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A REPLY TO MR. WOLLMAN

by

Roy Hamilton*

It seems I have incurred the wrath of the righteous. Let me express my gratitude for the opportunity of replying to Mr. Wollman.

As I understand Mr. Wollman, he builds his attack on an error of mine—the error of saying that most of the benefits if realized, of the Senate Select Committee's Report on National Water Resources would flow to the western states. He argues that I drew this incorrect inference from my disposition to believe that Senators from western states would be likely to recommend action of primary benefit to the western states and from my failure to read the report properly. I dare say that these Senator's constituents would be likely to draw the same incorrect inference from the same incorrect disposition. If it were otherwise, western Senators would be in difficulty at the polls, and properly so. In the matter of reading the report, I can only admit to having read it in my fashion, not in Mr. Wollman's fashion. Apparently, Mr. Wollman clings to the idea that there is only one proper way to read a document of this sort. Mr. Wollman is, it seems, unaware of the problems of cognition and perception.

With the use of a few selected statistics, Mr. Wollman has shown that most of the benefits (over half) would accrue to the eastern half of the United States, particularly in the form of pollution abatement, flow regulation and so forth. He has thus performed a service for us by illuminating the Select Committee's report and its data presentation.

Mr. Wollman has performed yet another service. He has publicly stated that because 66.4% of the benefits of proposed expenditures would fall to the eastern half of the United States, while only 33.6% of the benefits would fall to the western half, it is clear that the *Report* overwhelmingly favors the east. Now the second service Mr. Wollman has performed lies precisely here—in repeating the hoary error of western apologists that one can best determine where the benefits of federal expenditures will lie by simply drawing a line down the 96th meridian, cutting the country in half, and calculating the expenditures on each side of the line. This kind of reasoning has been much discussed, but not by western apologists. Those of us who disagree with people like Mr. Wollman (and we admit that they are politically powerful), prefer a model for determining the location of benefits which takes into account something besides vacant land, say *people*, for example. Wouldn't it make more sense to compare the benefits likely to accrue from the Select Committee's *Report* in terms of the number of people benefiting and the location of their residences? If this were done in the case of the Select Committee's *Report*, might we find

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some skewing of benefits, in terms of people? I don't know. I haven't had time to examine the matter in this light.

I suggest that Mr. Wollman has opened up a question quite worthy of debate. I further suggest that this journal could perform a tremendous service to scholarship by encouraging, in these future pages, an examination of the benefits of federal expenditures as they have fallen to various areas of the United States. I suggest, for example, an historical examination of the benefits of federal expenditures for "public works" in terms of area, number of persons, and selected other variables.

We cannot all immediately agree as to the "proper" model to be adopted for such an examination (all models incorporate goals and values). Mr. Wollman's preference is clearly not in accord with mine, but I do believe that we might reach some agreement in the interests of scholarship and then proceed, if the methodological difficulties are not insurmountable, to let the chips fall where they may. Scholarship, after all, does not consist in violent denunciations and proposals to squelch all statements that contain errors of fact, for if there is anything which scholars know for certain, it is that almost every statement which purports to be a "true fact" over-reaches the experimental knowledge of the person making the statement. In the interests of scholarship, I propose that we ignore the seductiveness of wordy violence and get on with something interesting.