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PUBLIC LAND POLITICS: INTEREST GROUP INFLUENCE ON THE FOREST SERVICE AND THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

PAUL J. CULHANE

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press for Resources for the Future.
1981. Pp. 398. \$29.50.

Paul J. Culhane's timely *Public Land Politics* addresses important questions in the management, disposal, and use of the one-third of our nation's lands held in public trust. In light of current controversy swirling about these lands, this book is a welcome piece of careful analysis and responsible policy research.

The public lands are largely administered by two agencies. The older of them, the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture, has been the subject of prior analysis, notably Herbert Kaufman's classic study in public administration, *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior* (1960). The other, the Bureau of Land Management, was created in 1946 out of the General Land Office and the Grazing Service of the Department of Interior. It received noteworthy treatment in Phillip Foss's 1960 study, *Politics and Grass*.

The popular image of the two agencies, largely the result of these two influential 1960 studies, has been one of "conformity" and "capture" respectively. Kaufman presented the Forest Service as a strictly hierarchical agency, with its own elan, in which formal and informal practices yielded a high degree of conformity with central agency policy from field officers. This traditional public administration view led critics of the Service to argue that it is insulated from change, and that its timber management practices, in particular, are outdated and inefficient.

The BLM has been considered a captured agency. This picture of the BLM supports McConnell and Lowi's critiques of clientism—in which public power is transferred to narrow private interests.¹ Captured by mining, grazing and timber groups, effective representation of the public interest at BLM is thwarted by their influence over the flow of services from public lands.

The central thesis of Culhane's study is not only that these pictures of agency conduct are dated, but that the capture-conformity distinction is overdrawn. In the tradition of interest group theory, Culhane argues that both the BLM and Forest Service respond, at the local

1. See GRANT MCCONNELL, PRIVATE POWER IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY (1966), McConnell, *The Conservation Movement Past and Present*, 7 WESTERN POLI. Q. 463-78 (1954), and THEODORE LOWI, THE END OF LIBERALISM (1969).

level of policy, to a relatively balanced set of interests ranging from Sierra Club types to timber industry executives. The range of interests varies from romantic preservationists to highly use-oriented, utilitarian interests. While the mix of these interests is a reflection of local conditions, land-type, and proximity to urban centers (enclaves of environmental preservationists), the general picture from Culhane's survey and interview data is of public lands agencies and offices acting as honest brokers between conflicting interests.

The legislative context of such brokerage is the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960, which in appropriately ambiguous phrases calls for resources on public lands to be managed "in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people." This act created the conditions under which "multiple use" can mean locally more or less what rangers or district grazing officers want it to mean, a quality which no doubt also assisted in its passage. The result is that each district office of the Forest Service or BLM becomes a stage on which the local drama of "multiple use management" is played out. When this legislative mandate is combined with recent policy inside the agencies emphasizing "public participation" in national agency decision-making, the result is a subtle balancing act in which the district ranger or officer must be "a little captured in order to conform."

Two particularly important explanations emerge from this analysis, supported by data from a sample of thirty seven local administrative units. The first is that the strident character of the debate over public land use becomes more explicable. The Forest Service and the BLM are in the middle of what are often opposed interests, each trying to get the local officer to acknowledge the importance of one or another facet of multiple use. In this game, there is strategic value in overstating the damage which will attend recognition of others' claims. Hence the rhetoric of "environmental rape" is cast at commodity developers, responded to by assertions of the "environmental extremism" and national security disasters which will befall us if we "lock up" public lands for wilderness or recreation.

The second explanation is that in this struggle, the existence of local environmental interests actually assists agencies in playing off interests against one another to achieve agency goals. No longer is the agency alone in trying to convert consumptive users of range, timber, or minerals to good land management practices. A ranger pointed out that the forest products, oil, and gas industries "were a hell of a lot easier to deal with" because of environmental activists. When the oil and gas firms tried to "play the energy crisis" off against the Forest Service, he told them they had to "shape up to avoid litigation from the Sierra Club" (p. 218).

A necessary condition for this mode of policy is the honest broker role of both agencies. A basic finding of Culhane's study is that despite a history in which the BLM has been treated as somewhat *declass * in relation to the older Forest Service, this distinction is no longer valid, at least at the local level. However, there are significant differences in the agencies at the state and federal level which may result in a divergence in their interpreted mission in the current policy climate. Unlike the Forest Service, the BLM's locus of authority extends largely from state offices. In addition, the Service continues to operate as a virtual separate entity inside the Department of Agriculture. Its head is a career forester, in contrast to the political appointee who administers the BLM.

This structure means that the BLM is subject to direct political influence at both the State and cabinet level in a way quite different from the semi-autonomous Forest Service. The Secretary of Interior hires and fires the BLM director and may largely shape the policies of the agency. While this may have been less important at the time of Culhane's data collection (1972-73), it emerges as of critical significance in the current political climate, in which the Interior Secretary is an avowed advocate of commodity interests and interprets his charge as part of the state-based Sagebrush Rebellion in the West. These forces suggest the hypothesis that the BLM and Forest Service may move farther apart in their interpretation of "multiple-use" during the current administration, making the author's conclusions regarding their similar role as honest brokers more difficult to sustain.

A final point concerns Culhane's use of statistical analysis of group interest influences on district-level decisionmaking. The attempt to treat power, value preferences and access as multiplicative variables in an interest group model in which groups are considered additively independent is naive. As Culhane notes, his group influence model ignores Bentley's warning that indicators of group power, values and access are too dynamic to admit of such simplistic statistical manipulation.

These flaws do no damage to the main thrust of the study. Culhane's book deserves careful reading by all concerned with the future management of our public lands.

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