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**Bureaucracy vs. Environment: The Environmental Cost of
Bureaucratic Governance, John Baden and Richard L. Strong,
Editors**

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BOOK REVIEWS

BUREAUCRACY vs. ENVIRONMENT: THE ENVIRONMENTAL COST OF BUREAUCRATIC GOVERNANCE

JOHN BADEN and RICHARD L. STROUP, editors.

Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press. 1981. Pp. 238.

From one point of view this book may be regarded as a variation on the theme sounded by Garrett Hardin in his seminal essay "The Tragedy of the Commons." (*Science*, 1968). From another viewpoint it may be regarded as a contribution to public choice theory of political economy. But this would be an oversimplified perspective because each of the thirteen chapters which comprise this book represents a distinctive analysis by different authors of problems involved in governmental management of natural resources. Four of the thirteen essays are coauthored, including one by the editors of the volume. Several essays are substantially case studies—some, it is to be hoped, of past practices now abandoned. Among them are accounts of clearing land by "chaining" practiced by the BLM and the Forest Service, grazing policies on BLM lands and the Navajo Reservation, clear cutting practices in the Forest Service, and policies regarding the development of coal and natural gas reserves.

Although I have described this volume as a variation upon the "tragedy of the commons theme" the variation is as important as the theme and, being a variation, is somewhat different. The connection with the commons may not be readily apparent inasmuch as these essays deal with governmental bureaucracy which presumably provides an antidote to the pathology of the commons. But, as Rodney D. Fort and John Baden point out in the initial essay, the United States Treasury has come to be treated as a common pool resource which may be described generically as a kind of "commons."

I do not read the essays as advancing a libertarian view that the role of government in the management of natural resources has been wholly ineffective or destructive. As the authors observe, "an imperfection in collective management should not automatically cause us to avoid governmental action." The question is: what kind of governmental action, and subject to what responsibilities and controls? In an introduction, editors Baden and Stroup develop the proposition that unifies this volume. They are, they say, "increasingly convinced that both the environmental and economic costs of bureaucratic management of natural resources are excessively and unnecessarily high. These social costs are generated by perverse institutional structures that give authority to those who do not bear responsibility for the

consequences of their actions." Regarding the usefulness of the book, the editors state their belief that "the primary social value of this collection will be its contribution toward explicating the costs, especially the environmental costs of bureaucrats holding authority that is buffered from responsibility."

The editors develop this thesis more explicitly when they declare:

The root cause of failure in the collective arena is the same as in the private: authority and responsibility are separated. In the private sector, this occurs when property rights are not clearly established or enforceable so that, for example, the smelter owner uses the air resource for free garbage (SO₂) and is not held responsible. He captures benefits but not costs. Similarly—but much more frequently—in the public sector, the individual with the authority to order an action does not bear certain important costs of that action.

In a mass democracy the average citizen will have little time or reason to familiarize himself with the policies and procedures of the big resource management agencies. But these agencies will be studied attentively by those interests with which they are directly and unavoidably involved—lumbering, grazing, mining, outdoor recreation, and wilderness preservation, among others. And as with all bureaucracies, public or private, the resource management agencies have survival interests that have demonstrably influenced their policies and actions over time. The collective essays document numerous cases of bureaucratic self-interest overriding broader economic and environmental considerations. If long range public interests and economic efficiency had been paramount in public policymaking it is at least open to question whether vast public works extravaganzas such as the Garrison Diversion project in North Dakota, or the Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway in Mississippi and Alabama, would ever have been undertaken. Neither of these controversial public works is dealt with in this set of essays, but the generalization the editors draw with respect to the cases considered would also equally apply. They conclude that "most, if not all, of the environmentally destructive practices discussed . . . would not occur if the agency were required to meet the standards of economic efficiency."

The essay by Bernard Shanks entitled "Dams and Disasters: The Social Problems of Water Development Policies," does a good job of summarizing the consequences of building dams of dubious economic utility. His indictment of the Garrison Dam relates primarily to the costs directly attributable to the impoundment itself. But another essay could have been written about the subsequent cost growing out of the efforts of the Bureau of Reclamation to compensate for the

losses of agricultural lands buried under the waters impounded by Garrison through a diversion project which has been a major source of controversy in North Dakota, and in which Canada is also involved. Thus I do not believe the authors of these essays can be faulted with overstating their cases.

A concluding essay by M. Bruce Johnson, entitled "The Environmental Costs of Bureaucratic Government: Theories and Cases," summarizes the principal points in the preceding essays and draws some general conclusions from their findings. Principal among these is the need to "price" realistically the cost of public enterprise in relation to natural resources and environment. Thus this volume ends upon a note of principle rather than with a universal prescription for dealing with the fundamental problem of identifying and allocating the true costs and benefits of natural resources management. In the course of a two year study of the administration of the National Environmental Policy Act in federal natural resource management agencies, I have become persuaded that the federal bureaucracy is today doing a more responsible and farsighted job of management in relation to natural resources and the environment than was done formerly or as described in most essays in this volume. Nevertheless, as Congressional action in public works and natural resources policy continues to demonstrate, major political and institutional barriers to rational resource management persist. Responsibility in bureaucracy is not likely to be increased without a corresponding increase in responsible behavior by Congressmen. Perhaps an item veto for the President would be an effective inducer of Congressional responsibility.

This volume is timely and its arguments persuasive, certainly to the extent that a careful examination of the consequences of the ways in which resource management and public works decisions are made continues to justify attention. I would very much like to see a comparable volume dealing with the issue of public decisionmaking and responsibility in the Federal courts. It may be possible to structure bureaucracy to make it institutionally responsible for its behavior, but I share with Thomas Jefferson deep doubt that our most irresponsible branch of government, the judiciary, can be made responsible for the consequences of its decisions without a major reordering of our constitutional system.

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