The United States Army Corps of Engineers in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, 1935–1955

Michael Welsh

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HISTORIANS OF NEW MEXICO have devoted little attention to the causes and consequences in the past half century of the explosive growth in the middle Rio Grande valley. The traditional perspective of New Mexican scholarship provides too brief an understanding of the political, economic, and social changes that have reshaped present-day Albuquerque and its environs. Yet as the population expands past the half-million mark and local leaders are pressured to plan for the future, they need an awareness of the recent past to determine the wisest policies for the remainder of the century and beyond.

A key to deciphering the mysteries of the modern era is an assessment of water-policy planning for the Rio Grande basin. In an area as devoid of surface moisture as central New Mexico, the use and abuse of precious water resources dictates all other factors of growth and development. Prior to 1935, the sparse population of the region required no elaborate policy making, but the combination of the Great Depression and the chaotic although exhilarating boom of World War II rendered obsolete the old methods of water management. Henceforth, organized approaches by local and state leaders had to coincide with federal plans for construction of western water projects. These facilities contributed greatly to the unparalleled expansion of the postwar years that shows no signs of abatement in the Albuquerque area.

The vast majority of Albuquerque residents take for granted the delivery of fresh water in generous quantities at low rates. Too often they are not cognizant of the projects built since 1945 to protect their city from periodic flood flows. Moreover, they know
little of the costs involved or the players in the drama of water-polyicy planning. Yet their lives and futures are different because of the work conducted to prevent flooding in the middle Rio Grande valley. One of these organizations charged with the duty of flood protection has shaped local and state history to a surprising degree: the Albuquerque District of the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

The army engineers can point to a lengthy record of national public service over the past two hundred years. In the nineteenth century they provided the eastern United States with harbors and levees, channel-dredging, and military construction. In the West, the branch of the corps known as the Topographical Engineers drew maps, conducted scientific surveys, and recommended policies to Congress that would utilize the resource potential of the region. But the lack of settlement, and the isolation and remoteness from urban centers, inhibited development of any large-scale corps projects beyond the Mississippi River. It was left to the regionally based United States Reclamation Service, founded in 1902 and renamed the Bureau of Reclamation in 1923, to begin construction of irrigation facilities in western waters. Among these was Elephant Butte Dam and Reservoir in southern New Mexico, completed in 1914, to serve farmers of the lower Rio Grande valley in New Mexico and west Texas.

The presence of the Bureau of Reclamation in New Mexican and other western river basins in the early twentieth century kept the army engineers from active participation in regional water-policy planning. Indeed, the ostensible mission of the corps to operate only in navigable rivers excluded most western streams from their purview. Only in 1927 did Congress authorize activities of the corps throughout the West as part of House Resolution 308, which called for surveys of flood protection and hydropower facilities in all United States waterways. At the same time, the states of New Mexico, Texas, and Colorado had attempted, with mixed success, to fashion an interstate stream compact on the usage of the waters of the Rio Grande. The need for technical assistance to conclude this important agreement thus became the vehicle for the army engineers to enter the complex and challenging world of water-resource development in New Mexico.
By 1935 the river that held the lifeblood of central New Mexico had undergone study by the state engineer’s office, the International Boundary Commission, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Agriculture, the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD), and other private irrigation companies. Despite an overwhelming body of statistical data, the three compact commissioners from the affected states had doubts about the accuracy, completeness, or what the New Mexico state engineer called the “freedom from bias” in each agency’s report. In this predicament the federal government intervened, in the form of the National Resources Committee, a New Deal organization devoted primarily to the study of resource development in the West. Meeting twice in Santa Fe in the winter of 1935–36, the committee sought clarification by asking the army engineers to join the Interior and Agriculture Departments as part of the “Rio Grande Joint Investigation.”

As a contributor to the formation of the Rio Grande Compact—the formal document on interstate stream use—the army engineers gained invaluable knowledge about the appropriation of basin waters, as well as the geology and topography of the region. Once these studies had ended in 1938, the corps also established itself in the area through its construction work at Conchas Dam on the Canadian River near Tucumcari. After the completion of this project in 1939, the corps served in an advisory capacity to state and federal agencies, such as the Works Progress Administration, on various small retention and diversion dams in rural New Mexico communities. Then in the spring of 1941 severe flooding along the midsection of the Rio Grande brought a permanent presence for the soon-to-become Albuquerque district in matters affecting the river.

