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THE LAST CONSERVATIONIST: FLOYD DOMINY AND FEDERAL RECLAMATION
POLICY IN THE AMERICAN WEST

By

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Dissertation

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The Last Conservationist: Floyd Dominy and Federal Reclamation Policy in the American West

Chairperson: Dr. Dan Flores

Historians of the American West have long identified the federal government's important role in shaping the region's physical and social landscapes, especially concerning water development. The Bureau of Reclamation, which built most of the West's major dams and water projects, traces its origins back to the 1902 Reclamation Act and since then has seen its share of political upheavals and colorful personalities. But one figure towers over all: Floyd Dominy, who served as commissioner from 1959 to 1969. By following the career of this one influential bureaucrat from the Great Depression to the end of the Great Society, I show that the federal government's relationship with the West—and thus the relationship of westerners to their government—cannot be isolated from national political and social trends. My dissertation connects the literature of American state building with the insights of the “New Western History” and argues that the Bureau of Reclamation's true role in shaping the twentieth-century American West can only be understood in the context of a Washington bureaucracy struggling to survive through a turbulent period. “The Last Conservationist” traces the arc of American liberalism from the New Deal to the final fracturing of Western political solidarity over water issues in the late 1960s. From this perspective, federal reclamation policy is less of an imperial endeavor than a largely unsuccessful effort to hold together various western factions in the face of diminished budgets and changing social priorities. This view also highlights the control and participation of local groups, often at the expense of federal desires.

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Unraveling Floyd Dominy's story allowed me the chance to travel the country extensively and peek into a lot of far-flung archives. But it was also a time consuming and expensive undertaking. Fortunately, I received generous financial and institutional support. Foremost was the American Heritage Center in Laramie, WY, where I essentially became a piece of furniture in the reading room for several months and which provided me a travel grant. The AHC staff was tremendously helpful and a model for their profession. A summer award for research from the Charles Redd Center at Brigham Young University gave me the opportunity to visit a number of fruitful archives in the West. I was especially pleased to receive a Grey Towers scholar-in-residence fellowship. This allowed me a month of uninterrupted writing at the Gifford Pinchot ancestral home and was the most pleasant and productive period of the entire dissertation process. A Wilbur R. Jacobs fellowship at the Huntington Library in California also allowed me the chance to write and conduct research among a community of brilliant scholars. Underpinning

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Abbreviations used in footnotes:

CE-CSUC	Clair Engle Collection, MSS 17, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.
CT-ASU	Carl T. Hayden Papers, MSS 1, Arizona State University Libraries, Arizona Collection
DC-CSR	Dennis Chávez Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.
DDE-DDE	Dwight D. Eisenhower Diary, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.
DRB-BANC	David Ross Brower Papers, BANC MSS 79/9 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
DSK-UU	David S. King Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriot Library, University of Utah.
EFB-DDE	Elmer F. Bennett Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.
ELA-AHC	Ellis L. Armstrong Papers, Collection Number 04723, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
FAS-DDE	Fred A. Seaton Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.
FED-AHC	Floyd E. Dominy Papers, Collection Number 02129, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming [All citations refer to the 1981 accretion unless otherwise noted.]
FED-OH	Floyd E. Dominy, Oral History Interview, conducted by Brit Allan Storey, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland.
GGG-CSU	Papers of Gilbert G. Stamm, Water Resources Archive, Colorado State University.
GP-LOC	Gifford Pinchot Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
HM-CSS	Helene Monberg Papers, Collection M104, Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College, Colorado.
HRH-RMN	H.R. Haldeman Collection, Richard M. Nixon Collection, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California.
JAC-JFK	John A. Carver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts.
JGW-AHC	James G. Watt Papers, Collection Number 07667, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming
JPS-IUP	John Phillips Saylor Collection, Manuscript Group #18, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Special Collections and University Archives.

Abbreviations used in footnotes, continued:

JSB-DDE	John Stewart Bragdon Records, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.
KG-JFK	Kermit Gordon Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts.
MWS-LOC	Michael Wolf Straus Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
NARA-RG48	Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Record Group 48, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland.
NARA-RG145	Records of the Farm Service Agency, Record Group 145, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland.
NARA-RG229	Records of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, Record Group 229, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland.
NARA-RG313	Record of Naval Operating Forces, Record Group 313, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, Maryland.
OB-JFK	Orren Beaty Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts.
PST-BANC	Paul S. Taylor Papers, BANC MSS 84/38 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SC-BANC	Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SLU-UA	Stewart L. Udall Papers (AZ 372), Special Collections, University of Arizona Libraries.
SWCD-CSS	Southwestern Water Conservation District Records, Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College, Colorado.
WHCF-DDE	White House Central Files, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.
WHCF-JFK	White House Central Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts.
WHCF-LBJ	White House Central Files, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas.
WHCF-RMN	White House Central Files, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California.
WIP-USU	William I. Palmer Papers, MSS COLL 331, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University.
WNS-UD	Wayne N. Aspinall Papers, Collection M008, Special Collections and Archives, University of Denver Libraries

Introduction: Western Water Conservation, Bureaucracy, and the American State

In the American West water is everywhere and nowhere. Aridity defines the region and is the single thread that ties together small farmers on the High Plains, corporate produce growers in California, and migrant agricultural workers from Texas to Washington. For most of the twentieth century, water reclamation was a universal issue at all levels of western government. Much as race was the unstated political calculation for the American South, water politics in the West transcended party affiliation. A western politician's support for federal reclamation could always be assumed. Even staunch fiscal conservatives found ideological gray areas when it came to funding water projects in their own states. Reclamation has certainly softened the landscape's harsh edges and contributed to high national standards of living. But the ecological and social costs of this engineering triumph have been high. Federal water policy in the West has created wide disparities in wealth and power, setting communities, states, and even entire sections of the country in opposition. Water scarcity could unite westerners, but just as often was a divisive force. Although few westerners today are familiar with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, no other federal agency has been more influential in shaping the modern West.

The Bureau of Reclamation traces its origins back to the 1902 Reclamation Act and since then has seen its share of political upheavals and colorful personalities. But one figure towers over all: Floyd Dominy, who served as commissioner from 1959 to 1969. Had Dominy worked for any other agency he might be regarded as one of the greatest public servants in American history. He was the consummate bureaucrat and worked tirelessly with both conservatives and liberals to carry out his agency's mission. He also displayed remarkable political resilience. As a presidential appointee he served two Republican and two Democratic administrations and managed to retain his position against challenges from powerful members of Congress, business

interests, and environmental groups. In an era when environmentalists could be found at all points on the political spectrum, Dominy personified the nation's tension with prosperity and growth on the one hand and increasing environmental degradation on the other. By the late 1960s, Dominy and the dams had come to symbolize technological hubris and the worst excesses of congressional pork barrel politics.

Floyd Dominy was born on a small dry farm near Hastings, Nebraska in 1909. Like farming communities across the country, Hastings was grappling with a radical shift to mechanized agriculture and becoming increasingly dependent on global markets. As a young man during the Great Depression, Dominy worked as a county agricultural agent implementing New Deal conservation programs in northeast Wyoming. This formative experience had a profound impact on his later government career and instilled in him a belief that the federal government had a duty to improve the lives of rural, poverty-stricken Americans. After working on agricultural development projects in Latin America and the Pacific during World War II, Dominy signed on as an economist for the Bureau of Reclamation in 1946. There he established a reputation as a fair, no-nonsense troubleshooter. In just thirteen years, he advanced to the commissionership and oversaw an unprecedented construction spree as the Bureau built dozens of major dams and thousands of miles of irrigation canals and high-tension power lines. At the same time, however, an increasingly vocal, increasingly powerful environmental movement began to oppose the Bureau's work. Dominy's unapologetic defense of reclamation made him a lightning rod for controversy and turned even staid, pro-establishment publications like *Reader's Digest* against the Bureau.

In "The Last Conservationist," I argue that the Bureau of Reclamation's true role in shaping the twentieth-century American West can only be understood in the context of a

Washington bureaucracy struggling to survive through a turbulent period. The Bureau was a durable pivot point around which all aspects of western water policy rotated. But like any federal agency, it never enjoyed true autonomy. Agency chiefs like Dominy and their staffs must continually jockey for administrative power, battle for funding, and protect their interests. They must also be willing to make short-term ideological and economic concessions to guarantee long-term survival. As Dominy well understood, an agency's ability to transform policy and vision into action depended on the bureaucrats' skill in navigating the currents of social and political change. His life provides a framework for examining changing environmental attitudes and shifting political allegiances in postwar America and shines a light on the exercise of power within the executive bureaucracy.

Although most bureaucrats purport to be political noncombatants, federal reclamation policy, like all long-running policies, must also be understood within the prevailing political and ideological currents of the day. Between the New Deal in the 1930s and the resurgence of conservatism in the late 1960s this meant the Bureau conformed to widely held liberal views on conservation, western settlement, and agriculture. But these views were hardly static. Old New Dealers from President Lyndon Johnson on down to Floyd Dominy drew on their Depression-era experience to meet the challenges of a nation that was becoming more populous, more urban, and increasingly less reliant on the government to enact change.¹

As this dissertation's title suggests, I see Dominy as the last prominent figure in a lineage of federal conservationists stretching back to nineteenth-century bureaucrat-explorer John Wesley Powell. Until the enactment of landmark environmental legislation around 1970, federal bureaucrats largely dictated conservation policy, notwithstanding the efforts of early

¹ For a survey of the growth of the urban West, see Peter Wiley and Robert Gottlieb, *Empires in the Sun: The Rise of the New American West* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1982).

environmentalists like John Muir and Robert Sterling Yard.² By then the time had passed when a single, well-placed federal official like Dominy, Progressive-era forester Gifford Pinchot, or National Park Service director Stephen Mather could shape policy with only minimal public input. The death of federal conservation reflected not only changing national attitudes about the environment but also a transfer of power into the hands of grassroots groups on both sides of the natural resource development coin. Almost overnight, it seemed, agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Forest Service, and even the generally popular National Park Service found themselves beset by detractors.³ By the close of the 1960s, the conservation movement, which had always experienced tension between its utilitarian and preservationist wings, fractured irrevocably.⁴ Environmental issues that had once enjoyed wide bipartisan support became increasingly polarized.⁵

² The best study of private citizens' influence on government conservation policy before World War II is Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002). Douglas Brinkley's *Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: Harper, 2009) illustrates the dominant role of federal partners in defining the terms of conservation and shaping the American West in the early twentieth-century. The literature on Muir is extensive. Donald Worster's biography *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) is the best of the lot.

³ For challenges to the U.S. Forest Service in this era, see Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests since World War Two* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), chapter eleven. For the later conservative backlash to federal policies and resource management agencies, see McGregor R. Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

⁴ Gifford Pinchot, the first American conservationist to connect the philosophy of utilitarianism to natural resource management, drew heavily from British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham argued in *A Fragment of Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right or wrong." (93) Pinchot modified this to "the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the longest run." See Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001), 151-55 for the evolution of Pinchot's thinking.

⁵ For a study of federal efforts to enact water pollution control measures in this period, see Paul Charles Milazzo, *Unlikely Environmentalists: Congress and Clean Water, 1945-1972* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006). Like Mackenzie and Weisbrot below, Milazzo sees the federal government, in this case Congress, and not the states or grassroots activists as the engine of change. In general, I agree with Milazzo's premise that Congress was at least as important in shaping liberal policy as were presidents or activists. But the executive bureaucracy, as I hope this study of Dominy shows, was a critical intermediary between all parties.

Most Americans have found a happy if perhaps unsustainable medium of increased consumption and superficial support for environmentalism.⁶ But the extreme positions of militant anti-development groups and the unabashedly exploitative “wise use” movement have come increasingly to dominate political rhetoric. An old New Dealer like Dominy would likely find little room in either camp today.⁷ Unlike President Ronald Reagan’s controversial Interior secretary James Watt, Dominy generally believed that natural resources should be developed for public rather than private benefit. He saw the federal government as a necessary catalyst for resource development, not an obstacle. But he rarely questioned the necessity for developing resources to their fullest.

At the end of World War II, the Bureau had seventy-four water projects in various stages of completion and had identified hundreds more potential project sites. Some of these ventures, like the massive Central Valley Project in California, were befitting a true hydraulic empire. But most projects were failures by any measure. Small-scale irrigators were trapped in a cycle of low crop prices and high operating costs. Despite generous public subsidies, many were unable to repay their construction obligations to the government. This prompted a crisis of conscience and an ideological transformation in the Bureau that began at the end of the 1930s and continued on for more than a decade. Planners would no longer maintain even the pretense that irrigation projects could stand on their own feet. Without revenue from other aspects of reclamation, particularly hydropower, most projects were simply not cost effective. In fact, the Bureau expected power revenues to cover sixty-five to ninety percent of future irrigation project costs. The time had passed, assistant reclamation commissioner Bill Warne told Congress in 1947,

⁶ This is the fundamental insight in Hal Rothman, *The Greening of A Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States since 1945* (Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

⁷ James Morton Turner, “‘The Specter of Environmentalism’: Wilderness, Environmental Politics and the Evolution of the New Right,” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (2009): 123-148 traces the origins of modern conservative opposition to environmentalism.

when individual projects could be considered without looking at the economic potential of entire river basins.⁸ Future irrigation projects might be financed by dams hundreds of miles distant.

For the Bureau's opponents, these "cash-register" dams symbolized the absurdity of reclaiming western deserts. But the overwhelming focus on large dams and agriculture as agents of social and ecological change has obscured the importance of hydropower development in the growth of the postwar West.⁹ The Bureau's expanded emphasis on hydropower also attracted serious opposition from fiscal conservatives. Many westerners and their eastern political allies recoiled at the Bureau's plans to expand the West's network of public power projects, especially those without obvious connections to irrigation. Just as standalone irrigation projects now had little chance of passing congressional muster, so too did single-purpose power projects. The debate went beyond simply substituting federal dams for private ones and questioned whether westerners would control their own energy development—if, for instance, they would develop coal resources instead of hydropower. But to move forward and continue to serve as an agent of western settlement, the Bureau had to think on a grand scale and integrate the West's subregions into a larger framework. In a move that surely would have shocked an earlier generation of reclamation boosters, Dominy was even willing to build and operate fossil-fuel power plants as a revenue source to maintain the pace of western growth.

⁸ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Public Lands. *Irrigation and Reclamation*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 1947, 13-14, 24, 70.

⁹ Dams and their effects on river ecosystems are the dominant motif on the literature of western reclamation and their titles are often indicative of the authors' lament. Mark W. T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (University of New Mexico Press, 1994); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Philip L. Fradkin, *A River No More: The Colorado River and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, 1995); Blaine Harden, *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996); Jared Farmer, *Glen Canyon Dammed: Inventing Lake Powell and the Canyon Country* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999); and James Lawrence Powell, *Dead Pool: Lake Powell, Global Warming, and the Future of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

What then of the small irrigation farmer now that the Bureau thought more in terms of kilowatts than acres of sugar beets? Already by the mid-1930s, New Deal liberals had concluded that the best way to uplift agrarian Americans was to integrate them more fully with industrial America, consuming as much as they produced.¹⁰ But how to do this without destroying one of the nation's most sacred mythological characters: Jefferson's sturdy, self-reliant yeoman? The Bureau's top echelon had long recognized that reclamation law's standard 160-acre ownership limit (320 acres for husband and wife) was detrimental to small farmers' long-term success. But few in the executive bureaucracy or Congress were willing to expend the political capital necessary to revise the issue. No matter how the debate played out, the Bureau stood to lose its primacy as an agent of western settlement.

