. C. Rangeland to Curry, Jan. 15, 1909, L. A. Hughes to Curry, Aug. 20, 1909, J. B. Adams to Curry, Jan. 27, 1909, Curry Papers.

18. G. Curry to J. R. Garfield, Aug. 22, 1908, Curry Papers.

19. G. Curry to S. Luna, July 17, 1908, to T. R. Shipp, Aug. 6, 1908, to H. W. Kelly and A. A. Jones, Aug. 6, 1908, Curry Papers; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of . . . New Mexico, Thirty Fifth Session* (Santa Fe: 1909), 8-42; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Mar. 19, 1909.

20. G. Curry to G. Pinchot, Mar. 2, 1909, A. F. Potter to Curry, Mar. 2, 1909, W. H. Andrews to Curry, Mar. 1, 1909, Curry Papers.

New Mexicans were "more than satisfied" with the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior in their administration of conservation.²¹ Curry was justly proud of his part in bringing about that attitude. "I think our joint efforts," he wrote Pinchot, "have been the means of making the forestry service in New Mexico more popular than ever."²² An editorial in the usually critical *Santa Fe New Mexican* testified, although grudgingly, that this popular acceptance of policy was real. The editor had "a sneaking suspicion" that there were still great amounts of grazing lands which should be eliminated from the reserves, but he asserted that New Mexico had "slowly and unwillingly learned that the forest reserves are good for it and its people."²³

George Curry's relationship with the federal administration during the last year of his governorship was marred by a heated controversy with Roosevelt's successor, William H. Taft, and Taft's Secretary of the Interior, Richard A. Ballinger. Early in 1909, Curry asked permission to come to Washington to urge adoption of the statehood bill and to settle outstanding conservation matters. Ballinger denied him this permission and Curry, who had been an admirer of Taft's, took this as a sign of no confidence and sent in his resignation. After correspondence and consultations, he agreed to remain in office.²⁴ His own confidence in the new administration was nevertheless profoundly damaged, and he had no difficulty in choosing sides when Taft dismissed Pinchot in January, 1910, after the latter's controversy with Ballinger. In a letter to his friend on this latter occasion, Curry recalled the "feeling of hostility to the forestry policy of the Roosevelt administration" which he had had when he assumed the governorship in 1907, and admitted to Pinchot that he had subsequently realized that he had been "absolutely wrong."²⁵

Curry was glad to get out of the governor's office so that he could be "absolutely free" to do what he considered best

21. W. A. F. Jones to G. Curry, Aug. 26, 1909, Curry Papers.

22. G. Curry to G. Pinchot, Dec. 22, 1909, Curry Papers.

23. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Jan. 20, 1910.

24. G. Curry to A. F. Potter, Nov. 21, 1908, to G. Pinchot, Feb. 6, 1909, to A. B. Fall, Jan. 4, Mar. 22, 1909, to W. H. Taft, Mar. 22, 23, 1909, Curry Papers.

25. G. Curry to G. Pinchot, Jan. 12, 1910, Curry Papers.

in the growing schism in the Republican Party: that is, to support Roosevelt if the latter decided to run for the presidency again in 1912.²⁶ His adherence to Progressive Republicanism was confirmed by his close friendships with Pinchot and Roosevelt; he was elected to Congress in 1911 and then gave Roosevelt early and vigorous support during the summer and fall of 1912.²⁷ As private citizen, he continued to prove his adherence to conservation by offering his knowledge of what would be acceptable to the people in the solution of resource problems in New Mexico.²⁸ Curry's official career clearly exemplified the essential role of the political leader in the satisfactory application of conservation in the West.

26. G. Curry to C. Lyon, Jan. 11, 1910, Curry Papers.

27. T. Roosevelt to W. H. H. Llewellyn, Nov. 14, 1911, to B. M. Cutting, June 14, 1912, printed in Morison, *Letters of T.R.*, VII, 435, 561-562 and fn., 575 fn.

28. Eg.: G. Curry to A. C. Ringland, Jan. 12, 1910, Curry Papers; Curry to W. C. Barnes, Dec. 9, 1912, Barnes Papers.