Floods on the Rio Grande and its tributaries had been a fact of life since time immemorial. Indian and Hispanic farmers who operated at a subsistence level worked around the flooding by waiting for its arrival each spring and then planting their crops in the highly fertile sediment deposited in the flood’s wake. The American system of farming, however, involved massive production of surplus crops for sale in a larger market economy. This practice meant increasing the length of the growing season, the size of one’s fields,
and the volume of water used thereon. Spring floods then constituted a danger, not a blessing, to such organized methods of agriculture, and as more settlement occurred the need for flood control grew accordingly.

This greater use of the river by farmers and city dwellers became obvious after 1900. Since the Rio Grande flows through a desert environment, it absorbs sand and dirt in large quantities as it scours the river bed. This action decreases the volume of clear water needed for fields cultivated with fertilizer. In addition, the excessive pumping of wells in the basin reduced the water table so that the amount of irrigated land in the middle valley had declined by two-thirds, from 125,000 acres in 1880 to less than 40,000 acres in the 1930s. The stream bed was also rising as silt was deposited every year, and where farms were lower than the shoreline the groundwater seeped to the surface, killing the vegetation and leaving swamp and marshland behind.3

At first the citizens of the river valley attempted to control their water problems through formation of the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District. After a particularly difficult spring in 1917, water users incorporated to pass bond issues that financed construction of levees, irrigation canals, drainage ditches, and later a storage pool at El Vado Dam in northern New Mexico. Problems caused by the Dust Bowl and the Depression combined with Albuquerque’s small population base and low per capita income to convince the conservancy district to seek outside help. In 1938 the Soil Conservation Service made recommendations on the sediment problem, and the next year the Bureau of Reclamation conducted a preliminary survey on flood control and hydroelectric power facilities. Then in 1941, when the Rio Grande flooded almost nonstop for two months, valley residents asked the corps of engineers for their expertise as well.4

The Galveston district of the army engineers first responded to the flood situation on the Rio Grande, since it controlled the stream flow of that river in southern Texas. But when the Albuquerque district opened its doors in early 1942, all work on the New Mexico reach transferred to the local office. The pressures on the new district to complete its many military construction projects left little
time, staff, materiel, or money for flood protection work. The conservancy district thus had to maintain its levees throughout the war years—a task made more difficult by its precarious financial situation. Tax assessments to property owners increased dramatically, yet the district spent an inordinate percentage of its funds on flood damage, rather than on enlarging the irrigable acreage of the valley. 5

The crises facing the Albuquerque area disturbed many residents, not the least being First District U.S. Congressman Clinton P. Anderson. Elected to the House of Representatives in the fall of 1940, the Democrat quickly learned in Washington how officials from other states manipulated the levers of power to acquire public works projects. Anderson’s Albuquerque could not fund any large facilities, and the outstanding conservancy district bonds had no takers until the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation had purchased them in 1935. As tales of flooding on the Rio Grande filtered back to Anderson in the spring of 1941, he watched the federal budget process closely. Anderson first asked the Bureau of Reclamation to assume the district bonds, as that would free conservancy district members from the debt service on their loans. When that move failed, the Congressman learned that some western water projects, especially those the army engineers funded, could be built on a nonreimbursable basis. Conchas Dam had been constructed in such a manner, and the repayment schedule for the proposed Arch Hurley Irrigation District at Conchas received very liberal terms from the Bureau of Reclamation. Anderson did not begrudge the farmers around Tucumcari their good fortune, but he called upon “the people of Albuquerque and the middle Rio Grande valley, the newspapers of Albuquerque, and the Legislature of the State of New Mexico to get a little ‘hot’ on this subject.” The city needed “millions more spent” on flood control, and Anderson believed that it “ought to be spent in an area where people are already living and in distress.” 6

The flooding of 1941 helped Anderson’s bill for flood protection, House Resolution 4911, to pass both houses of Congress in short order. Public Law 78-534, known as the Flood Control Act of 1941, directed the Chief of Engineers to conduct a preliminary study of
Clinton P. Anderson. Courtesy Special Collections, University of New Mexico Library.
the basin and its tributaries north of El Paso. Anderson also detected a potential for conflict with the Bureau of Reclamation, the other agency working in the river basin, when he added a clause requiring both groups to develop a joint-use plan for the Rio Grande near Albuquerque. Anderson hoped to avoid the bitter dispute between the corps and the bureau unfolding in the Missouri River valley that threatened future funding for that region. The Bureau of Reclamation agreed with Anderson to study irrigation and water conservation measures, while the Albuquerque district of the army engineers would plan for flood control and sediment storage via reservoirs and levees.