Literature Review

Floyd Dominy was a hard-drinking, cigar-chomping, womanizing, larger-than-life personality stuffed into a stout five-foot-nine frame. He personified the rapacious modern westerner in a way John Wayne never could, a federal bureaucrat capable of repainting the landscape with the stroke of a pen or a kindly word to a senator. He wielded great power over his subordinates and was an ever-present actor in the drama of western water politics, appearing everywhere from contentious western community meetings to congressional hearing rooms to White House signing ceremonies. He was, in short, the most imperial commissioner in the Bureau of Reclamation's history. The epithet of "empire" is actually as old as the Reclamation

¹⁰ Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 226-228. Two important studies address the shift to a national consumer-oriented economy beginning in the 1930s: Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003). See also Otis L. Graham, Jr., *Toward A Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Service. But until the 1970s the loudest critics usually spoke a socialist empire that killed free enterprise.¹¹ Environmentalists have since appropriated the term for altogether different reasons.

“The Last Conservationist” shows that the Bureau of Reclamation was hardly an empire builder, countering the central argument of Donald Worster’s influential *Rivers of Empire*. Building on the work of German philosopher Karl Wittfogel, Worster argues that the “American West can best be described as a modern *hydraulic society*, which is to say, a social order based on the intensive, large-scale manipulation of water and its products in an arid setting.”¹² Worster essentially described an oligarchy of government technocrats and local elites. But while this arrangement could, at times, be found in places like the great irrigated valleys of California, it was hardly universal across the diverse social and ecological landscapes of the West. Even in California, Norris Hundley has shown that the “record discloses a wide and often confused crosscutting range of interest groups and bureaucrats, both public and private, who accomplish what they do as a result of shifting alliances and despite frequent disputes among themselves.”¹³ As a career bureaucrat like Dominy knew intuitively, relying for support solely on a handful of corporate irrigators, even powerful ones with deep pockets, would do little to reconcile decades-old animosities between the West’s political and geographic factions.

Congress has had an enormous influence in shaping the West’s waterways, although it has not been quite as powerful as some of its critics have imagined. *Cadillac Desert* author Marc Reisner observed that “to a degree that is impossible for most people to fathom, water projects

¹¹ For a mid-century critique of reclamation, see Sheridan Downey, *They Would Rule the Valley* (San Francisco: Sheridan Downey, 1947).

¹² Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1985), 6-7. Emphasis in original. Even as Worster was writing, scholars were critically reappraising Wittfogel’s fundamental assumptions about irrigation and agriculture. See J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 80-90, 143n79 for a survey of challenges to Wittfogel’s argument.

¹³ Norris Hundley, Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, revised edition, 2001), xix.

are the grease gun that lubricates the nation's legislative machinery."¹⁴ This is true insofar as it goes, but as my study shows, one senator's pet water project could invite a storm of protest from other corners of the West. Reisner found in Dominy a personification of the West's hyper-aggressive relationship with nature, describing him as "the two-fisted commissioner who rode reclamation's falling star." He conceded Dominy's humble origins but noted that he "ended his term as a zealot, blind to injustice, locked into a mad-dog campaign against the environmental movement and the whole country over a pair of Grand Canyon dams." In Reisner's telling, Dominy was the omnipotent master of the West's waterways, bullying any hapless congressman who dared cross him.¹⁵ To be sure, he was a calculating politician in his own right. But in spite of his reputation for bombast, Dominy generally stepped lightly on Capitol Hill. Nearly all of his power came from his relations with members of Congress and he was smart enough not to bite the hand that signed his agency's appropriations checks.

Western water projects typically had long legislative histories, with a shifting array of political and bureaucratic actors, which precludes a simple analysis of power relationships. However, some historians of western water development, like Robert Gottlieb and Daniel McCool, see an unassailable alliance of interest groups, bureaucratic agencies, and congressional committees—the so-called Iron Triangle model of policy formation.¹⁶ But these models tend toward an ahistorical and teleological understanding of the West's hydraulic landscape. At any one moment in time, the historian can quite easily identify the Iron Triangle's points. But over the long term, the model tells us almost nothing about why the Bureau and not another agency

¹⁴ Ibid., 308.

¹⁵ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 1993), 182, 240, 248.

¹⁶ Robert Gottlieb, *A Life of its Own: The Politics and Power of Water* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 46-52; and Daniel McCool, *Command of the Waters: Iron Triangles, Federal Water Development, and Indian Water* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

became the preeminent dam building organization in the West, or how it continued to thrive for more than a decade after shifting focus away from its historic consistency of small farmers. Iron Triangle models also do not explain the Bureau's changing relationship with urban consumers between 1945 and 1970. Nor do they account for why an influential lobbying agency like the National Reclamation Association could support irrigation projects generally but loudly denounce the federal hydropower projects that funded them. The rise of a powerful environmental lobby after the 1950s created competing triangles that further confuse analysis. Groups like the Sierra Club also worked in concert with Congress and federal agencies like the National Park Service to advance their agendas.

The Reclamation Act of 1902 still provides the ideological underpinnings of federal reclamation in the West despite more than a century of revisions. The act proved to be an obstacle for later generations of water managers. It was not a harbinger of the modern era, as its creators seemed to believe, but rather a nostalgic look back at the nation's nineteenth-century frontier heritage. Here I follow the insights of historian Donald Pisani, who has built a career challenging the conventional wisdom of reclamation history.¹⁷ While not an apologist, Pisani does not subscribe to the idea of reclamation as a tool of empire or posit the existence of an all-powerful central government. As Hal Rothman noted in the foreword to Pisani's *Water, Land, and the Law in the West*, "a fragmented West, divided by local rather than regional or national allegiances and battling against itself for economic gain in a zero-sum equation, emerges from Pisani's work."¹⁸ Reclamation maintained wide public support for much of the twentieth century and was largely democratic in development, notwithstanding the increasingly vocal opposition of

¹⁷ Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xi.

¹⁸ Hal Rothman in Donald J. Pisani, *Water, Land, and the Law in the West: The Limits of Public Policy, 1850-1920* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), ix.

environmental groups after World War II.¹⁹ Dominy spent the 1950s and 1960s working to unify the same disparate local groups Pisani identified behind a coherent, region-wide water policy. Following on Pisani's studies of the prewar period, my work seeks to complicate the relationship between western water interests in the postwar period and dispel the myth of a hydraulic empire.

"The Last Conservationist" connects the fertile academic discussions that grew from the visionary and revisionary insights of two unrelated but contemporaneous scholarly movements: the publication of *Bringing the State Back In* (1985) and the foundation of the "New Western" history.²⁰ Western scholars at least as far back as K. Ross Toole and Bernard DeVoto in the 1950s recognized the federal government's powerful hand in shaping and exploiting the West.²¹ In the 1980s, New West historians like Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and William Cronon sharpened these critiques, debunking the myth of western independence with a strong acknowledgement of the federal government's ubiquitous presence in the region. At times, however, the Federal Government appears as an all-powerful, unchanging monolith. In fact, agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management have had to respond as much to larger changes in American political and social life as they have to the specific needs and demands of westerners. By following the career of one influential bureaucrat over the tumultuous period from the Great Depression to the end of the Great Society, I show

¹⁹ Donald J. Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and the American West in the Twentieth Century," *Agricultural History* 77, no. 3 (2003): 418.

²⁰ Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For an assessment of the volume's impact fifteen years later, see Samuel DeCanio, "Bringing the State Back In...Again," *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society* 14, no. 2-3 (2000) 139-146. For a survey of the contribution of New Western history, see Richard White, "Western History," in *The New American History* Eric Foner, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 203-230.

²¹ At the heart of these critiques was the government's hand-in-glove relationship with extractive industries. See K. Ross Toole, *The Rape of the Great Plains: Northwestern America, Cattle, and Coal* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) and a collection of Bernard DeVoto's essays for the popular press, *The Western Paradox: A Bernard DeVoto Conservation Reader*, with an introduction by Douglas Brinkley and Patricia Nelson Limerick (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

that the federal government's relationship with the West—and thus the relationship of westerners to their government—cannot be isolated from national political and social trends. The history of federal power in the American West is best surveyed from both the spine of the Rockies and the dome of the Capitol.

A hearty skepticism of federal power has always been a core element of western identity. As Bernard DeVoto observed of New Deal programs, “the West greeted these measures characteristically: demanded more and more of them, demanding further government help in taking advantage of them, furiously denouncing the government for paternalism, and trying to avoid all regulation.”²² For scholars of the American state, this “western paradox” necessarily complicates metanarratives of New Deal liberalism, the rise of the World War II “warfare state,” or the growth of postwar suburbia.²³ Rightly or not, westerners have long seen their relationship with the federal government as one of quasi-dependency, with an intrusiveness equaled perhaps only in the Reconstruction-era South. Through presidential fiat and congressional legislation that encouraged the symbiotic westward march of labor and capital, the federal machine has left its imprint everywhere one cares to look in the West. The New Deal and World War II, which are viewed as major turning points in the development of the modern American state, should be seen more as surges in federal spending and involvement in western life, not as radical departures

²² Bernard DeVoto, “The West Against Itself,” *Harper's Magazine* 194 (January 1947): 1-13.

²³ For general analyses of the federal role settling and developing the American West, see Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), esp. parts two and four; Gerald D. Nash, *The Federal Landscape: An Economic History of the Twentieth-Century West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); and Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). Studies of the federal impact at critical moments in the modern West may be found in Richard Lowitt *The New Deal and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Gerald D. Nash, *World War II and the West: Reshaping the Economy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); and Kevin J. Fernlund, ed. *The Cold War American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

from the status quo.²⁴ These surges were important ones to be sure, but they fit comfortably into a pattern of federal involvement stretching back to the days of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Dominy and his peers in the executive bureaucracy occupied the often overlooked realm between the federal government and local communities.²⁵ Dams and other infrastructure projects can be cynically dismissed as mere pork barrel handouts to appease the hometown electorate. And while this is no doubt true in many cases, these projects still offer valuable lenses for understanding state power. Jason Scott Smith's *Building New Deal Liberalism*, for example, recognizes the role of civil works projects in extending federal reach.²⁶ But just as important is the often messy democratic process that occurs as locals maneuver to "bring home the bacon." Floyd Dominy was a native westerner who understood both the intimate details of western rural life and the language of power in Washington, DC. Although he is best remembered for his high-profile contests with environmentalists, most of his bureaucratic energies were spent in more mundane matters of bringing irrigation water to farms and hydropower to cities. These were specifically western issues. For this reason, the West deserves consideration as a distinct source of culture and political power in studies of American state building.

The federal bureaucracy is pervasive in its reach. Unelected bureaucrats, often described as the "fourth branch" of the American government, have steadily but quietly gained power over the course of the twentieth century. In his aptly titled study of the executive bureaucracy, A

²⁴ For analyses of expanded state power and nationalism during World War II, see Bartholomew H. Sparrow, *From the Outside In: World War II and the American State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Although their interpretative frameworks are different, neither sees regionalism or local actors as significant factors in the transformation of American political culture across the 1940s.

²⁵ In an answer to *Bringing the State Back In*, Thomas J. Sugrue argues for the "persistence of localism," highlighting the role of non-federal actors in policy formation in "All Politics is Local: The Persistence of Localism in Twentieth-Century America," in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, Julian Zelizer, eds. *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 301-326.

²⁶ Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Government of Strangers, Hugh Heclo observed that “between the politician’s intentions and the government’s final action passes the shadow of the bureaucrat.”²⁷ And while the overall trend over the last four decades is a decrease in total personnel numbers, the federal bureaucracy has become a permanent fixture in the fabric of American life. Max Weber’s observation that “once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy” remains fundamentally true.²⁸ (Or, as Ronald Reagan quipped “Actually, a government bureau is the nearest thing to eternal life we’ll ever see on this earth!”)²⁹ Yet few elected officials would do away with the entire bureaucratic structure, as it provides an effective shield for unpopular policy decisions and a laboratory for new ideas.³⁰

As reclamation commissioner, Dominy required a presidential appointment. But he was also a career civil servant, distinguishing him from the true political appointees who come to their jobs through patronage. Frequently in the 1960s, Dominy found himself at odds with Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, his nominal boss. Dominy’s bitterest enemies were in the layer of political appointees that cycled through the department’s upper ranks of under- and assistant-secretaries. Even Udall, whose eight-year tenure was one of the longest-held cabinet appointments of the twentieth century, was never completely sure of his future. Dwight Eisenhower eased out Interior Secretary Douglas McKay before the end of his first term; Richard Nixon fired Udall’s successor, Walter Hickel, after less than two years over Hickel’s opposition to administration policies in Vietnam. Under Nixon, the average political shelf life of a cabinet

²⁷ Hugh Heclo, *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1977), 6.

²⁸ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* trans., ed., and with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 228.

²⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Book of Famous Quotes,” available at: <http://www.famous-quotes.com/author.php?page=1&total=50&aid=6031>. Accessed November 2012.

³⁰ David Nachmias and David H. Rosenbloom, *Bureaucratic Government USA*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 29.

secretary declined from forty months to eighteen.³¹ Appointees, many of whom had little experience in Washington and frequently no understanding of the technical aspects of their position, barely had time establish the requisite political contacts before departing. Thus the importance of a civil servant's longevity in the Washington political scene to shaping policy cannot be overstated.

Despite popular misconceptions that bureaucracy stifles personal initiative, individual personalities do matter a great deal.³² Nowhere is this truer than in dealing with Congress. Although congressmen frequently eschewed partisanship to pursue the shared goal of re-election, amity lasted only as long as the watering trough was full. As congressional committees have become increasingly bureaucratized they have opened another avenue for policy making among the unelected. Committee staff members are often the most well-informed people in the legislative branch. These staffers wield considerable power within the Washington power structure and are often as influential as elected members of Congress. Schisms between western water interests appeared anytime a major water project was proposed. Bureaucrats with keen survival instincts recognize that loyalty in a bureaucratic framework is always situational and so are able to cultivate broad congressional contacts without becoming too chummy with any one faction. While Dominy's congressional relationships were extensive, they were always professional.³³

In the end, many of the Bureau's postwar activities and policies made sense only in light of the agency's relationship with other elements of the federal government. While these activities

³¹ Heclo, *A Government of Strangers*, 103.

³² See, for example, the discussion in Nachmias and Rosenbloom, *Bureaucratic Government USA*, 235-239. The historical literature on the role of bureaucrats, "experts," and the federal government is thin. For a survey of this relationship see Brian Balogh, *Chain Reaction: Expert Debate and Public Participation in American Commercial Nuclear Power, 1945-1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chapter one.

³³ Nachmias and Rosenbloom, *Bureaucratic Government USA*, 105.

and policies may have profoundly affected the West they were not always conceived with the interests of any particular group of westerners in mind. In some places, corporate agribusiness interests may have had a cozy relationship with the Bureau but they had far less influence shaping Bureau policies than the Budget Bureau, Congress, the Interior secretary's staff, or the president. Moreover, when westerners of all political stripes *chose* to challenge the Bureau they had a remarkable degree of success. Almost everywhere the Bureau faced coordinated opposition in the postwar era, its plans were scaled back or stopped: at Burns Creek, Mountain Sheep, and Hells Canyon in the Snake River drainage; at Echo Park; at the Marble and Bridge sites in Grand Canyon; at Devil's Canyon and Rampart in Alaska; Reichle and Sun Butte in Montana; and, significantly, on the problem of electric power distribution. This is hardly the record of an empire builder, either as an agent of creeping socialism or the handmaiden of agribusiness. If the Bureau of Reclamation was an empire builder, it was a shaky one indeed. Perhaps like most empires in antiquity, it succeeded because it ultimately demanded little of the conquered peoples.