The pace of change in the Albuquerque area caused by military spending in World War II hampered the study of the Rio Grande basin and left Clinton Anderson in a quandary. He saw the potential for postwar economic growth in his district if only he could fashion a network of transportation and communications for Albuquerque. In his mind the federal government had the largest source of capital to invest in the city's future. If he could not overcome the obstacles of flood control and irrigation, that future stood in jeopardy. Anderson then resurrected an idea that had met opposition in the West just prior to World War II: the concept of a regional water authority. Under this scenario, Congress would develop not only flood and irrigation projects, but water recreation facilities and inexpensive hydropower as well. Were Anderson to convince his colleagues in Washington and New Mexico of the merits of such a plan, the federal government would underwrite nearly the entire cost of economic expansion for the middle Rio Grande valley, much as it had done in the South with the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s.

To meet this urgent need, Anderson went before Congress in the spring of 1945 with a bill entitled "Upper Rio Grande Reclamation Act of 1945." The legislation covered the drainage area of the basin from its source in southern Colorado to San Marcial, a town north of Elephant Butte Reservoir that flooding had destroyed in 1929. Anderson chose to work with the secretary of the interior on this matter, giving that agency "such powers as may be necessary to carry out the purposes of this act." The sale of hydropower would be a major component of any storage reservoir constructed on the
river, with profits from the electricity to offset the costs of the projects. Finally, the Corps of Engineers would be responsible for flood control only, with all other uses of their projects managed by the Interior Department.7

From his vantage point in Washington, Anderson believed that his “Rio Grande Basin Authority” (RGBA) made eminent sense. The Columbia River projects of the corps and reclamation in the Pacific Northwest generated large quantities of cheap power that transformed that area into a haven for agribusiness and defense plants. The prevailing attitude among many New Deal supporters still held true in the 1940s: that national solutions were best for persistent problems of unemployment and economic stagnation. But Anderson either forgot the lessons the corps learned when it advanced the ill-fated Arkansas Valley Authority in 1941 or thought that emergency conditions in wartime offered a compelling rationale for his RGBA. Anderson contacted influential backers in New Mexico for their opinions, only to be stunned by their near-unanimous rejection.8

The concerns of Anderson’s constituents reflected the economic and political dilemma they faced in World War II. Oscar M. Love, president of the Albuquerque National Bank, told Anderson that “development of the Rio Grande . . . is perhaps the local matter of transcendent importance to every citizen and owner of property within the area.” Fred C. Wilson of the conservancy district noted that Joseph O’Mahoney, Democratic senator from Wyoming, had pressed for similar legislation for the Upper Colorado River basin, with “construction of the works at the entire expense of the United States.” All respondents sympathized with the Congressman’s objectives. But the idea of the federal government taking direct responsibility for management of New Mexico water resources alarmed local leaders, and they made Anderson aware of their hesitancies.9

The critical evaluation of the RGBA proposal quickly expanded beyond the Albuquerque area to the states of Colorado and Texas. Clifford H. Stone, director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, echoed the displeasure of his state as a member of the Rio Grande Compact Commission. Stone held that all basin authorities were “wrong in principle in every respect.” Federal officials would not be sensitive enough to the water laws of the various western
states and would find restrictive “the right of the states of the arid West to control the appropriation and distribution of water.” Colorado discounted Anderson’s claim that basin-wide management would further economic vitality, contending that the RGBA would “delay rather than expedite desirable developments.” Stone did not leave the Congressman without hope, however. He saw in several actions of the army engineers an attempt to resolve disputes in river basin planning and recommended that Anderson study the latest flood control and rivers and harbors bills, which guaranteed state control of water rights. Stone then warned Anderson that the Albuquerque District had to remain a strong partner in Rio Grande basin projects: “An attempt to relegate to them a minor role, or eliminate them entirely from the field of water development . . . will only tend to unduly discourage and delay what is needed for the proper utilization . . . of the water resources of that area.”

The other participant in the Rio Grande Compact, the state of Texas, also moved to register its dissent with the Anderson proposal. Terrell Bartlett, a civil engineer from San Antonio who had clients on the river below Elephant Butte Dam (technically considered part of the Texas reach of the Rio Grande), called the preliminary plans of the corps and reclamation “grandiose.” Bartlett not only disapproved of the authority concept, but believed that many of the proposed projects would waste money and not deliver on their promises. He called for less glamorous, but in his estimation more effective work, like raising of levees, dredging the river channel for a deeper, swifter flow, and more attention to the problems of evaporation and sedimentation in any reservoir under study. The goal of Bartlett and other interested water officials in Texas and New Mexico was quick and efficient delivery of all compact waters to Elephant Butte as soon as flooding occurred further north, so that lower valley farmers would have enough irrigation water to last through the summer.