Federal Conservation: A Brief History

Dominy's humble origins and long path to power through the machinery of the federal bureaucracy distinguished him from better-known patrician conservationists like Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt. But he rarely missed the opportunity to connect the Bureau of Reclamation's ongoing work with the legacies of past federal conservationists. Foremost among them was John Wesley Powell, the one-armed Civil War veteran whose exploration of the Colorado Plateau opened the region to the federal government. His 1878 *Report on Lands of the Arid Region* recognized that only a bare fraction of the West could be irrigated and that radical social adjustments would be necessary. His warnings fell largely on deaf ears. Instead, Congress and western commercial interests encouraged a breakneck pace of

settlement. Families were all too eager to take the gamble, lured by the myth of the American Garden and promises of a climate that would surely adapt itself to the settlers' needs.³⁴

In our own time of water shortages and climate change, Powell appears as a prophet. And like most religious figures, his core message is open to interpretation. For western historians early in the twentieth century, Powell seemed to lean toward the side of federal intervention in irrigation development. In an excellent survey of the many varied interpretations of Powell, James Aton concluded “that Powell opposed empire building—in the private and public sectors—and that what happened with the Bureau of Reclamation after his death was not his plan at all. He believed in decentralized, self-determined groups of people working out and controlling their own futures. He also believed in the small farmer and the small anything; for the Major, big was not better.”³⁵ But to reclamationists of Dominy's era, Powell remained a role model for managing the West's water, including construction of big dams and massive irrigation projects. Both Dominy and Powell thrived in the bureaucratic realm, understanding intuitively that the bureaucrats' ability to translate personal vision into policy was only as good as their ability to outmaneuver political opponents and squeeze appropriations dollars from Congress.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the notion of scientific management of natural resources began to take hold. But the hard realities of “reclaiming” the West's arid lands complicate the argument, advanced most forcefully in Samuel Hays's classic *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, that rational federal bureaucrats could overcome the influence of local

³⁴ John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States With a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah*, Wallace Stegner, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), 42-49. Although dated, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) still provides the best analysis of the “myth of the garden” and nineteenth-century western settlement.

³⁵ James M. Aton, *John Wesley Powell: His Life and Legacy* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010), 50-67. The best two biographies of Powell are Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953); and Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.)

communities. By its very nature, reclamation as the Progressives conceived it created local constituencies out of whole cloth. Irrigators, many of whom grew disenchanted with the Service's poorly designed projects, simply could not be managed like the resources of a silver mine or forest. The belief that a rational federal government was best capable of settling the irrigated West brought ruin to generations of farmers. For reclamation policy at least, Hays overstated the efficacy of scientific efficiency, but he was nevertheless correct that the *idea* of dispassionate, science-based resource management was the goal for future resource managers.³⁶

Chief forester Gifford Pinchot, like many of his contemporaries, never quite resolved the ambiguities of the "greatest good" philosophy or resolved scientific conservation's inherent social and environmental contradictions.³⁷ Nevertheless, the idea took powerful hold throughout the federal conservation bureaucracy. Pinchot believed human development and efficient resource use were important components of modern American nationalism. Owning land, he liked to point out, transformed men into solid American citizens.³⁸ With arable land in the humid East fast disappearing, the irrigated West offered opportunities for the next generation of farmers. If the family farm disappeared, something vital in the American character would disappear with it.³⁹ Like Pinchot, Dominy recognized all too well the suffering that accompanied poor land use practices. As he saw the two paths of American conservation diverge in the 1960s, Dominy tried to retain a conservation outlook that linked human progress with responsible resource use. "Conservation is a human-oriented activity, and its fruits should benefit man in his

³⁶ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1959, 1999), 1-5.

³⁷ Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*, 155.

³⁸ Gifford Pinchot, "Home Building for the Nation," GP-LOC, box 974, folder: BNG FSF Irrigation Congress 1909.

³⁹ Theodore Roosevelt to Herbert Myrick 19 September 1908, GP-LOC, box 425, folder: Agriculture Commission on Country Life Executive.

economic, his personal, and his spiritual life,” he told a group of teachers in 1962. “Conservation is not an end unto itself. Rather, it is a means to a better life.”⁴⁰

The economic and ecological crises of the 1930s transformed American conservation. But beyond a few token and often counterproductive efforts, New Deal agricultural programs often did little to assist impoverished small-scale and tenant farmers. A return to prosperity at the end of the 1930s did little to institutionalize federal conservation practices. World War II and the government’s endorsement of industrial agriculture accelerated the demise of marginal producers and in time pushed out even the moderately prosperous farmers who had weathered the Depression intact. Historian Theodore Saloutos is perhaps the most generous in his assessment, arguing that “the New Deal inherited an agricultural situation that had been generations in the making, one unlikely to be undone in a year or a decade by administrative decree.”⁴¹ Critiques of New Deal agricultural and conservation policies perhaps reflect only the views of a later generation that believed the government should always do more and better than it has.

The New Deal also did little to unify government conservation efforts.⁴² In the fragmented and overlapping system of American bureaucracy, the Bureau of Reclamation was just one of many agencies overseeing agriculture and rural settlement. This placed it in direct conflict with two other bureaucracies outside the Interior Department: the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In the 1940s, the USDA quietly but persistently tried to strip the Bureau of its social obligations to farmers. The Army Corps, seen as the Bureau’s more successful older sibling, often served as a stark example of how a water

⁴⁰ Floyd E. Dominy, “Remarks...before the 19th Annual Classroom Teachers Conference,” 12 July 1962, FED-AHC, box 5, folder: Correspondence, 1962 July.

⁴¹ Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), xiv. See also Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*; and Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 2004).

⁴² Graham, *Toward A Planned Society*, 53-55.

management agency *should* be run. Within the Department of the Interior itself, the seemingly haphazard array of agencies with widely different social and environmental mandates practically ensured conflict would occur between the Bureau of Reclamation, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Mines, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

By the time Dominy joined the Bureau of Reclamation in 1946, a powerful block of opponents in Congress was becoming increasingly intolerant of “socialist” federal policies, including social planning on reclamation projects. What saved the Bureau from divesting all its agricultural responsibilities and reverting to an agency focused solely on engineering was lingering hostility toward the New Deal. Many in Congress had no love for the Bureau, but they liked the USDA’s plan to “Russianize” American farms even less.⁴³ Significantly, however, the Reclamation Act of 1939, a classic example of New Deal conservation thinking, allowed Dominy and his colleagues to sustain New Deal conservation principles well into Republican Dwight Eisenhower’s administration in the 1950s.⁴⁴

As Sarah T. Phillips observed in her study of New Deal conservation, “resource conservation never stands alone as an essential component of American liberal ideology.”⁴⁵ We must then understand mid-century reclamation as a national policy that addressed not only the conservation of a physical, natural resource but also an antiquated, mostly forgotten notion about conserving people. As late as the mid-1960s, conservation was still a big enough tent that President Lyndon Johnson could endorse dams and parks in the same speech without seeming

⁴³ U.S. Congress, House. *Irrigation and Reclamation*, 172.

⁴⁴ The best survey of natural resource policy during the Eisenhower Administration is Elmo Richardson, *Dams, Parks, and Politics: Resource Development and Preservation in the Truman-Eisenhower Era* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1973).

⁴⁵ Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, 1-3. I disagree with Phillip’s assertion that New Deal conservation was the first attempt to link agriculture with conservation or consider environmental planning. The 1902 Reclamation Act was a distinct expression of these ideas.

contradictory.⁴⁶ But Johnson's conservation ethos saw beyond mere careful management of natural resources. And unfortunately for the Bureau of Reclamation, the West's big dams no longer captured public attention nor were they a solution to racism, urban poverty, or other Great Society concerns.⁴⁷ The Bureau of Reclamation attempted to adapt to Johnson's "New Conservation" model, inviting the First Lady for dam dedication ceremonies, burying unsightly electrical transmission lines, and beautifying visitor centers. But beyond a moderate interest in blue-collar recreation, it was increasingly apparent that the Bureau had little to offer Great Society liberals.⁴⁸

In truth, the Bureau of Reclamation had always been an agent for settling an undeveloped country and this heritage caught it flat-footed at the end of the 1960s. By then, the combined financial strain of liberal domestic programs and the war in Vietnam had slowed the Bureau's progress dramatically. The agency's emphasis on multi-dam, multi-purpose projects allowed little flexibility when drafting budgets or planning for the future. The Interior committees in Congress, dominated as they were by westerners, had done the Bureau no favors authorizing more projects than the appropriations committees would fund. When Dominy retired in 1969, the Bureau had a \$5 billion backlog of authorized but unfunded projects. By the time the federal trough began to fill again a few years later, Dominy's brand of conservation was irrelevant to a majority of westerners.

⁴⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, "The President's Remarks to Members [of the National Recreation and Park Association]," 13 October 1966, SLU-UA, box 158, folder 6.

⁴⁷ G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 184-189. Mackenzie and Weisbrot see liberal politicians in the 1960s not as reactionary forces but as the source of social change.

⁴⁸ Floyd E. Dominy, "Water Challenges of the Future," 16 November 1966, FED-AHC, box 32, folder: Speech File 1966.

Prologue: “Times of Want...”

They rose up from fields where red-orange earth rusts through pale yellow grass, came down through hollows and creek bottoms lined with cottonwoods, skimming along barbed wire and past empty dooryards on busted homesteads. First by thousands, then by millions, grasshoppers descended on Campbell County, Wyoming. They devoured crops, nibbled at fence posts, and shredded kitchen curtains. One by one, vegetables in backyard gardens disappeared until only the onions remained. But soon these too went missing under a carpet of insects.¹ The infestation was unpleasant but not unexpected or without precedent. What made the situation intolerable was the one-two punch of drought and economic depression. Neither faith in God nor in the almighty dollar seemed to offer any hope for relief to a community that could not even hang the wash out to dry for fear it would vanish into the sky.

Situated in the northeast corner of Wyoming, Campbell County is an improbable rectangle of nearly 5,000 square miles set down atop gently rolling plains, punctuated here and there with buttes and scarred with a web of dry creek beds. Today, the county is the scene of one of the periodic booms that cycle through the history of the American West. Gas and coal deposits drive the region’s current economic resurgence and strip malls and fast food joints, trophy homes and trailer courts testify to the presence of hard cash and steady employment. But the veneer of prosperity is thin. One need not venture too far off the interstate to see relics of past hard times. Hollow-eyed ruins testify to broken dreams and failure.

The winter of 1933-1934 had been exceptionally mild. After a brief dip in mid-December, temperatures were “summer-like” by Christmas and despite the worldwide economic depression, the local newspaper editorialized that things were looking up for the county and the

¹ Leora M. Hubbard, *Campbell County Profiles: Interviews with Early and Not So Early Settlers and Citizens of Campbell County* (Shawnee Mission, KS: Inter-Collegiate Press, 1985), 47.

nation. More than a hundred Campbell County men were off the relief rolls thanks to the Civil Works Administration, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's many New Deal relief agencies. Farmers would soon collect tens of thousands of dollars in wheat allotment payments. Perhaps most importantly for a community clinging to the hope of better crops and little else, northeastern Wyoming's weather had stayed balmy right down through the first week of December with good autumn rains and a late frost. "So it is not alone for the immediate benefits that we can give thanks," the editor wrote, "but for the future prospects, for the better times that are ahead—in short, for prosperity which is just again around the corner."² But in the coming months, the optimists of Campbell County were sorely tested. The warm winter was actually the harbinger of a crushing drought that would last for nearly two years.

Across the nation, the economic depression of the 1930s hit Americans hard. National unemployment soared from just over three percent in 1929 to a full quarter of the labor force four years later. In Campbell County, as in many of America's rural farm communities, the hard times of the Depression barely registered as anything more than a slight downturn in an already hard existence. The county was sparsely settled and no one outside of the few small population centers had electricity or running water. The shockwave of depression had begun at least a decade earlier when the brief agricultural boom after World War I collapsed. A crippling drought in 1919 followed by a hard, early winter devastated livestock. Statewide, ranchers lost or shipped out a third or more of their herds.³ More than half of Wyoming's banks failed in the 1920s.⁴ Farmers and ranchers with financial resources increased their holdings in the 1920s, buying out

² "The Return of Thanksgiving," *The (Gillette, WY) News-Record*, 7 December 1933; and Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934," Floyd E. Dominy Collection, American Heritage Center, Laramie, WY (hereafter FED-AHC. Unless otherwise noted, all citations refer to the 1981 accretion), (2005 accretion), box 2, 96-99.

³ T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, second edition, revised (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, 1978), 412.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 413-414.

their less fortunate neighbors. Those with more modest means gave up and moved on. But for many, the poverty that had kept their pioneer forebears from returning east decades earlier kept them through the Depression. “We couldn’t raise enough money to leave,” one recalled simply.⁵

As spring 1934 approached, the warm temperatures and scant snowfall were cause for concern. Without snow, stock water ponds dotting the land dried up and without spring rains the crop forecast was dire. Old-timers in the county estimated that perhaps ninety percent of the previous summer’s batch of grasshopper eggs had survived the mild winter and the state entomologist forecast a “general infestation.” In spring the land began to green up but almost immediately, the hoppers appeared. The devastation dismayed Floyd Dominy, the county’s new emergency Extension Service agent. “These pests even destroyed what old feed remained on the ranges,” he wrote, “and cut new growth of crop and grass off as fast as it grew.”⁶

Dominy went to work right away, attacking the problem with federal funds and federally funded manpower. By the first week of June, crews were distributing poisoned bran on fields in the county’s north and south ends, hoping to catch the hatching insects before they moved on to greener pastures. At the end of the month, the hopper population was at least three times larger than the previous year’s forecast. Over the horizon nearby counties experienced Mormon cricket infestations and funding for extermination projects was becoming hard to get. The state leader of grasshopper control was not sanguine. “Our only salvation is Providence,” he told a community meeting at the Gillette Lions Club.⁷

Despite having two bachelor’s degrees and experience as everything from a combine operator to a short-order cook to a taxi driver, Dominy had few prospects until the state’s

⁵ Hubbard, *Campbell County Profiles: Interviews with Early and Not So Early Settlers and Citizens of Campbell County*, 45.

⁶ Floyd E. Dominy, “Summary of Cattle Buying Program in Campbell County, June 26-Dec. 29, 1934,” 1935, FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 1.

⁷ Dominy, “Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934,” 102.

director of agricultural extension at the University of Wyoming offered the county agent position. Dominy arrived in Gillette in February 1934 in the depths of winter. No housing was available, and Floyd and his wife Alice scoured the countryside for a home. They settled on a long-abandoned stone dugout house on the Bell Ranch five miles west of town. A mile off the nearest road, the house had no plumbing, electricity, or phone service. But it did have a good well and a two-hole outhouse. For the next two-and-a-half years Dominy lived in conditions equal to or slightly worse than most of the people he was supposed to be helping. In the winter he dug coal out of the hillside for heat and in summers he grew a garden and hunted antelope. When Alice was not directing 4-H activities in the community or tending to the couple's baby girl Janice, she meticulously recorded the household's every expense in a large ledger book.⁸ Even for a government employee with a stable paycheck, every haircut and every new pair of shoelaces was a burden on the young couple. Although he was no stranger to the privations of rural life, Floyd Dominy never forgot the lesson of those years.

That Dominy's position existed at all was something of a minor miracle given Wyoming's political climate and culture of stubborn self-reliance. During the 1932 general election, the Democrats surged in popularity, abruptly shifting allegiance away from Herbert Hoover and a Republican Party that seemed unwilling and unable to acknowledge the depth of suffering in Wyoming. But although only Nevada and Montana would receive more federal aid than Wyoming during the Depression, resentment toward perceived federal handouts lasted longer in Wyoming than anywhere else. In fact, Wyoming was the only state to refuse emergency relief loans from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932 and 1933. Instead, the state's new Democratic governor, Leslie A. Miller, advocated strict austerity measures that

⁸ Ibid., 126.

included cutting agricultural extension service funding by half.⁹ Campbell County had been without an agent for ten months by the time Dominy arrived.

Slowly, haltingly, federal aid programs and relief funding began to trickle into the state. A seemingly endless drought had finally shattered the state's illusion of self-control and independence. The catch was that the federal government would not dispense aid money without a federal representative to manage programs, complete paperwork, and enforce compliance. It was the conundrum that has defined western American politics for over a century. The federal government had money to give and the people wanted it, but it came at the cost of local autonomy. Over the first six years of the Depression, the federal government spent \$170 per capita in Campbell County, far beyond the national average.¹⁰

Since September 1933, rainfall across the Great Plains and Mountain States had been well below normal. Except for scattered counties in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, the entire drought area lay west of the Mississippi River. Campbell County suffered from "extreme drought," represented on Department of Agriculture maps with a menacing black ink blot centered in North Dakota.¹¹ Wyoming received less than half its average rainfall that autumn and precipitation remained below average through the winter and spring. Range conditions were so degraded that dozens of acres might not support even a single animal. Beyond problems of pest control, Dominy spent the summer and fall of 1934 convincing skeptical ranchers and farmers to participate in the New Deal's agricultural programs. At this point, Dominy and Campbell County's leaders were mostly thinking in terms immediate relief, lurching from one crisis to another. The agricultural programs of the New Deal's first nine months had yet to address the

⁹ Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 463.

¹⁰ Francis D. Cronin and Howard W. Beers, *Areas of Intense Drought Distress, 1930-1936* (Washington, DC: Works Progress Administration, 1937), 52.

¹¹ Philip G. Murphy, "The Federal Government's Assistance to Agriculture: A Report Presented to the President's Drought Committee," 15 July 1935, NARA-RG145, box 1.

structural problems within American agriculture but they stopped the hemorrhaging. For many Campbell County families, government aid was the only income they received that year. The number of farmers and ranchers seeking Dominy's advice and assistance became so great—up to 200 people per day—that he moved out of his cramped basement office in the court house and into a larger room at the First State Bank.¹²

As 1934 came to a close, the situation in Campbell County was less dire than it had been when Dominy arrived eleven months earlier. At the end of his first year, Dominy assessed the ecological damage and the government's response. "This great western country was retreating before an unprecedented drouth," he said, "but the retreat was orderly and the damage less serious because of the far-sighted programs for relief offered by our government through the Agricultural Adjustment Administration."¹³ Commodity programs for wheat, corn-hog, sheep, and cattle were well established and had provided income to many struggling families. Together, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) programs infused \$679,650 into the county. With Dominy acting as secretary, the county established a debt adjustment board to assist the most hard luck cases. And throughout much of the West, the autumn rains returned in 1934. By the following summer, the extreme drought area shifted south to the Oklahoma-Texas panhandle area. This new "Dust Bowl" was centered in the area government mapmakers highlighted as "still extremely dry," a wide swath running from the crest of the Rocky Mountains east to the ninety-fifth meridian.¹⁴

Conditions in Campbell County looked to be improving, and Dominy was not shy about taking his due share of credit. In his first annual report on progress in the county, he noted that

¹² Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934," 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ Agricultural Adjustment Administration, "The Drought of 1934-35," 31 December 1935, NARA-RG145, box 1, 111-112

because of the seriousness of the emergency and the size of the county, “the work of administering the production control and drouth relief programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration has been a task of great magnitude and responsibility.”¹⁵ Like a politician, he had taken to the hustings to extoll the virtues of the AAA’s commodity programs. He made sure producers received their government aid checks on time. With Alice’s help, he coordinated community activities like 4-H clubs and hobby groups. In time, Dominy would decide which ranchers received range improvement work or access to expanded aid programs. Campbell County’s experience may not have meant much when submerged into the New Deal’s voluminous reports, charts, and graphs, but for county residents, the New Deal began and ended in the office of the county agent. It did not hurt either that Dominy was able to help the community while helping himself. “When I was twenty-four years old,” he once said, “I was king of the God-damned county.”¹⁶

Dominy’s time as a county agent instilled in him the unshakable belief that the federal government had a duty to uplift the lives of the nation’s rural citizens. But he was not yet making policy or even in regular contact with the USDA beyond the occasional circular letter from Washington. He was simply one county agent out of thousands who took what the New Deal programs had to offer and tried to shape them to the specific needs of his clients. Then as now, federal programs were only as effective as the bureaucrats who encouraged people to participate and helped them to untangle red tape. Dominy’s lifelong career as a government bureaucrat began with little fanfare and he might have disappeared into obscurity. But the unrelenting economic depression and the looming war provided many opportunities for the ambitious and committed liberal. Even as the New Deal’s corporate opportunists and political carpetbaggers

¹⁵ Dominy, “Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934,” 1.

¹⁶ John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, 1977), 157.

began returning to private life, Dominy vaulted through the civil service ranks with astonishing rapidity, eventually coming to rest in 1959 as the head of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Even as his responsibilities drifted toward the challenges of supporting the nation's relentless postwar expansion into the American West, the searing experience of Campbell County was never far from his mind.

One: “A True Son of the Soil”

Floyd Dominy came of age when the country was beginning to grapple seriously with the poor land use and settlement practices of past generations. With a third of the labor force working the land, the America of his childhood could still claim to be a nation of farmers. But all of that was rapidly changing around him. Farmers were trading their horses for tractors and weaving themselves tightly into the global agricultural economy. At the same time the mechanism of modern federal conservation was taking shape. As he grew older, he would come to understand the intimate relationship between the federal government and the American farmer. It could be at times paternalistic, charitable, or contradictory. As a child, he understood none of this, of course. He could not know then that the hardships and privation he saw all around his family’s dry Nebraska farm had deep roots in the ill-considered, haphazard homesteading policies of the nineteenth century or the naïve optimism of generations of farmers looking out across the hard lands of the arid American West. He saw only honest, hard-working people who struggled against a deck of cards that seemed unfairly stacked against them.

Dominy’s small role in the transformation of American conservation during the dark decade of the 1930s started him on a career in federal conservation. But his pedigree was not that of gentleman conservationists or patrician politicians like Gifford Pinchot, the Roosevelts, and their cronies. The rational, scientific conservation of the Progressive-era, which had so often turned on decisions made by a select few in remote office buildings and the posh social clubs of Washington, DC, was giving way to legions of professional bureaucrats who worked closely with local communities. Dominy’s own understanding of the land came from firsthand experience. He was not, as one angry farmer once accused him, a mere “swivel-chair bureaucrat who has never had his hand on a shovel.” Dominy knew well the problems of farmers and never

stopped thinking of himself as a “true son of the soil,” even as he was spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year to halt ancient rivers dead in their courses.¹

By the time Floyd Dominy was born on Christmas Eve 1909 in the house his father built, his family had been farming the Nebraska soil for more than three decades. His grandparents Lafayette and Sarah had been successful farmers in Illinois but after six years of marriage the two packed up their belongings into a wagon and headed west to Adams County, Nebraska, in the spring of 1876. They brought Floyd’s father Charles, then two-and-a-half, and an infant daughter, Flora. Lafayette, like so many caught up in the westward tide, arrived in Nebraska at the start of a seventeen-year stretch of good rains.² With this good fortune and the family’s hard work, the Dominys maintained a comfortable if not quite prosperous living. Over time, they added an orchard, four more children, and some cattle to the homestead. But their life was also marked by tragedy; diphtheria claimed three of their children: Flora in 1878, three-year old Eva in 1882, and their infant son Lewis in 1887.³

While Nebraska was new territory, the Dominy clan was invested deeply in the American soil, with eight generations of yeoman stretching back to the middle of the seventeenth century. Hailing from Southampton in England, the first Dominys in America settled in eastern Long Island and upstate New York. When Illinois lands opened up in the 1830s at the end of the Blackhawk War, they settled in La Salle County.⁴ Sarah’s family also came from the East, farming first in Greene County, Pennsylvania, before migrating west to the Illinois prairie.

¹ Ray A. Whitlow to James Murray, 26 January 1960, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: Professional File, 1960 Columbia Basin Project;

² James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 13, 183.

³ Floyd E. Dominy, “The Dominy Family Tree in the United States,” 23 January 1971, courtesy of Janice DeBolt, copy in the author’s possession.

⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, interview by John Madgett, December 2009, courtesy of John Madgett, video copy in author’s possession.

Lafayette's relocation to Nebraska followed a familiar pattern set by his own family and many like them. These moves collected several households of a family and often followed in the tracks of a pioneering relative. County plat maps showing multiple relations living in close proximity usually indicate a single mass settlement of families, not generations building upon each other. When Lafayette came to Nebraska, he brought along his parents and younger brother's family.

In relocating to Nebraska in the 1870s, the Dominy band slipped into an ever-widening stream of westward migrants. Most were farmers lured by the Homestead Act of 1862. For a small filing fee, they could settle on a 160-acre quarter-section and if they "proved up" that land in five years, they acquired a title. With so much open land recently cleared of its indigenous inhabitants, this quickly became the preferred method of American settlement. But making a go of it on a western homestead was really only possible with a railroad nearby. Just a generation before in Illinois, Lafayette's father had had to make a difficult seventy-mile, five-day wagon trip to market his produce in Chicago. With the Homestead Act, the federal government offered merely the promise of western settlement. The railroads made good on that promise.

The Union Pacific right-of-way snaked across Nebraska from its eastern terminus near Omaha, following the Platte River all the way. As part of the deal to finance construction and attract the settlers that would legitimize the venture, Congress granted the Union Pacific ten (and later twenty) sections of the public domain for every mile of track. In addition to government construction loans, the railroad could sell this free land to settlers, financing operations and creating an instant customer base for commodities heading east and finished goods heading west. In Nebraska alone, the Union Pacific acquired nearly five million acres, or enough land to settle more than 30,000 homesteading families. Despite complaints from some quarters that land grants betrayed the spirit of the homesteading laws, easterner farmers like the Dominys followed the

tracks like a compass needle. Nebraska's population grew up with the railroad, increasing more than three-fold over the 1870s.⁵

Unlike many Nebraskans, Lafayette gained his farm under the Preemption Act of 1841, and not the better-known Homestead Act. Preemption allowed squatters (many of whom were actually speculators) the right of first refusal once the federal government formally surveyed the land. The price was a nominal \$1.25 per acre. But Lafayette's plot sat within the forty-mile-wide swath of Union Pacific grants. Here as elsewhere, railroad sections were interspersed with public domain land, creating the now-familiar checkerboard pattern that has defined much of western America's settlement and resource development. The railroads had a tricky balance to maintain: keep land prices high enough to gain immediate cash returns but not so high that settlers tried their luck elsewhere. Two legal requirements helped the railroads in this regard. Homesteaders on the public domain within the railroad grant area could only claim eighty acres, or half what the law entitled them to elsewhere. Moreover, the financial settlement for preemption lands in these areas doubled to \$2.50 per acre. Lafayette worked one of these squatter sections for two years before buying it outright for four hundred dollars. Overall, this was a good transaction for Lafayette even though he was certainly capable of proving up a "free" homestead elsewhere.⁶ He had worked the land for two seasons (with uncommonly bountiful rains) and knew it could produce. The dense tallgrass prairie had already been plowed under, saving him considerable labor and time. The squatter's plot was also well-situated along the major road linking the town of Hastings, which was rapidly becoming the county's largest community, to Grand Island, the much larger town to the north.

⁵ Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 118-19, 170-71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170-71; and John Opie, *The Law of the Land: Two Hundred Years of American Farmland Policy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 75-79.

Lafayette may also have known of plans to construct a rail line running just west of the new property. When he purchased a second quarter section across the road from his original place in 1883, the Union Pacific retained a right-of-way across the parcel's northwest corner. The short-lived Hastings and Grand Island Railroad connected the St. Joseph and Western Railroad in Hastings with the Union Pacific in Grand Island, firmly establishing Hastings as the county seat and opening up new marketing possibilities. Before the Union Pacific bought it out, the St. Joe and Western platted the village of Hansen, three-quarters of a mile north of the Dominy farm. This small village, rather than Hastings a few miles to the south, became the center of the Dominy clan's social world. Lafayette was an active member in the town's spiritual and business life, the sort of trusted community figure who could be found on any number of boards and committees. Devoutly religious, he was also a founding member of Hansen's Presbyterian Society and helped oversee construction of the local church.⁷

Within a year, Hansen boasted two stores, a hotel, and a lumber yard. At first, Lafayette and his neighbors marketed their produce through the railroad depot and a pair of antiquated "shovel stations" to dump produce into rail cars. Soon Hansen gained modern grain elevators, a major status symbol for an up-and-coming Plains community. Yet the affluent appearance was deceptive. The two general stores changed hands often through the end of the nineteenth century and at times lay unoccupied for months.⁸ On Easter Sunday 1901, the business district burned down, an all too common disaster from which the village never fully recovered. Hansen continued to experience boom-and-bust cycles through the twentieth century, although its overall trajectory was clearly downward. The village blacksmith, a sign of stability for many western

⁷ Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Adams County: The Story 1872-1972* (Hastings, NE: Adams County-Hastings Centennial Commission, 1972), 918.

⁸ William R. Burton, *Past and Present of Adams County Nebraska* (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1916), 1:391-92.

villages, went under with the coming of the automobile. The final death knell sounded in 1956 when the post office closed. Today, Hansen is not even the proverbial wide spot in the road since it sits a few hundred yards off the county highway.⁹

When Floyd's father Charles turned 21 in 1894, he was still living in his parents' house but had become a formal tenant farmer on one of Lafayette's plots. His new start could not have come at a worse time. Climatically, the 1890s were the toughest period in Nebraska's short history of Euroamerican settlement and 1894 was the driest yet. All over the West, farmers lured by years of good rain gave up, sold out, and moved on. Western Nebraska farmers living beyond the hundredth meridian suffered the most, but the drought left few of the state's farming communities untouched. At first a trickle and then a torrent, busted farmers left the Great Plains and retreated east. More than a third of Nebraska's counties lost population over the decade.¹⁰ Like much of the drought-afflicted agrarian West in the late-nineteenth century, Adams County briefly embraced Populism. In later years, residents also flirted with socialist, prohibitionist, and free silver candidates. Nevertheless, Charles and Lafayette clung tightly to their Republican principles, which in that age meant an ideology rooted in activism and a belief in a strong, centralized government.

Through it all, Charles managed to hold on. Three years into his quasi-independent stint as a bachelor farmer, he married Emma Etta Shay, the daughter of a neighboring farmer. Emma was barely a second-generation American, her father having been born on the sea passage from Ireland. Two years after the marriage, they purchased Lafayette's Union Pacific quarter-section for four thousand dollars. Lafayette built the young couple a home on the land and Charles improved the farm, growing corn and wheat and raising hogs. In the years to come, the climate

⁹ Creigh, *Adams County*, 918.

¹⁰ James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 242-43.

improved and he had enough work to justify a hired man. Like his father, Charles was a community builder and in an era when fraternal organizations enjoyed wide popularity, he joined or co-founded several. Over twelve years, Emma gave birth to six children in the family home. All the Dominy children were born in the house with neighboring women assisting in the deliveries. Floyd's first childhood memory was the commotion surrounding the birth of his younger sister Marian.¹¹ Charles, who could recall the death of his own siblings, could give thanks that all of his children would survive him.

In 1905, Lafayette harvested a bumper crop, and decided to call it quits. Sixty years old, he auctioned off his equipment and retired to the farmhouse.¹² Whether because of an innate conservatism or shrewd abilities or just plain good luck, Lafayette Dominy had done everything right. He had stopped to settle about one hundred miles short of the twenty-inch isohyet, the magic make-or-break line of precipitation that divides American agriculture's eastern and western sections. He had also settled at the start of a long run of good crop weather, and as the nation was on the upswing from economic depression. His purchase of preemption land was fortuitous once the road and rail lines developed and Hansen became a marketing center. The timely purchase of railroad grant land gave his family some breathing room, allowing Charles to begin his adult life with family support nearby. Lafayette's active involvement in building a democratic community planted roots that stabilized his neighbors and three generations of his own family. In short, he was a shining example of Thomas Jefferson's virtuous yeoman. But he was also atypical. To begin with, he and Sarah remained healthy well into old age despite the earlier tragic loss of their children. He was able to use his improved land as capital for

¹¹ Floyd E. Dominy, interview by John Madgett, December 2009, courtesy of John Madgett, video copy in author's possession.