Under the onslaught of criticism for his basin bill, Anderson chose discretion. He wrote to Thomas McClure, state engineer for New Mexico, to calm his fears about the authority’s intent and purpose. The congressman had no desire to “set up an appointive board in Washington, which knows nothing of conditions in New Mexico.” Any commission for the RGBA, he added, would be “composed of
people resident within the area” and would be selected “by the President [with] the advice and consent of the Senate.” Anderson still considered his plan meritorious, telling McClure that federal control of the operations and management of any flood protection work was standard procedure throughout the West. He did admit, however, that the impact of the RGBA on the delivery of compact waters had not crossed his mind, but promised to negotiate with the states on that point. Anderson reassured McClure that he had not sold out the interests of his state or of Albuquerque with the authority bill and concluded that “we all know what New Mexico needs, wants, and ought to have, and our feelings are not far apart.”

The battle for the RGBA changed character in 1945 when Clinton Anderson resigned from his seat in Congress to accept the position of secretary of agriculture in President Harry S. Truman’s cabinet. Although Anderson would maintain his interest in flood control and irrigation projects for the basin, it would be left to New Mexico’s senior senator, Dennis Chavez, to fulfill the expectations of Rio Grande valley water users. Chavez would assume coordination of the various plans under the aegis of the Middle Rio Grande Project (MRGP), and when he became chairman of the Senate Public Works Committee in 1949 he would exert great influence on the funding of army engineer projects nationwide.

As a lifelong resident of the Rio Grande valley, Dennis Chavez knew first-hand the problems of flood control and sediment protection. His family lived in the small community of Los Chavez, south of Albuquerque, where Chavez developed his understanding of the New Mexico Democratic party and its important Hispanic component. Clinton Anderson often spoke for the business and professional interests of New Mexico, given his background as an insurance agent who had come to the state to recuperate from tuberculosis in 1917; but Dennis Chavez, on the other hand, paid close attention to the concerns of small farmers and landowners throughout the valley, and he knew that they too must share in any improvements brought by the army engineers and other federal agencies. David M. Cargo, former Republican governor of New Mexico (1966–70), characterized Chavez’s perspective on water policy as “practical dreams,” and it was Chavez’s diligence and
consensus-building in Congress that carried the day for the Rio Grande basin where Clinton Anderson had gone astray. 13

Prior to 1945, Chavez had devoted his energies in the Senate to acquiring military contracts for the state and New Deal social programs for his constituency. His forays into water development consisted of support for funding of Conchas Dam in 1935 and introduction of bills to construct small flood protection works in northern New Mexico. But the RGBA debate brought Chavez into the picture when he agreed to write an article on the issue for the New Mexico Quarterly Review. The senator also worked on passage of the Flood Control Act of 1944, which added several tributaries of the Rio Grande to the original corps study, and it also called upon such disparate federal agencies as the Federal Power Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Forest Service, and Soil Conservation Service to join the Albuquerque district and the Bureau of Reclamation in developing a comprehensive basin report. 14

The deliberative pace of the federal bureaucracy irked the activist Chavez, especially when the Middle Rio Grande Project report did not surface in time for the off-year Congressional elections of 1946. The evident backlash against Democratic social programs, postwar inflation, and the suspected Communist menace of the Cold War, made Republican fortunes bright that fall. Chavez saw two problems on the horizon: one for himself and the other for the MRGP. His re-election campaign pitted him against Patrick W. Hurley, secretary of war in the administration of Herbert Hoover, and a former general in the army. In addition, a Republican sweep of the Senate might doom federal support for western water projects since budget-cutting and criticism of "big government" provided the GOP with ammunition in all contested races.