¹² Undated news clipping (probably *Hastings (NE) Tribune*, August 1905), FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family.

retirement, but this also required selling, rather than gifting, a quarter-section to his son. Moving to Hastings or Grand Island would likely have been beyond their means and so this meant renting their land—their safety net and the source of all their worldly capital—to a tenant.

Like his father, Charles struggled from season to season to wrest a living from his “poverty-stricken” farm.¹³ Most years this meant little more than subsistence. And always this was dependent on rainfall. The lack of water defined every facet of life in the Dominy household. In later years Floyd often reflected on the hardships of growing up on a dry farm, remembering “the Saturday night bath as a household ceremonial.”¹⁴ The dry years of the 1890s had given way to a decade of wetter weather. But drought returned in the 1910s, with the notable exception of 1915. Heavy rains in June made that year the wettest in Nebraska’s recorded history and played havoc with crops. Then as now, “average” precipitation means little to the Great Plains farmer.¹⁵ Sudden storms or erratic rains could be as harmful as prolonged drought.

Growing up in the Dominy household was a challenge for young Floyd. As the fifth of six children and youngest son, he often found himself at the bottom of the pecking order, struggling for attention. He especially envied his brother Ralph, nine years his senior, and this pressing sense of inferiority would drive him for much of his life. By his own account, young Floyd was the neighborhood strongman, and developed a taste for power that a domineering mother and repressive birth order would not allow him in the confines of the Dominy home. Emma was indeed stern and she and Charles often quarreled. But Floyd recalled that Emma

¹³ Floyd E. Dominy, interview by Jack Loeffler, 16 August 2000, courtesy of Jack Loeffler and with thanks to William deBuys, audio copy in author’s possession.

¹⁴ “Address by Commissioner of Reclamation Floyd E. Dominy at the Banquet Meeting of the Sherman Dam Dedication Ceremonies, St. Paul, Nebraska, June 8, 1963,” FED-AHC, box 5, folder: Correspondence, 1963 June.

¹⁵ Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 13.

“nourished and pampered” him until he left home at nineteen.¹⁶ Through good years and lean years, Floyd’s parents maintained their deep Presbyterian faith, and although Floyd became a professed atheist, he clearly absorbed the teachings of the Bible. As he preached the Gospel of Reclamation later in life, Dominy adeptly wove both scripture and ribald country humor into his sermons.

During the 1915 harvest, when Floyd was six, Charles took a bad fall off a tall stack of wheat. His injured back brought an abrupt transition to the household. The following February, he moved the family off the farm and into Hastings where he hung out his shingle as a realtor and insurance agent. Charles sold off the farm equipment—his draft horses fetched the princely sum of \$250 each—and rented out the land for the next several years. Despite an eighth-grade education he prospered in business and quickly became a key figure in the town. The family moved into a comfortable home on a broad tree-lined lane nine miles and a world away from the old farmstead. The children, accustomed to Hansen’s single-room school house, attended Hastings’ modern schools. Floyd’s older brother Ralph attended Hastings High School and then Hastings College, a small Presbyterian institution. There he studied a general liberal arts curriculum, including a healthy dose of Bible study. After two years he left school and entered business with his father, who renamed the business C. M. Dominy and Son. Ralph married the daughter of the high school band teacher before becoming a city councilman and joining a host of fraternal and business organizations. Like Lafayette and Charles before him, Ralph seemed destined to become a pillar of the community. When farmers at the grain elevators mentioned the Dominy name in conversation, as they no doubt did in the tight-knit community of Hastings, they meant Ralph, not Floyd. Charles “always wanted it to be C.M. Dominy and *Sons*,” Floyd

¹⁶ Ruth Young, interview by Ian Stacy, December 2010; and Floyd E. Dominy, interview by John Madgett, December 2009, courtesy of John Madgett, video copy in author’s possession.

recalled at the end of his life. “But Ralph was nine years my senior. I knew my job there would be janitor, so I didn’t want any part of it.”¹⁷

In 1924, when Floyd was fifteen, he accompanied his father on a trip west to visit his older cousin Ed in Scottsbluff County. The journey in Charles’ Model T, across “fields and prairies...as brown as the unpaved road,” triggered an epiphany. Cousin Ed was an irrigation farmer on the Bureau of Reclamation’s North Platte River Project. After seeing close-up what the “miracle of irrigation” had done for Ed and his neighbors, Charles and Floyd traced the North Platte River system—for by now it had become as much an artificial system as a natural river—well into Wyoming, ending at Pathfinder Reservoir, more than 170 airline miles from Ed’s farm. The teenaged Floyd was more focused on the fishing at Pathfinder than on the promise of irrigation and “still too much boy and not enough man to recognize all at once what a deep impression that visit to Cousin Ed’s made on me.” Yet the two-pound brown trout Dominy landed must have made a lasting impression too, since he would one day work hard to strengthen the ties between reclamation and recreation.¹⁸

By leaving the farm in 1916, Charles missed out on the boom in farm commodities that swept American agriculture during and immediate after World War I. The war had brought European agriculture to a standstill, grinding up young men and good farm land, and disrupting Continental and overseas transportation networks. The United States remained aloof from the conflict, even as German submarines claimed a small number of American merchant vessels. President Woodrow Wilson, in fact, would carry his 1916 reelection campaign under the slogan “he kept us out of the war.” Even with the below average rains that bracketed the war years,

¹⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, interview by John Madgett, December 2009.

¹⁸ Floyd E. Dominy, “Incident on a Nebraska Farm,” 26 August 1966, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: biographical information, 1963-1967 Nebraska background.

Charles no doubt missed a chance to smooth over the losses of previous seasons with higher crop prices. But as a real estate agent, he stood to gain much more.

For the American farmer and realtors like Charles Dominy, the war touched off a period of unprecedented prosperity. In Nebraska, agricultural patterns matched those in much of the rest of the West. Individual farmers increased their acreage and farms changed hands. Another speculation bubble grew, and some farmers used the opportunity to break their ties to the land altogether. Charles sold between ten and twelve farms per month, and in January 1920 he sold an unprecedented seventeen residential homes in Hastings. The real estate bubble kept expanding, and in one case Charles sold the same home three times in a single year, each time at an increased price.¹⁹ At the same time, farms became increasingly mechanized. This boosted efficiency and opened up new land as farmers began growing wheat and corn on acres once dedicated to draft animal forage. More than half the increase in farm production in the years after the war came as the nation transitioned from muscle power to mechanical power.²⁰

As a teenager, Floyd worked summers on farms outside Hastings for ten dollars per week plus room and board.²¹ Not yet grown into his frame, he struggled to operate the farm machinery. After graduating high school in 1927, he attended Hastings College, accumulating sixty credits toward a degree in economics. To support himself, he hired on as a farmhand near Chappell, Nebraska. Because Dominy had one of the few cars on campus, some of his Hastings College classmates convinced him to sign up with them for an engineering co-op program at Georgia Tech, and so in June 1929 he headed south. The program rotated month-long

¹⁹ “Meet a Neighbor: Local Realtor Remembers Post War Boom Days Here,” *Hastings (NE) Tribune*, undated clipping (probably 1938 or 1939).

²⁰ Earl Pomeroy, *The American Far West in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 57.

²¹ Floyd E. Dominy, “Application and Personal History Statement,” (for the War Department), undated, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: biographical information, c. 1934-1942 Civil Service; and Floyd E. Dominy, “Statement of Experience,” undated, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: biographical information, c. 1934-1942 Civil Service.

instructional periods with a month at a jobsite. Like many Americans of his age, Dominy was thrilled with airplanes and briefly entertained dreams of a career in aeronautical engineering. Instead, he took a brief surveying course in preparation for a general labor position with the Hope Engineering Company on a natural gas pipeline in Alabama. The job was a backbreaking ten-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week for three dollars per day. At the end of the month, the company withheld thirty dollars for board. The meager wages gave him little money to survive during his periods of classroom instruction.²²

Even before he began fieldwork, Dominy was looking for something more lucrative. With characteristic braggadocio, he wrote his brother Ralph that he had been hunting for a better job, and had feelers out for a mechanic's job with local trucking companies. "I surely hope I land one of them," he wrote. "I let them in on the fact that I know more about trucks than the guy that designed them."²³ His organizational talents soon impressed his supervisors at Hope, and he moved into an administrative position in charge of payroll, timekeeping, and supplies. More importantly, the job offered a substantial pay raise that might have allowed him to continue his studies. But the stock market crash of October 1929 killed the project. Hope finished the work in progress and cut the workforce. With the onset of the Depression, another Hope job offer in Montana dried up too. Twenty years old, out of money, and with a new bride, Dominy retreated to Nebraska. He took a job as a truck driver for twenty dollars a week and looked for his next opportunity.²⁴

Alice Criswell had been born within four miles of the Dominy farm, although she and Floyd did not meet until junior high school. Pretty and petite, Alice had begun teaching at a one-

²² FED-OH, 101-102.

²³ Floyd E. Dominy to Ralph Dominy, 29 August 1929. Courtesy of Charles E. Dominy. Copy in author's collection.

²⁴ FED-OH, 102-103.

room schoolhouse in Hastings when she was seventeen. Floyd invited Alice down to Georgia to spend Christmas with him near the Hope jobsite. A justice of the peace married them on December 23. The newlyweds drove to Villa Rica and then on to Macon for a very brief honeymoon. Because Alice could not keep her teaching job if she was married, and because her parents would likely not have approved of the union in any case, Floyd and Alice kept their marriage a secret. When they returned, Floyd and Alice continued to live apart, each in their parents' homes. Alice's family never reconciled themselves to Floyd, since they believed he had taken her away from them, especially so once the couple settled in Virginia.

Like many young people of his generation, Dominy's future seemed to be on hold and he spent the next several years in a succession of odd jobs. He returned to Chappell to work the farm of Ed Smith. Smith convinced Dominy to go back to school despite the uncertainty of the Depression, offering a promise of summer work if he attended the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Alice had saved some money and so the two of them moved on to Wyoming. But even here he and Alice had to maintain their charade, living apart in the dorms. As a married couple, they would have lost their campus jobs, he as a cook's helper and teaching assistant, she as a babysitter for faculty. Realizing he wasn't disciplined enough for an engineering degree, Dominy pursued an aggressive course of study in economics, with minors in political science and agricultural economics.²⁵ In the summer of 1931, he worked his last season as general farm labor. The following year he got on as a statistician at Wyoming's Archer Agricultural Experiment Station before returning for a year of graduate study with an assistantship in the Department of Agronomy. He kept up a busy life in Laramie, joining several academic honors societies and playing on the intramural hockey team.

²⁵ Ibid., 103-106.

His next opportunity came in the summer of 1933 when he accepted a \$100-per-month position as a vocational agriculture instructor at a high school in Hillsdale, Wyoming. “All I had to do,” he recalled, “was teach all the vocational [agriculture] subjects, including mechanical shop and a woodworking shop, coach the basketball team, teach 7th and 8th grade arithmetic, [and] 9th grade general science. Then, when they asked me to coach the junior play, I decided that was too much. And I took another job. I quit. I didn't even teach a year.”²⁶ He briefly considered a job with the Indian Bureau as the sole teacher at a remote school in Alaska, but declined it when he found out that the entire community left the village for four months every year. He and Alice would have been left entirely and utterly alone in the Alaska wilderness.²⁷

The Great Depression had a profound effect on the American psyche. Certainly no other experience of Floyd Dominy's early life was more important to his professional development or his evolution as a conservationist than his time as a county agent in Campbell County, Wyoming. As a bureau chief in the Department of the Interior, Dominy was often at odds with his counterparts in the Department of Agriculture (USDA.) But his formative experience as a bureaucrat and disciple of classic American liberalism developed during the depression years under agriculture secretary Henry A. Wallace, son of Calvin Coolidge's Secretary of Agriculture and grandson of the founder of the influential journal *Wallaces' Farmer*. Like perhaps no other American before or since, Wallace saw the intimate relationship between a nation of small family farms and democracy. The agricultural crisis of the postwar period and the full-blown

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Ibid., 106.

depression that followed convinced Wallace of the need for an expanded partnership between the nation's farmers and their government.²⁸

A progressive Republican of the Theodore Roosevelt mold, Wallace slowly gravitated toward the Democrats over the troubled decade of the 1920s. He supported Democrat Alfred E. Smith in his unsuccessful 1928 presidential campaign but was slow to warm to Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. But Wallace was increasingly troubled with what he saw as the rotting core of American democratic society. In the end, he became one of FDR's most trusted advisors and a champion of New Deal reforms. At times, Wallace's strident endorsement of the liberal American state outshone even Roosevelt.²⁹ He occupied a middle ground in the New Deal agricultural network as one of the administration's "agrarian intellectuals." "Because of their upbringing in the less class-stratified regions of the country," historian Sarah Phillips has observed, "the agrarian intellectuals had more confidence in local planning and gradual, voluntary change."³⁰ They were neither urban liberals with a sincere but idealized concern for the plight of rural folk nor were they among the conservative New Dealers who carefully kept one foot in Wall Street and the other in Roosevelt's inner circle.

In 1862, Congress had passed two landmark pieces of legislation that would affect generations of Wallaces, Dominys, and countless other farm families. The first and most famous was the Homestead Act. The second, often overlooked, law was the Land Grant College Act of 1862. Its purpose, as its full title states, was to "provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts."³¹ Dominy's alma mater, the University of Wyoming, dated back to 1886,

²⁸ Henry A. Wallace, *New Frontiers* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934), 27-29 and passim.

²⁹ John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 86-87, 99-105.

³⁰ Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108.

³¹ *An Act Donating Public Land to the Several States and Territories which many provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess., 2 December 1861.

although the university's department of agriculture did not begin outreach into the Wyoming countryside until 1904. At first, this was through a series of Farmers' Institutes covering topics of immediate interest like stock grading and rudimentary conservation practices. The annual programs were popular, but settlement in Wyoming was too sparse to attract many attendees outside a handful of small towns. On the eve of World War I, the Wyoming legislature appropriated \$10,000 for the creation of a legitimate agricultural extension service to be operated under the nominal supervision of the dean of the university.

The service's first director was Albert E. Bowman, an agronomist at Utah Agricultural College. In the early years, the peripatetic Bowman hitched around Wyoming's vast emptiness on stage coach, bus, train, and horseback. For his troubles, he faced legions of hostile ranchers. They believed the extension service was a secret arm of the federal government, created to push cattle off the land in favor of the growing number of dry farmers who were presently lacing the countryside with barbed wire under the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909. Bowman's future became more secure in 1914 when Woodrow Wilson signed the Smith-Lever Act, authorizing federal funds for state extension services. Urban politicians, however, echoed the Wyoming ranchers' concerns and claimed Smith-Lever would destroy local autonomy and lead to socialism. Bowman and his counterparts still had an uphill battle ahead of them working to win the trust of the nation's agricultural community and penurious legislators, but a framework for direct government assistance to individual farmers and ranchers was now in place.³² As it turned out, the extension service became the most durable link between the federal government, state agencies, and agricultural producers.

³² Albert E. Bowman, *Early History of Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming* (Laramie, WY: University of Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, 1964), 2-10; and R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 32-33.