To deflect the attacks of Hurley, et al., and to insure success of the MRGP, Chavez made an issue of Republican insensitivity to public works and social programs. He also issued an unsigned statement on the eve of the election warning New Mexico voters that Arizona Senator Carl V. Hayden, a Democrat who championed western water projects, could be replaced as chairman of the powerful Appropriations Committee by Senator Styles Bridges, a Republican from New Hampshire. Chavez depicted Bridges as "a
reactionary easterner" who knew "nothing of the West and cares less." By inference Chavez painted his opponent with the same brush. To save Hurley's candidacy, Bridges responded immediately by telegram to the Albuquerque Tribune. The New Englander reminded New Mexicans that a Republican, Theodore Roosevelt, had supported funding of Elephant Butte Reservoir in 1906 and that Secretary of War Hurley had authorized the corps to conduct its survey of the middle Rio Grande. Bridges had visited New Mexico on several occasions and assured Tribune readers: "I have been and am now in favor of flood control that will protect the magnificent city of Albuquerque . . . and I shall be very glad to work with you [Dennis Chavez], Pat Hurley, and all others interested to that end."15

Chavez and the Democrats did lose control of the U.S. Senate that year and had to wait until the Truman upset of 1948 to regain their positions of power in that body. Once back in command of the Congress, the Democrats named Chavez to head the Public Works Committee. In the summer of 1949 he received the long-awaited Rio Grande report from the secretary of the army and moved for quick action on its recommendations. The report, known as House Document No. 243, 81st Congress, 1st session (HDoc 243), did call for extensive construction in New Mexico, but also revealed the complexity of water management in the Southwest.

No less than five federal agencies worked on HDoc 243, along with the Rio Grande Compact commissioners for New Mexico, Texas, and Colorado. The Flood Control Act of 1948 had authorized several projects, the most prominent being Chamita Dam above Española, Jemez Canyon Dam above the town of Bernalillo, and flood protection for the middle Rio Grande valley. The act also recommended projects to control the heavy sedimentation of the river and to upgrade the present irrigation systems to gain efficiency. Federal officials took notice of the memorandum of agreement signed between the interior secretary and the chief of engineers on 25 July 1947. This statement delineated the areas of responsibility for the corps and reclamation in the Rio Grande basin. The director of the Bureau of the Budget, Frank Pace, Jr., hailed this cooperative posture and commented: "It is gratifying to note the
Despite these words of praise, the budget director also could not ignore the number of deficiencies in the report. Many of the agencies involved, including the Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Geological Survey and Soil Conservation Service, had yet to file their recommendations, and thus the survey of 1949 lacked sufficient data on soil erosion and retention of silt. In addition, Colorado and Texas expressed concern over the amount of water stored in the basin and the operation of the proposed facilities, while New Mexico worried about meeting its delivery schedule to Texas under the Rio Grande Compact. But of all the aspects of the Middle Rio Grande Project study, most objectionable was the flood control dam and reservoir at Cerro Chiflo, north of Questa on the upper reach of the river.

The Albuquerque district's plans for Chiflo Dam drew the special attention of Colorado water authorities. Their estimate of the savings the facility offered showed that Chiflo would cost three times as much to maintain each year ($1.26 million) as it would offer in flood protection benefits ($384,000). The damsite would be too far north of Elephant Butte Reservoir to effect sedimentation control since only 1 percent of the basin's silt flowed past Chiflo. Forty percent of the floodwaters of the Rio Grande came from the Rio Chama above Española, and the army engineers did not plan to advance construction on that stream in the near future. To help cover the costs of building Chiflo Dam, the corps had suggested placing hydroelectric power works at the site. Colorado, however, feared that storage of water at Chiflo would endanger similar plans for the San Luis Valley project, authorized in 1940 and as yet unfinished. Finally, Colorado was not sure that the Rio Grande Compact would permit waters to be stored for long periods that far north. The damsite had not been thoroughly tested for watertightness, and the seepage into underground wells would drain away the flow that needed to remain in the channel.

Criticisms of Chiflo disturbed Senator Chavez, who had pushed for its construction by the Albuquerque district. Chavez saw the project as providing a multipurpose water resources facility for the
Hispanic farmers of the Taos–Questa region of northern New Mexico and especially as a source of low-cost electricity for an area among the poorest in the nation. Still, as negative commentary built on the subject of Chiflo, this criticism loomed as a threat to the funding of the entire basin project. To limit the damage, Chavez sent word to the Albuquerque district that no employees engaged in drilling core samples at the site were to discuss their work with the general public. The final version of the 1949 report requested that Congress remove Chiflo Dam from the overall planning, either to be replaced by a dam near Jaroso, Colorado, or to be eliminated altogether.\textsuperscript{18}