When American agriculture began its tailspin after World War I, the Wyoming extension service faced new challenges. The service was a cooperative organization between the USDA, the University of Wyoming, and local government. Individual counties could accept or decline the services of an agent as they saw fit. Through the hard economic times of the 1920s and early 1930s, several Wyoming counties chose to discontinue their agents. In the spring of 1919, Campbell County commissioners refused to fund their agent, beginning a four-year break in service. Other counties followed suit. In 1931, a reform organization of wealthy ranchers and other fiscal conservatives calling themselves the Wyoming State Tax League conducted a county-by-county campaign against the service, urging the state legislature to cut all funds. Only Bowman's strenuous efforts kept the service afloat.³³

The New Deal saved the extension service in Wyoming. For New Deal planners in the USDA, the first problems to tackle were the commodities programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of May 1933. While the legislation spelled out a framework for making subsidy payments to agricultural producers, the government still faced the challenge of administering the complex program at the local level. For Wyoming, the two programs of immediate concern were the corn-hog and wheat programs. The natural instrument for this work was the county agent, a neutral figure familiar with the social and environmental conditions in a specific region. But seven of Wyoming's more conservative counties refused to fund agents. No agent meant no AAA programs. As a stopgap measure, the USDA allotted additional funds to hire agents to carry out the AAA's program. These "emergency" positions required refunding every three months, making it difficult to attract prospective employees. The Bankhead-Jones

³³ Bowman, *Early History of Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming*, 28-29.

Act in 1935 replaced emergency appropriations with regular funding and put land grant colleges and state extension services on more secure footing.³⁴

Campbell County had reestablished its relationship with the extension service in 1923 despite the best efforts of the Wyoming State Tax League. Agent Glen Clark had served in the position since late 1928 and enjoyed the support of local farmers. But by January 1933, enough residents had fled the parched landscape to drop the county to second-class status and trigger a one-third budget reduction. To cut costs, county commissioners defunded Clark's position. After he resigned two months later, the county was without an agent for the rest of the year. Farmers had already taken advantage of the AAA's wheat allotment program, forming a committee in July and netting \$35,000 in subsidy payments at year's end. But they could not participate in the corn-hog program without an agent. Director Bowman informed the county commissioners that "if the county wished the government to aid in increasing the purchasing power of the producer, the county would be expected to participate in the cost." Under the agreement, the federal government would pay the new agent's salary while the county bore administrative and incidental expenses. Distressed farmers throughout the county demanded action.³⁵ They got Floyd Dominy, who signed on as emergency agent on February 1, 1934. Ironically, considering Dominy's fruitless search for work, Bowman and the University of Wyoming had come looking for him.³⁶

Within days of arriving, Dominy began a direct-mail and newspaper campaign. He was fortunate that Campbell County had created a functioning Wheat Production Control Association the year before, and he used that framework to promote the corn-hog program. The economics of

³⁴ Ibid., 29.

³⁵ "Appointment of County Agent Here is Likely says Chairman of Board," *The (Gillette, WY) News-Record*, 4 January 1934; and Frank W. Lane, *History of Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming Counties* (Laramie, WY: University of Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, 1964), 28-29.

³⁶ FED-OH, 108.

the corn-hog program were simple, although convincing producers of the program's necessity proved difficult. To drive up prices, producers had to reduce both corn acreage and hog numbers by one-quarter, receiving payments of thirty cents per bushel of corn and five dollars per hog. Corn reduction targets reflected average yields, not the lean harvest years of 1932 and 1933, essentially providing each participating producer with crop insurance.³⁷ Although Dominy coordinated the program's administration and ensured compliance with federal regulations, local involvement was extensive. Community committees in each of the county's districts fact-checked initial contracts, allowing neighbors to monitor each other. Committee members from other districts then checked each producer for compliance. This process ensured that "farmers have for the first time a voice in running the affairs of their local associations...thus training men for future farm leadership."³⁸

Dominy's greatest challenge in the community was defeating ignorance and skepticism. The mindset of USDA statisticians and economists, concerned as they were with a national program and not the specific concerns of Campbell County, did not always make sense to individual producers. Dominy spent much of his time explaining program details and benefits. Here he honed the ability, one that would be tested innumerable times in the years to come, of patiently allowing a detractor or opponent to express their concerns, sometimes crudely, before laying out the government's case. He also insisted on making personal contact with every corn-hog producer, even if they declined to sign a contract. His experience with the program taught him that "complete cooperation followed complete understanding."³⁹ Dominy also developed another skillset that would serve him well over the course of his long bureaucratic career:

³⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934," FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 16-17.

³⁸ Ibid., 50.

³⁹ Ibid., 3.

meticulous attention to detail. Despite submitting the second-highest number of corn-hog contracts in the state, he did not commit a single paperwork error, something no other agent in Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, or Oregon could claim. In the end, 458 of the county's corn-hog producers participated, netting more than \$26,000 in benefit payments. For many, the federal payment was the only cash income they received that year. Not surprisingly, producers voted overwhelmingly to continue the program the following year.⁴⁰

By October 1934, all or parts of twenty-two states were receiving emergency drought aid. Under normal conditions, animals in drought areas could be sold and shipped elsewhere to finish their life cycle. But with prices too low to offset the shipping cost of either animal or fodder, stock growers in the West could not afford to save their herds. They were unsure how long the drought would last. Facing severely degraded pastures (less than one-quarter normal in Campbell County) stock growers began culling their animals, hoping to preserve at least a foundational herd. This action, multiplied many thousands of times across the West, only drove prices lower. Moreover, cattle had already become a surplus commodity by summer 1934. When the Senate failed to include beef as a basic commodity in the first round of AAA legislation, most farmers held on to their animals hoping for better prices down the road. By 1934, the USDA feared that unless the government stepped in to correct the imbalance, “millions of our citizens faced starvation, and the serious impairment of the beef and dairy industries was inevitable.” Only planning at the national level could orchestrate the actions of millions of farmers who otherwise would see only their own fate at stake. In April 1934, Congress reluctantly passed an amendment

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

to the AAA, the Jones-Connally Act, which authorized the USDA to add beef cattle to the list of other basic commodities.⁴¹

By May, drought conditions had grown so severe that Secretary Wallace relaxed some restrictions on feed crops, allowing farmers to increase acreage of silage so long as they did not plant the designated acres set aside for corn reduction.⁴² In June, Dr. E. W. Sheets and Wallace attended the annual meeting of the Wyoming Livestock Growers Association in Douglas. Sheets explained the details of the federal government's livestock purchase program to the association's executive committee. This same group of influential ranchers who had long been enemies of the extension service was incensed to discover that the service and its county agents would administer the livestock program. After a tense exchange pitting Sheets and Bowman against the cattle and sheep growers, the federal plan won out. Extension agents acting under the general supervision of the state's livestock specialist, J. R. Neale, would work with one of the association's representatives in each county. The agents performed the actual selection of livestock, and the government's Emergency Program office in the state handled the payments. The ranchers' recalcitrance soured Wallace on the livestock growers and he let Bowman know it on a long drive from Douglas to the secretary's next stop in Pierre, South Dakota.⁴³

In early June, Dominy gathered together Neale and local representatives from the Wyoming Stock Grower's Association. Campbell County ranchers, no doubt in more dire straits than the association's affluent state representatives, were less resistant to the idea of federal aid. They quickly agreed on a plan. As he had with the corn-hog program, Dominy began another media blitz and outreach program to educate the community and correct erroneous rumors. He

⁴¹ Agricultural Adjustment Administration, "The Drought of 1934-35," 1936, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 145, box 1, 2-5.

⁴² Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934," 35.

⁴³ Bowman, *Early History of Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming*, 63-64.

fired the federal veterinarian who was supposed to be conducting livestock inspections when the man refused to match Dominy's long work days.⁴⁴ Within two weeks, a younger (and apparently more energetic) veterinarian from the Bureau of Animal Industry and an appraiser began visiting Campbell County ranches. They selected out cattle too emaciated to make a journey by railcar or otherwise unfit for food. Animals making the grade were shipped to canneries for distribution to families on relief. Working non-stop for the next four months, the two men visited an average of eight ranches each day, sorting through nearly 300 animals per day.⁴⁵

Planning efforts were extensive. Starting with the most distressed areas, Dominy selected the inspection sites, coordinated with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to deliver hay to the cattle (most of which had to be driven sixty or more miles to the railhead), and then arranged the exact number of freight cars needed to dispatch the cattle without creating a bottleneck at the stockyards. He also urged the stock men to be cautious and apply for federal feed loans, and to reduce their herds only to the absolute minimum required to prevent a future crisis.⁴⁶

Perhaps most important for the small rancher, Dominy and the other committee members foresaw the extended drought of 1934 and recognized its potential impact on the number of surplus animals nationwide. By getting the program underway quickly, they were able to get ahead of the glut in the cattle market. By the time the USDA began instituting quotas at the county level, Dominy had already shipped out a significant percentage of Campbell County's cattle. Officially, this meant the county had not yet met its quota as of late October, and Dominy reassured producers they would not have to carry the risk of overwintering questionable

⁴⁴ FED-OH, 5.

⁴⁵ Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1934," 66, 76.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

animals.⁴⁷ He also shipped some cattle to Belle Fourche in nearby South Dakota, a federal reclamation project in poor economic health but possessed of a miraculous amount of green pasture.⁴⁸ Three-quarters of Campbell County's ranchers eventually took part in the program.

When the program ended in the fall, Campbell County's ranchers had disposed of more cattle than any other county in the state and received nearly half-a-million dollars in benefit payments. "Cattlemen in general realized that the Emergency Cattle Buying Program of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration was certainly a Godsend to them in every way," Dominy concluded. "They have nothing but praise for the program, and for the manner in which it was carried out locally."⁴⁹ Conservation had not yet entered the picture in any meaningful way. But as the emergency passed and the drought relaxed its grip in large areas of the West outside the Dust Bowl, New Dealers like Dominy began to approach problems on the land in a more orderly and rational fashion. The county commissioners, once vigorously opposed to the presence of an agent, strongly supported Dominy's continuance into 1935. Citing an administrative loophole, he also managed to convince Bowman to continue paying federal emergency funds in addition to the county wage.⁵⁰

Optimism was illusory. Wheat prices, as with many other commodities, improved less because AAA programs were successful than because extensive drought conditions in 1934 reduced surpluses. Nationwide, farmers voted seven to one to retain the wheat allotment program after it expired at the end of the 1934 season. But by 1935, the AAA was under attack from

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁸ FED-OH, 130, 169.

⁴⁹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Summary of Cattle Buying Program in Campbell County, June 26-Dec. 29, 1934," 1935, FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 1-11.

⁵⁰ FED-OH, 109.

several fronts.⁵¹ In letters urging Campbell County farmers to sign up for the following year's program, Dominy argued that only the AAA could allow thousands of wheat farmers scattered across the country the same protected markets a handful of industrial capitalists enjoyed. "The only way the wheat production control program can be defeated," he wrote in November that year, "is by lack of interest and cooperation from the wheat farmers themselves."⁵² Yet lack of interest was widespread, despite the timely appearance of government checks the previous autumn. With lower expected payouts scheduled for 1935, corn-hog contracts fell by a quarter.⁵³

Dominy was concerned that farmers and ranchers were not keeping adequate production records, especially since producers could not participate in AAA programs without proof of acreage reductions. But he also knew that most producers had no grasp of how their farms operated financially. Wyoming producers may have "had their sights fixed on an urban world of markets, fashions, and living standards" and not on the land around them, as Donald Worster wrote of Dust Bowl farmers.⁵⁴ But if they had their eyes on the material trappings of a better life, they were doing little to maximize production or income. On his own initiative, Dominy refused to issue AAA record books until producers agreed "to sign a pledge that they would keep the records called for the best they could."⁵⁵ For his entire tenure, Dominy tried and mostly failed to convince farmers to improve their bookkeeping. Nor were they educating themselves about their livelihood. In mailing out the extension service's circular "Wyoming Agricultural Situation for 1935," he attached a cover letter with the admonition "DON'T just lay this bulletin aside!" and then listed the page numbers for topics like alfalfa seed, the potato forecast, hog futures, and

⁵¹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1935," FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁴ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 2004), 165.

⁵⁵ Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1935," 30.

other topics in which farmers should be “vitaly interested.”⁵⁶ Dominy also encouraged shelterbelt tree planting, although at this point the goals were largely aesthetic and “to increase permanency of location.”⁵⁷

No other problem of the Depression-era brought together as many separate components of the local community and state and federal governments as did the effort to eliminate insect pests. Infestations, such as the grasshopper plague of 1934, were commonplace. With three million acres of crop and range land in the county to protect, the task was enormous. Dominy convinced the Civilian Conservation Corps detachment in Gillette to lend fifty of their number who then worked around the clock distributing hundreds of tons of poison bait. Grasshoppers got off to a late start in 1935 owing to a cold and damp spring. The delayed hatch allowed farmers to harvest their winter wheat and mow the first crop of hay. But later crops and subsistence gardens “were entirely destroyed throughout the north half of the county, except where systematic poisoning was practiced.” Farmers focused their prevention efforts on high value crops, alfalfa seed, and backyard gardens, often poisoning their fields every few days. Good weather in late summer, when the hoppers laid their eggs, foreshadowed an even worse year to come in 1936.⁵⁸

Predators and “nuisance” animals also received federal attention. Through the winter of 1935-36, local hunters working with the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey earned federal wages protecting the county’s sizable sheep population from coyotes.⁵⁹ Drought conditions brought coyotes and humans in closer contact when rabbits became scarce.⁶⁰ By 1937, the county had four salaried hunters working through the winter months to eliminate coyotes, and the state

⁵⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 54-56.

⁵⁹ Dominy, “Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1935,” 42.

⁶⁰ Floyd E. Dominy, “Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1936,” FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 47.

created a bounty system. With this, producers sought out coyote dens and destroyed the pups.⁶¹ County residents also waged war against prairie dogs, rabbits, and rattlesnakes.⁶² Many Campbell County families had at least one tragic rattlesnake encounter in their histories and the snakes also menaced young livestock. Dominy supervised a local committee in locating snake dens and trapping the reptiles as they emerged in the spring. The committee killed all the rattlers but released bull snakes and other nonpoisonous species deemed of value.⁶³

While conditions had not quite returned to normal in 1935, Dominy's second year as agent proved less eventful than the first. With the worst seemingly behind Campbell County, Dominy wanted to focus on community-building activities. Heading into 1936, his top three priorities were farm accounts, 4-H clubs, and home management work.⁶⁴ Yet 1936 proved to be the worst year yet. As predicted, grasshoppers appeared on a massive scale. In the north of the county, an expanse of 1.6 million acres "was as bare as a road by the middle of June." Ranchers tried to sell off their livestock and Dominy looked to Idaho, Nebraska, and Colorado for pasture, feed, and buyers. Desperate to save foundational herds, he and the cattlemen torched thorns of cacti and fed Russian thistle to gaunt animals. Fortuitously, soon after he had arrived in 1934, Dominy had convinced a handful of farmers to plant crested wheat grass, a drought tolerant Eurasian forage crop. By 1936, several dozen farmers had created a local market for the seed. Dominy also conducted an outreach program to improve alfalfa range practices. The results of his efforts were mixed. Grasshoppers and drought continued to exact a heavy toll. Even more ominously, the county harvested no grain that year.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1935," 65.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶³ Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1937," FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 87-89.

⁶⁴ Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1935," 66.

⁶⁵ Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1936," 1, 36-38, 48-49.

Because of the work of thousands of county agents and community organizations across the nation, agricultural secretary Henry Wallace hoped the AAA would survive despite conservative opposition. Federal-local cooperation gave the AAA a veneer of democratic participation unlike many other New Deal programs aimed at business, and the commodity programs were generally popular in rural communities. But the Supreme Court struck down the law in January 1936, declaring that the tax on processors of agricultural commodities (which had funded the program) was unconstitutional. In less than two months, however, Wallace produced replacement legislation that promised to maintain strong alliances between the countryside and the New Dealers. Not only did the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act (SCDAA) of 1936 improve the funding mechanism and make it less susceptible to constitutional challenge, it also integrated conservation into the system of production, allotments, and subsidies. The new law emphasized conserving land instead of simply reducing crop levels and indicated a fundamental ideological shift from parity pricing for crops to parity income for farmers, leveling the playing field somewhat between different classes of farmers. No longer could large-scale producers with surplus acreage profit simply by leaving excess land idle. Everyone now had a positive obligation to fulfill before receiving payment.⁶⁶

As a young man, Dominy saw what the federal government could accomplish and he learned what a dedicated, aggressive public servant could achieve. He was also present at a moment when the impetus for conservation was shifting away from the scientific managers in Washington, DC and back into the hands of local communities. The government may have provided the funds and general guidance, but it was up to county agents, farmers, and ranchers to find the practices that best suited their own social and ecological conditions. His early

⁶⁶ Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 80-82; and Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 161-162.

assignments in the vastness of the American West, which necessarily allowed “wide latitude for the use of independent judgment and action,” brought with them the lesson that an individual could achieve significant power in a seemingly menial position.⁶⁷ Although critics would later attack his pro-development stance toward western waterscapes, he had not arrived casually at his conclusions. He was a man who thought deeply about the history of the American West, knew its landscapes and its people. In fact, nearly every aspect of his upbringing, education, and early work history seemed tailor-made to the career of a man who would one day take on the improbable task of making the desert “blossom as a rose.” He spoke for millions of westerners.