Regardless of his preferences on Chiflo, Dennis Chavez believed that the entire Middle Rio Grande Project had to be enacted quickly to spare central New Mexico the devastation of 1941. The opportunity to employ hundreds of workers at salaries comparable to World War II wages also spurred the senator because the postwar recession had proven long-lasting for unskilled and semiskilled laborers in New Mexico. Even before the report of the army engineers became public, Chavez called upon the newly seated Eighty-First Congress to enact legislation giving reclamation and the corps a combined national budget of $53 million for new water projects. Of this, more than $1.2 million would be needed for starting the MRGP.\textsuperscript{19}

Senator Chavez realized that his proposed legislation might confuse many senators not supportive of western water projects and resorted to a variety of tactics to gain approval for his measure. He drummed up testimonials from the Santa Fe Railway to prove his contention that Rio Grande basin flooding disrupted communications and transportation almost every spring. The railroad even composed a two-page handbill detailing all major floods on the river since 1874, listing crop and track damage, loss of life, and costs of repair. Maj. Gen. K. D. Nichols, chief of the Special Weapons Project at Sandia Base in Albuquerque, informed Chavez that any loss of services would hinder the work of the nuclear missile program there. Similar commentary came from David Lilienthal, former director of the TVA and then-chairman of the United States Atomic Energy Commission. Lilienthal worried about "rail, air and
road communication for both the Los Alamos and Sandia Laboratories.” The railhead at Albuquerque had to be protected so that shipments of uranium products and nuclear devices met no harm.20

Encouraged by these letters of support, Chavez called upon Albuquerque municipal water officials to testify before his committee. John P. Murphy, executive secretary of the Middle Rio Grande Flood Control Association, wrote to Chavez offering his services as a witness. The chairman responded with recommendations for Murphy’s remarks so as to strengthen the case of the MRGP. “Although the Corps of Engineers will be represented,” said Chavez, “and will furnish technical data, I believe it would be very much to your advantage [to] be reasonably well posted on such several matters pertaining to the physical aspects of the river and its problems.” Committees that held lengthy hearings were often “much more favorably impressed with clear, concise statements,” and Murphy should not read from a prepared text if at all possible. Chavez needed Murphy’s statement to justify another increase to $3.5 million for the first phase of the MRGP, and he knew that Murphy would “be questioned somewhat extensively on almost any aspect of the project.”21

The New Mexico senator’s efforts to fund construction of the MRGP went for naught in 1949. He then prepared new legislation to increase nationwide water project funding to sixty million dollars, which included $750,000 for preliminary studies of Jemez Canyon Dam, north of Bernalillo. Chavez then scheduled hearings of his Public Works Committee in the state on 9–19 January 1950. The group would visit Carlsbad and Roswell, observing the work of the Albuquerque district in the Pecos River basin. Then committee members would adjourn to Albuquerque, where they would be confronted with the necessity for the MRGP.22

The session with the Senate committee convinced Chavez, the corps, and local proponents of the Middle Rio Grande Project that Jemez Canyon dam offered the best hope of initial construction of flood protection works for the Albuquerque area. Its proximity to the metropolitan center, its large storage capacity, and its price tag of $7.2 million made it easier to pass through Congress than the $27 million needed for the defunct Chiflo site or the $28 million being discussed for Chamita Dam near Española. On 4 May 1950,
the Albuquerque district awarded a contract for construction of an access road and outlet works, amounting to $236,000. Chavez and the corps congratulated themselves on their good fortune and could almost ignore the decrease in the fiscal year 1951 budget for Jemez Dam from one million dollars to $500,000. The project had begun, and Congress rarely halted production of a facility once monies had been expended.22

As the New Mexico congressional delegation pressed their case for Jemez Canyon dam in Washington, events far away in East Asia threatened another round of budget cuts and termination of the MRGP. In the fall of 1950 President Truman committed U.S. military forces to the growing conflict between North and South Korea. While this action meant additional authorizations for military construction branches of the Albuquerque district, it also drained away staff, materials, and funds from the civil works segments engaged with Jemez Canyon dam. The risks of flooding did not abate, nor did the rate of sedimentation decrease in the Rio Grande basin. Yet the war effort led many in Congress to scrutinize more carefully all nonmilitary portions of the budget. As funds for water projects shrank, interagency disputes over jurisdiction threatened whatever public works money Congress did appropriate. In the face of such conflict and tension, Dennis Chavez fought for any and all funds he could get for the MRGP.

The prevailing mood of economizing in government in the early 1950s resurrected interagency disputes over water projects that had lain dormant during the years of rapid growth and increasing expenditures. The culprit in the eyes of the corps was the Bureau of Reclamation, whose constituency resided within the seventeen western states that organization served. While the Albuquerque district had reached a compromise with reclamation in the Rio Grande basin, differences of opinion about missions and delivery of services emerged during the war years. The Albuquerque district was not alone in this regard, and the crisis prompted Gen. Samuel D. Sturgis, chief of engineers, to draft a statement of concern about similar feuding nationwide.

Convinced of the wisdom of the corps’s approach to water policy in the West, and believing that reclamation operated within a more
narrow framework, Sturgis spoke bluntly about the future relationship between the agencies. “Differences are usually not technical,” the chief acknowledged. They stemmed from the “more nebulous realm of the political or social philosophy of water resource development.” Sturgis viewed reclamation’s goal as “greater centralized authority” over western water. In so doing the bureau moved “with the trend of the time . . . during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations.” To his way of thinking, the corps did not commit this sin of “empire-building.” The army engineers had “followed a fairly consistent course of recognizing local and state rights,” the chief contended, “of federal participation rather than control; and of leaving policy making in the hands of Congress.”

Sturgis then outlined several areas where reclamation appeared to overreach its legislated authority. These included its desire to utilize all waters in corps flood control reservoirs for irrigation; management of their own flood protection facilities; and attempts to appropriate hydroelectric power from corps projects to sell to their own customers rather than have the proceeds returned to the U.S. Treasury. Sturgis listed a number of western river basins where conflict had already surfaced and then highlighted the agreement of 1947 between reclamation and the Albuquerque district. Giving Rio Grande channel rectification to the bureau, Sturgis thought, was a “shotgun affair”; a reference to a forced compromise. Sturgis suspected that New Mexico politicians had wanted to placate reclamation when they knew that the bulk of Rio Grande projects belonged with the corps. “This is actually our type of work,” the chief concluded, leaving no doubt as to the nature of the corps-reclamation relationship.

Frayed nerves all around involving the Middle Rio Grande Project reached their peak when colleagues of Dennis Chavez, and finally General Sturgis himself, took the senator to task for his handling of the affair. Senator Guy Cordon, a Republican from Oregon, disliked Chavez’s attempt in 1952 to revive the funding cuts for the Jemez Canyon dam without the support of the Bureau of the Budget. Having sat through a series of witnesses lamenting Albuquerque’s fate without flood protection, Cordon interrupted the testimony of the corps officials to exclaim: “It seems to me that [the MRGP] cried aloud for the earliest possible action at the
earliest possible minute. I cannot understand why work was not commenced the minute there was authorization."25

The army engineers in Washington mirrored Cordon’s frustration at the lack of progress in the Rio Grande basin and adopted countermeasures to deflect future criticism. By late 1954 General Sturgis had tired of the inability of Dennis Chavez to deliver local support for the MRGP. He vented his frustration by labeling the corps’s presentation to the New Mexican senator as the “Chavez background.” Sturgis encouraged his staff when speaking before Chavez to use maps “in rustic but clear and adequate style” in order to “save manpower.” As for the project itself, Sturgis asked his aides, “What risks have we accepted in going along with Senator Chavez?” The chief of engineers doubted that the senator could grasp the complexity of all the legal, financial, political, and bureaucratic tangents to the MRGP and told his subordinates no longer to assume “a position of caution and appeasement” with Chavez.26

This rift between Chavez and Sturgis did not surface in public, and the effects of their troubled relationship cannot be measured accurately. In the federal budget for fiscal year 1952, Chavez inserted $900,000 for completion of the outlet works at Jemez Canyon dam, despite the wish of the House Appropriations Committee for no monies. The following year identical circumstances obtained, but Chavez joined with Clinton Anderson to gain $2.1 million for the bulk of construction. The Albuquerque district began closing the 136-foot high dam in August 1952 and two months later had opened the sluice gates for testing. Once completed, the dam stretched 780 feet across the canyon and contained 120,000 acre-feet of flood and sediment control storage. The fight for Jemez Canyon dam had ended, leaving interested observers to wonder at the volume of acrimony and intrigue awaiting later segments of the Middle Rio Grande Project.27