⁶⁷ “Detailed Description of Employment,” FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, c. 1934-1942 Civil Service.

Two: The Making of a Conservationist

Floyd Dominy's boyhood and his time as a young county agent during the Depression exposed him to a wide variety of agricultural problems. From the perspective of Campbell County, the federal government's New Deal conservation programs were indeed a success. But Dominy was mired in the intimate details of a single community and his perspective was limited. His experiences in the latter part of the 1930s and during World War II showed him a relatively weak and ineffective federal government, one that harbored grandiose visions and grand expectations, but which often failed to implement them properly. The limits of federal power were evident everywhere he turned, whether in the inability to develop fully a conservation ethos among Depression-era farmers or even improbable military schemes to create a dairy industry on the rocky, tropical island of Guam. The government—often spurred by interest groups—rarely lavished the funding or attention necessary to dictate the entire terms of a project and seemed to lack the stamina necessary to see a plan to fruition.

Despite lofty political rhetoric, a government program was often only as effective as the bureaucrat carrying it out. For an ambitious man like Dominy this could offer both opportunity and frustration. He still had work to do in Campbell County but he was rapidly growing beyond the county agent role. As he came into the orbit of the center of power in Washington, DC, Dominy furthered his education as a New Deal liberal. He began to see the problems he had known so well as a child and as a county agent multiplied thousands of times across the West. A growing world crisis would offer him a new perspective on agriculture and further sharpen his understanding of the West's problems. When war ended in 1945, Dominy had an understanding of the relationship between conservation and the federal bureaucracy that set him apart from all but a few of his peers.

Campbell County attempted to use planning as a means to counter the Depression's effects. But like most national efforts at comprehensive planning during the New Deal, results were mixed and often reflected the motivations and personalities of a wide range of participants as much as any scientific or methodical purpose. As it happened, Dominy and county officials were too close to the emergency to look very far into the future. In 1936 he and the Program Planning Committee identified five broad areas of concern: adequate feed storage, land use, education, proper soil management, and general farm management. But the committee had a limited outlook and essentially did little more than plead for help from the state and federal governments. While it was better positioned than the national government to make recommendations about the unique social, economic, and ecological problems in its community, it did so in isolation from the rest of the nation, and even the counties nearby.¹

Like the tide of westward settlement in the nineteenth century, American conservation skipped over the Great Plains on its way west, not returning until the Depression forced it to. At the national level, planning for natural resource conservation continued on at a snail's pace. Few in the 1930s could argue that the nation's relationship with nature was harmonious. Yet several factors prevented any major accomplishments on the planning front. The chief difficulty, evident in the AAA commodity programs, was putting vast federal plans into action across a diverse national landscape. Even within the relatively limited realm of agriculture, effective planning would have required bringing a diverse lot—Wyoming cattle kings and southern tenant farmers, corn growers and dairy operators—into a flexible framework able to respond to unforeseen international events and climate crises. Officials from Franklin Roosevelt on down believed that

¹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1936," FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 57-70.

counties were probably the best organization units for planning, but even this required an intermediate layer of state involvement.²

Further complicating the already complicated structure of the American federal system, the two key government officials most responsible for rational land use planning, Henry Wallace and Interior secretary Harold Ickes, were open to centralized conservation planning in theory but were unwilling to trade away responsibilities (and the federal dollars that came with them.) Failure to create an all-encompassing department of natural resource conservation was mostly due to the temperament of the two men and their allies, although this was neither the first nor the last unsuccessful attempt to create a Department of Conservation in the twentieth century. As one Ickes biographer noted, “the quirks of greed, ego, vindictiveness, compassion, ambition, common sense, and plain cussedness which were given room for expression in any functioning democracy usually were enough to thwart the most grandiose planning, no matter how cunningly devised.”³ In the end, bureaucratic inertia and a lack of will was unable to overcome strong pushback from farmers who wanted independence except under the most dire of circumstances.

While a dedicated Department of Conservation was a non-starter, conservation measures became increasingly important for county agents and local producers. Whereas in 1934 Dominy could merely *suggest* that farmers adopt soil conservation measures or plant shelterbelts, the second half of the 1930s saw greater emphasis on restoring worn-out lands. In October 1936, when the government announced a new conservation program, Dominy seized his opportunity. Although winter loomed, he wasted no time and convinced more than 500 ranchers to bring 1.75 million acres into the Range Improvement Program. In the short run, conservation work

² Otis L. Graham, Jr., *Toward A Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 31-32, 40-43.

³ T. H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold Ickes 1874-1952* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 528.

employed 160 ranchers for three months.⁴ In this way, New Deal wages rather than commodity programs propped up farm families.

In the arid lands of northeast Wyoming, water is the limiting resource. Dominy and the ranchers set to work building small reservoirs, developing springs, and digging wells using Soil Conservation Service (SCS) funds.⁵ The SCS paid wages for work crews, but land owners were responsible for supplying building material and construction equipment, anti-livestock fencing for dams, and a four-horse team. In addition, the landowners agreed to maintain the dam for five years. Superficially, these requirements might have put the program out of reach for all but the biggest operators. But 250 producers applied for the program. Dominy selected applicants, identified siting criteria for reservoir sites, and convinced the county surveyor to volunteer his services when SCS surveyors proved unable to work fast enough to keep the relief crews on the job.⁶ These stock ponds were mere puddles compared to the massive projects he would oversee in years to come, but in late 1936 Floyd Dominy had become a dam builder.

As Dominy looked ahead to 1937, range improvement was a top priority. He developed a three-point program for water conservation that included reservoirs, rudimentary irrigation, and contour plowing. He also advocated rotational grazing and the reseeding of burned-out and insect-ravaged range land.⁷ Like many ranchers and farmers throughout the West, Dominy had become a convert to the cause of conservation. In a self-congratulatory tone, he noted that the conservation provisions of the SCDA “make it possible to make cash payments to cooperators for doing the very things that Campbell County Extension Agents have long recognized needed to be done in order to stabilize the agricultural industry of this county.” Even discounting his

⁴ Dominy, “Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1936,” 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59-61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

prideful tone, the statistics were impressive: 350 stock water reservoirs constructed, 150 springs developed or improved, 30 miles of additional fencing to promote rotational grazing, 1,200 acres of land with contour furrowing, 560 acres crested wheat grass planted, and 6,800 acres of summer-fallowed land tended. Altogether, eighty percent of producers had participated in soil conservation and range improvement programs.⁸ That year, Dominy held sixty-seven community meetings, sent out six circular letters, and had twelve newspaper items printed on conservation themes.⁹ He even invented a pendulum system for contour plowing and instructed farmers in its use.¹⁰ Overall, he thought the conservation program was good for the county and good for the country: “It is a very concrete and tangible program and the United States Government is getting a dollars [*sic*] worth of real conservation value for every dollar spent.”¹¹

The extension service had always been more than just a broker between farmers and the federal government or an outlet for the latest news in agricultural science. It was also a total community builder, working through boys’ and girls’ clubs, the 4-H, home economics programs, and women’s groups. The service wanted to do more than simply increase the incomes of farmers. As one brochure explained in 1948, “the big goal of the Agricultural Extension Service is to help rural people develop their ideas and practices so they can travel the road of life in a more productive, efficient, healthful, joyful, spiritually-better way—so they can have more knowledge about their rural world.”¹² As a county agent Dominy was also responsible for promoting these types of community building activities. Although they occupied far less of his time than traditional agricultural work, he coordinated homemakers’ clubs, recreation camps for

⁸ Floyd E. Dominy, “Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1937,” FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹² Albert E. Bowman, *Early History of Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming* (Laramie, WY: University of Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, 1964), 12.

adults and children, and demonstrations at local fairs. When the previous county agent left in 1932, all but one 4-H club disbanded. When Dominy left in the summer of 1938, 4-H clubs operated in even the most isolated of Campbell County's communities.¹³ Social clubs may have "stimulated discontent," encouraging Campbell County residents to embrace mainstream consumerism while neglecting a simpler, traditional lifestyle.¹⁴ But they also developed a sense of cohesiveness and identity for a dispersed ranching community.

The Depression-era county agent personified the extensive federal attempt to alleviate suffering. As a non-voting member of the county's debt adjustment board, Dominy listened as dozens of nearly destitute farmers appeared hat-in-hand before their neighbors to ask for mortgage adjustments. One woman complained that the board "was rather nose-y, but their advice helped them to get along, and finally pay off the loan."¹⁵ Dominy also worked with the Farm Credit Administration, distributing emergency feed loans to hundreds of farmers. He heard from additional hard luck cases on the Resettlement Administration committee. When he left the county in August 1938, the Farm Security Administration was servicing 112 loans, reaching perhaps one in eight rural families. The FSA also granted \$25,000 in subsistence grants, about half of which had been repaid through labor on public works projects. Many of the county's stockmen had liquidated their herds after the grasshopper and drought problems of 1936. Without access to credit, they had no means to restore their livelihood. Dominy found encouragement in the county residents' progress toward loan repayment, especially since "borrowers are, for the most part, in sorry financial condition at the time the loan was made." He

¹³ Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1935," FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 19.

¹⁴ Donald Worster makes this claim in Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 2004), 173.

¹⁵ Leora M. Hubbard, *Campbell County Profiles: Interviews with Early and Not So Early Settlers and Citizens of Campbell County* (Shawnee Mission, KS: Inter-Collegiate Press, 1985), 79.

was convinced the partnership between himself and the county's farm security committee could rebuild destitute families based on "careful farm plans, conservatively financed and adequately supervised."¹⁶

For years Dominy had toiled in relative obscurity in northeast Wyoming, although being "king of the God-damned county" clearly suited him. He was hardworking, driven, and had managed to make sense of the New Deal's disorderly agricultural policies. Campbell County typically ranked as one of the top compliers in AAA programs. Contracts and administration were often first to arrive in Washington and county producers were first in the state to receive benefit checks. While his effort did not go unrecognized in Laramie, his actions were obscured among the thousands of county extension agents who served during the Depression. Only slowly did word of achievements filter up through the convoluted channels of the Wyoming Extension Service and the Department of Agriculture. When USDA inspectors visited Wyoming in the spring of 1937, they saw that Campbell County had done more toward range improvement than several other states combined.¹⁷ He received offers for positions in Washington but he and Alice were reluctant to leave their western roots. Finally, in August 1938, Floyd, Alice, and Janice put a pull-behind trailer on their Buick and headed east to Washington. On the first of September 1938, Dominy joined the Western Division of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. His formal title was "associate economist" but he was really a troubleshooter in the field, ferreting out fraud in the agency's many commodity programs. The job came with a \$400 annual raise. He hoped to stay in Washington just long enough to gain experience and the prestige that came with

¹⁶ Floyd E. Dominy, "Wyoming Annual Narrative Report, Campbell County, 1938," FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 2, 37.

¹⁷ FED-OH, 6.

a federal job. But although Dominy would return many times in the years to come, he would never again reside in the West.¹⁸

By the time Dominy arrived to work for the USDA in Washington, New Deal agriculture had undergone its third major legislative overhaul. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 was something of a compromise measure between the 1933 and 1936 acts. It had three basic purposes: to restore individual producer income to parity; to develop a farmer-directed national program of soil conservation; and to maintain an “ever-normal granary,” which would smooth out American agriculture’s boom-bust economic cycles during drought or national emergencies like war.¹⁹ The 1938 law combined the production-control principles of the first AAA (minus the contentious tax on food processors) with the conservation-based principles of the SCDA. Unlike previous New Deal agricultural legislation which had been little more than short-term bandages on a wounded system, the new AAA gave the federal government broad powers to regulate the agricultural economy, especially when it came to controlling national production levels of a single crop. Significantly, allotment payments became part of the routine USDA budgeting process, a seemingly insignificant distinction but one that made subsidies a permanent fixture of American agriculture.²⁰ Although the Republican Party made substantial gains in the 1938 midterm elections, in part because of their criticism of the 1938 AAA, they had nothing to offer in its place and knew well the dangers of tinkering with a legislative life raft.²¹ Farm subsidies had become one of America’s most sacred cows.

¹⁸ FED-OH, 6-7, 111.

¹⁹ Floyd E. Dominy, “General Statement of the Application of the AAA Program in the Southern Great Plains,” 24 April 1940, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Professional File, 1940 Regional Advisory Council Reports.

²⁰ R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 82- 83.

²¹ Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 531-532.

Dominy's new job took him away from the intimacy of community-scale problems and introduced him to the workings of a sprawling bureaucracy. His new home, the USDA's Western Division, covered thirteen states and allowed him to consider agricultural problems on a grand scale. Dominy was responsible for planning and implementing the agency's Agricultural Conservation Program in the Pacific Northwest states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. In this capacity, he traveled extensively throughout the West and he began to gain an appreciation for the West's sub-regional variations. He appeared at community meetings and at kitchen tables to explain the government's program. As so often happens in large bureaucratic regimes—and few government agencies could match the complexity and unwieldiness of the USDA in this period—Dominy could have confined himself to his assigned responsibilities. But his frustration with the poor business practices of Campbell County's producers still lingered. He devised a simple worksheet for farmers to better their understanding of the relationship between their practices and federal program requirements. Within a year, every participating farmer in the Western Division was required to use the form. After just seven months on the job, Dominy received a promotion in the division, assisting the Senior Agricultural Economist. His geographical focus shifted to Montana and North Dakota.²²

This new position lasted just five months before he moved up again, working now under the title of Administrative Officer. Here he focused on the Great Plains region and spent less time on outreach and more on evaluation and long-term planning. In bureaucratic terms, he was tasked with “determining the effectiveness of the agricultural conservation, range conservation and price adjustment programs and the agronomic and social results of such programs.”²³ By observing a wide variety of agricultural practices and meeting with farmers and state agricultural

²² Floyd E. Dominy, “Detailed Description of Employment Considered...,” undated, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, c. 1934-1942, 6-7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

agencies, he could tailor legislation to the specific social, economic, and ecological conditions in various regions of the plains. He drafted seven of the USDA's annual conservation program handbooks for the individual states in 1940. By April of 1940 he was a Senior Administrative Officer supervising the details of the benefits payments for the department's various conservation and commodities programs.²⁴

One special area of concern was an area of extreme drought encompassing ten counties in southwest Kansas. Here Dominy worked with a state and local system familiar to him from his Wyoming days. But he also recognized that the special environment of the southern plains required innovative solutions. Retired grain fields did not quickly return to grasslands as they did further north. Instead they fed the massive dust storms that still haunt the nation's collective conscience. He also knew that unless entire communities (and preferably entire regions) banded together, individual farmers practicing good conservation techniques had no appreciable effect. "What we needed," he noted, "was concerted community effort on all the land in a county, whether public domain, public or privately owned, owner operated or tenant operated."²⁵ When the wind began to blow, a farmer's conservation efforts were only as good as his neighbor's.