The completion in 1953 of Jemez Canyon dam marked a turning point in the history of the Albuquerque district and the planning for the middle Rio Grande basin. With its first large flood protection facility in place, the corps could direct its attention to the challenges of the remainder of the MRGP: high dams at Chamita and Abiquiu and a floodway through Albuquerque. Several small items remained for Jemez Canyon dam, not the least being $310,000 worth
of levee protection for the pueblo of Santa Ana, directly upriver from the dam. The Santa Ana people had granted easements to the army engineers in return for protection from the storage of water at flood stage. When an abnormally high spring runoff in 1958 created the need for nearly 70,000 acre-feet of flood storage behind the dam, pressure from Albuquerque residents mounted for retention of the pool to provide recreation. H. Cook’s sporting goods store, the only local dealer in motorboats, sold more than one hundred pleasure craft while the corps held the waters of the Jemez River in check. But permanent storage would mean damage to Santa Ana farm and grazing lands as well as violation of the Rio Grande Compact delivery schedule of excess waters to Elephant Butte Reservoir. Albuquerque was still without a recreational pool nearby; a situation that would obtain until completion of Cochiti Lake by the army engineers in 1973.28

As the citizens of the middle Rio Grande valley contemplate their future, they must reflect on those factors of economics and politics that have merged to create the world in which they live. Careful analysis of the recent past demonstrates the close relationship between regional growth and federal spending. Reduced government expenditures, more reliance on state and local assumption of public works projects, and the inevitable expansion of the Albuquerque area are elements in an equation that demand more attention than heretofore given by native and newcomer alike. Ironically, the “golden age” of western water projects is ending just as Albuquerque attracts large numbers of Sunbelt migrants and strains the limits of its water resources. The expertise, financial support, and management skills of one partner in past Albuquerque endeavors, the army engineers, cannot be ignored as the city and its planners confront these realities and venture down the uncertain path that awaits the region in the twenty-first century.

NOTES


4. Subhas Shah interview.

5. Albert G. Simms, president, Board of Commissioners, MRGCD, to Lt. Col. Ruben E. Cole, district engineer, Albuquerque District, 8 February 1944, MRGCD Records.

6. Clinton P. Anderson to Phillippi, 19 March 1941, Conservancy file, Governor John E. Miles Papers, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives (NMSRCA), Santa Fe.


9. Oscar M. Love to Clinton Anderson, 28 March 1945; Wilson to Dempsey, 1 May 1945, RGB files, SEO.

10. Clifford H. Stone, director, Colorado Water Conservation Board, to Anderson, RGB files, SEO.

11. Terrell Bartlett, San Antonio, Tex., to Thomas McClure, New Mexico state engineer, 21 August 1945, RGB files, SEO.

12. Anderson to McClure, 30 March 1945, RGB files, SEO.


16. Frank Pace, Jr., director, Bureau of the Budget, to the secretary of the Army, 12 April 1946; Lee Knous, governor of Colorado, to Kenneth C. Royall, secretary of the Army, 29 March 1948, *Rio Grande and Tributaries, New Mexico*.

17. *Rio Grande and Tributaries, New Mexico*.


19. "Senator Chavez to Ask $1.375 Million Flood Fund for State," *Albuquerque Journal*, 12 February 1949. The remaining $100,000 in Chavez's request was for studies of the Pecos River basin near Roswell by the Albuquerque district.


21. Chavez to John P. Murphy, executive secretary, Middle Rio Grande Flood Control Association (MRGFLA), Albuquerque, 22 April 1949, RGB files, SEO. By law the Army Corps of Engineers could not contract with regular governmental entities for construction of flood control works. MRGFLA was created under New Mexico statute to levy bonds and assessments on property owners and to maintain all such facilities once the corps had built them.

22. John H. Bliss, New Mexico state engineer, to Governor Thomas Mabry, Santa Fe, 10 November 1949; Chavez to Bliss, 16 December 1949, RGB files, SEO; Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers (ARCE) 1949, pp. 1216–17.

23. "Notes for Discussion of Relations with Department of the Interior," Civil Works File No. 1, Samuel D. Sturgis Papers, Historical Division, Office of the Chief of Engineers (OCE), Washington, D.C.


26. Memorandum of Sturgis to the Civil Works Division, OCE, 27 December 1954, Civil Works File No. 1, Sturgis Papers.


1958, RGB files, SEO; James Loughridge interview; interview with James I. Redmond, 7 September 1983, Albuquerque; interview with Richard Blum, 27 June 1984, Placitas, N. Mex. The district estimated that 13,000 people visited Jemez Canyon Dam on Memorial Day in 1958. Vendors of all sorts of foods and beverages lined the roads leading into the project, and boaters spent the weekend sailing on the "lake" even though no ramp or docks existed.