A successful trial program in Sherman County, Texas, provided a possible solution. The plan was a partnership with the AAA, state extension service, and the county committee. Rather than having individual farmers collect payments based solely on what they did or did not plant each season, state and federal officials instead encouraged farmers to pool the payments and distribute them according to a county rate rather than an individual rate. An individual farmer was still required to plant within allotment limits or risk penalty. County committee members based the county rate on local crop yields, weather conditions, soil types, and production

²⁴ Ibid., 7-9.

²⁵ Dominy, "General Statement... Southern Great Plains," 24 April 1940.

methods. Dominy placed the burden for planning and execution on the county rather than the AAA, including penalty enforcement for non-participating farmers. As the program expanded to sixteen additional counties in Texas and Kansas, the emphasis on applying conservation measures to every acre on a farm were less strict. Still, Dominy found, “it is much more difficult for the indifferent farmer to farm AAA and earn payments with the least expenditure of effort.”²⁶

Dominy’s involvement in the Dust Bowl region had its origins in a collateral assignment. Since January of 1939, Dominy had served as the AAA’s representative on the Southern Great Plains Agricultural Council, an organization of state and federal agencies. When Dominy arrived on the council, conditions on the Great Plains were better than at any time since 1932. The federal government had encouraged farmers to take an active hand in controlling soil erosion and the results showed. Better-than-average precipitation in many areas had also helped. Yet, conservation was unevenly applied in the plains, especially in the so-called dust bowl areas. In Kansas, ten counties considered forming a soil conservation district and all ten voted the idea down, owing to “opposition to government programs, dislike of possible land use regulations, [and] distrust of appointed supervisors.” By contrast, Oklahoma farmers formed twenty-four districts using an eclectic county and watershed arrangement. Texans had adopted a stricter approach to bring their land under control. A state conservation law allowed county officials to enter the property of any farmer not practicing erosion control and make improvements, charging the cost as a lien on the property.²⁷ Despite these and similar improvements elsewhere, the council was not optimistic about the future, warning presciently in April 1939 that “a return to

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Report of the Eighteenth Conference of the Regional Advisory Council on Land Use Practices in the Southern Great Plains Area,” October 1938, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Professional File, 1938 Regional Advisory Council Reports, 4-6.

speculative farming and its accompanying practices would do much to return the region to one of serious soil blowing again as soon as rainfall returns to normal or goes below normal.”²⁸

Even without a return to speculative farming, healing the wounds on the Great Plains would take considerable time. Dominy became increasingly preoccupied with the problem of retiring submarginal lands. In April 1939, he gave a report to the council detailing the issues. As early as 1936, he noted, farmers could participate in AAA programs permitting them to retire land for a nominal twenty-five cents per acre payment, with the hope that they would reseed these lands to grass. However, like many good ideas badly executed during the New Deal, planners gave little thought to the quality of land retired, focusing instead on simple acreage figures. No one considered soil surveys and the quality of land being retired, or how to prevent that land from being re-cultivated in the future. The government’s outright purchase of these lands was the easiest solution as it cut farmers out of the loop completely and meant divorcing restored lands from operating farms. Yet this program’s high cost forced the AAA to work directly with farmers.²⁹ A more formal program developed in 1938. The AAA recommended that county committees retire as much as six million acres across the Great Plains. Yet local communities had sole responsibility for putting this plan into practice and the application was uneven. Perfectly good farm land was removed from production in some cases, and farmers continued to work submarginal land elsewhere.

Identifying past mistakes was easy enough but Dominy and the council struggled to correct decades of poor land use practices. Compounding the administrative difficulty was the

²⁸ “Report of the Twentieth Conference of the Regional Advisory Council on Land Use Practices in the Southern Great Plains Area,” April 1939, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Professional File, 1939 Regional Advisory Council Reports, 1.

²⁹ Floyd E. Dominy, “Changes in the Program of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration for 1940 and Problems of Keeping Submarginal and Restoration Land Out of Production.” Undated, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Professional File, 1939 Regional Advisory Council Report, 1-2.

fact that some farmers were still plowing under virgin sod which was often more productive than previously cultivated lands. Elsewhere, large land owners were breaking up and selling off their holdings. Somewhat unexpectedly, new farmers also continued to trickle into the region. Destitute and without any other means of survival, they broke new ground to eke out the barest returns. Although these farmers would be penalized at three dollars per acre of new land, they could take advantage of a legal loophole the following year and enter the land under normal AAA allotment and subsidy programs. In the end, Dominy and his cohorts could only produce a feeble statement “wish[ing] to avoid the plowing of lands that may be subject to severe wind or water erosion and encourage[ing] the return of cultivated lands to grass where such lands are unsuited for cultivation.” But only local county committees could put a definitive end to breaking new lands.³⁰

As the AAA representative on the Southern Great Plains Council, Dominy actively shaped farmers’ production and conservation practices. During his tenure, the council strengthened the hand of local committees to police wind erosion problems in their counties; established policies for farmers to acquire farm security loans for conservation work; simplified administration by combining the farm and range conservation programs; and issued a host of directives for management of specific crops and conservation practices.³¹ But without local support and with much of the region’s land locked up in private hands, the federal government could only do so much. They could create a variety of incentives and penalties, but if the farmers of a Kansas or Texas county did not want to participate, they did not have to.

³⁰ Report of the Twenty-Sixth Conference of the Regional Advisory Council on Land Use Practices in the Southern Great Plains Area,” October 1940, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Professional File, 1940 Regional Advisory Council Report, 3-5.

³¹ Floyd E. Dominy, “AAA Subcommittee Report,” 5 February 1941, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, c. 1934-1942 Civil Service.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Dominy drafted a memo outlining the importance of agriculture to the coming conflict. Speaking of “national agricultural security,” he noted the importance of a proper diet, a solid soil conservation program, and national acceptance of parity pricing for farm commodities. This last point was necessary “so that American agriculture may enjoy a standard of living equal to that enjoyed by people engaged in other activities.” In turn, this would make possible the preservation of the family farm. Here Dominy highlighted a problem that continued to trouble bureaucrats, politicians, and farmers alike in the years to come. How could farmers maintain an average American lifestyle—one with access to healthcare, the promise of a college education for the children, and even electricity—when so much of the production and distribution process was out of their control? Did farmers have a right to achieve high material standards of living, even if this clashed with the romantic myth of Thomas Jefferson’s virtuous yeoman? Dominy found no one-size-fits-all solution but believed that “a customarily high standard of living” might be obtained on a few intensely farmed acres of high-value crops or on expansive ranches in the West’s arid interior.³²

Reflecting on his Nebraska childhood and the hard times of the 1920s and 1930s in rural America, Dominy looked beyond the war to the effects of peace on the agricultural economy. He knew that the United States would eventually prevail in the conflict. But citing the federal government’s failure to address the problem of freed slaves after the Civil War and Congress’ failure to ratify the Versailles Treaty in 1919, Dominy believed “that the important thing is that the country now be united behind a definite reconstruction plan worldwide in scope in order to make certain that we might have a chance to win the peace.” Solving the postwar economic crisis

³² Floyd E. Dominy, “National Agricultural Security,” 20 February 1942, box 8, folder: Speech Material, 1941, 1942, Agriculture.

would take great skill to prevent either the victors' totalitarian control of the defeated nations or a global east-west split that would necessitate the buildup of militaries and lower global living standards.³³ The first mistake nations made in the aftermath of war was to grasp at the ephemeral web of protective tariffs. Dominy was already reminding farmers of the ill-conceived Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930, and the disastrous round of retaliatory tariffs that followed.³⁴

Dominy had found good company for his views in the AAA generally, and more specifically in Milton Eisenhower, a USDA land use coordinator and occasional consultant for the northern and southern Great Plains councils. Brother of the future president, Eisenhower believed American agriculture would undergo a great period of upheaval through the 1940s, "an adjustment with a vengeance." He questioned whether American democracy was up to the challenge of making swift and necessary adjustments in the agricultural sector. Eisenhower's solution was better administration at the local level. With keen insight into how New Deal programs were actually implemented—an understanding that was hardly universal among the USDA's many desk-bound planners—Eisenhower knew that "the responsibility for adjusting agriculture to ever-changing conditions falls upon the shoulders of farmers themselves." Federal and state agricultural agencies had already worked hard to develop good relationships with communities. Eisenhower urged council members to nudge locals to consolidate producers and concerned citizens to minimize conflicts over competing programs and needs.³⁵

With half the globe already engulfed in conflict, Dominy foresaw that "the pace of the world would change dramatically" after the war. Having decided on a career in federal service, he and Alice knew that they would likely remain in Washington forever. But they also knew they

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Undated news clipping (probably January 1939), FED-AHC (2005 accretion), box 8, green scrapbook.

³⁵ Milton S. Eisenhower, "Summary of Remarks of M. S. Eisenhower," 23 July 1940, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: 1940 Regional Advisory Council Reports.

did not want to become permanent apartment dwellers in the District. Both had spent their whole lives on or around farms and wanted the same rural upbringing for their children. While out on a Sunday drive to see the fall colors in Fairfax County, Virginia, Floyd stopped to heed the call of nature in what was then a remote community west of the District. He came across two squirrel hunters on a rocky hillside and inquired about the owner. The place that Dominy would christen “Hickory Knoll” was a 32-acre abandoned farm. He convinced the owners to sell for \$2,200, borrowing the sum against the value of his life insurance. Anxious to get started, Dominy began clearing the land by dragging a sled behind the family car.³⁶

Over the next several years, Floyd and Alice built a suburban homestead, adding son Charles to their family in June 1940. They had weathered the Depression better than many Americans. Except for rare periods, Floyd had earned a steady paycheck and with hard work and some luck even managed to climb far up the USDA’s career ladder. Yet, like most of his generation, the Depression had also left a profound mark on his character. Different people drew different conclusions from the experience, of course. But for Dominy his experiences in Campbell County and later work with the USDA bureaucracy in Washington had shown him that the government could—and should—act in the best interest of the people. Dominy also learned the futility of attempting to impose by fiat government programs on local communities, no matter how obvious the benefits. In this last belief he differed somewhat from many other liberals of his era. But overall the New Deal had given him powerful insights into federal power, the social dynamics of local communities, and the bureaucrat’s role in mediating the two.

Without the disruption of the war, Dominy might have had a long, productive career in the USDA. His field experiences, keen understanding of agronomic problems, and expanding web of personal connections could have led to a position in the Department of Agriculture

³⁶ FED-OH, 7-8.

equivalent or perhaps even greater than what he eventually achieved in the Bureau of Reclamation. Comparing his extensive experience and observation to his peers is impossible, but it is difficult to imagine what else he may have done through the Depression years to expand his understanding of the West's unique social and ecological conditions. Throughout his time with the USDA, Dominy traveled tens of thousands of miles, quite punishing in the days before interstate highways and regular air travel, which took him to nearly every corner of the West. He became an engaging public speaker who could win over skeptical farmers with his folksy, homespun tones. At the federal level, his experience with the Southern Great Plains Council, as well as minor involvement with complex water and land use issues like the Rio Grande Conservancy Board, taught him how to negotiate the sometimes perilous relationships within a fractious government, where petty turf battles consumed every bit as much energy as state building. Like most Americans after Pearl Harbor, Dominy knew that the war would dictate the course of his life for years to come. The only question was in what capacity.

The answer came in July 1942, when Dominy joined the Agricultural Division of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA). Under the direction of Nelson Rockefeller, the OIAA's purpose was two-fold: to stabilize Latin American economies and prevent their tilt toward fascism; and to boost production of tropical commodities lost after the Japanese overran the Southwest Pacific basin. These two goals overlapped somewhat and the United States imported raw materials for military production in exchange for American manufactured goods, boosting the Allies' arsenal and denying these same commodities to the Axis. Since Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, the U.S. government had slowly begun to reassess its stance toward Latin America, disposing of his cousin Theodore's corollary to the Monroe

Doctrine and softening the nation's interventionist stance.³⁷ (Or as Dominy put it, "so all of a sudden, we rediscovered South and Central America.")³⁸ Despite the pronouncement of one OIAA director that "the only propaganda that is necessary for the United States to broadcast in the hemisphere is the propaganda of freedom of thought," the OIAA developed a comprehensive suite of pro-United States propaganda.³⁹ The OIAA's benefits largely flowed in one direction and little of the material wealth trickled down into the countryside.⁴⁰

The United States government's interest in Latin American agriculture surged in the late 1930s because of agriculture secretary Henry A. Wallace. After his own election to the vice presidency in 1940, Wallace traveled south to represent the United States at the inauguration of Mexican president Manuel Avila Camacho. Once the formalities of the official state visit were behind him, Wallace spent weeks travelling the countryside, speaking with small farmers and comparing agricultural methods with the United States. He was "appalled" by conditions on Mexican farms. In short, the land was poor and the people poorer. A Mexican farmer invested 200 hours of labor for every bushel of corn while a farmer in Wallace's native Iowa spent just 10 hours for the same amount of produce. Wallace believed that hybrid seeds and better implements could improve the lives innumerable poor Mexican farmers. As soon as he returned to Washington, he contacted the Rockefeller Foundation, which had already begun its campaign to

³⁷ Edwin D. Anthony, "Record of the Office of Inter-American Affairs," 1973, copy available at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. [This is the introduction to the RG 229 finding aid.]

³⁸ FED-OH, 112.

³⁹ E. N. Bressman, 411206, "An Effective Program for Cooperation with the American Republics with Particular Reference to Agriculture," 6 December 1941, NARA-RG229, box 75, folder: Agriculture Misc. Printed Matter.

⁴⁰ Anthony, "Record of the Office of Inter-American Affairs."

eradicate parasitic disease around the globe. The first step was to build agricultural experiment stations, first in Mexico and then elsewhere.⁴¹

As the world situation worsened, humanitarian goals slipped further behind war production. As one history of the organization notes, “although the OIAA was interested in long-range programs aimed at improving conditions in Latin America, U.S. entry into the war had the effect of curtailing most such programs and placing greater emphasis on short-term, emergency projects.” In addition to its propaganda function, OIAA operations within Latin America focused on basic health and sanitation. Despite wide geographic responsibility, the OIAA had just 1,100 employees in the United States and perhaps 300 field technicians scattered throughout Central and South America. As a member of the food supply program, Dominy was one of the office’s overseas representatives. Much as the OIAA had had to defend itself from the State Department, which jealously guarded its sphere of influence, the OIAA’s food supply division spent much of its time fending off the USDA’s Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations.⁴²

Dominy joined the OIAA just as it finished a period of organizational restructuring. Food supply, along with health and sanitation, were housed in the office’s Department of Basic Economy. The Food Supply Division, of which Dominy was to be the assistant director, had two goals. The first was to meet the emergency food needs of local communities stressed by wartime economic hardship. Rather than trying to create new production projects, the division “was expected to concentrate mainly on those designed to promote improvement of existing production, storage, transportation, and marketing facilities.” The second goal was a long-range program aimed at boosting subsistence crop production. Much as Dominy had experienced as a

⁴¹ Donald W. Rowland, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947), 127; and John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 247-251.

⁴² Anthony, “Record of the Office of Inter-American Affairs.”

country agent, this second goal stressed evaluation of agricultural land, producer education, and demonstration projects. In reality, much of the division's administrative energy went toward feeding American forces in the Panama Canal Zone and work crews on Central America's inter-American highway. Other areas of U.S. strategic interest, such as rubber plantations in Brazil, also received food assistance.⁴³

Dominy traveled extensively in Latin America, performing agricultural surveys and trying to convince skeptical farmers and government officials of the merits of agricultural reforms. In Paraguay, for instance, he had to counter assumptions that the United States would simply offer handouts to the local government. The Paraguayans wanted only to dump their cotton surpluses on an already overburdened U.S. market and were reluctant to let Dominy survey the country. Characteristically, Dominy refused to back down.⁴⁴ Once out of the cities, he found some excellent land but saw that "most of the mistakes made in our period of agricultural expansion in the United States are being repeated."⁴⁵ Traveling by jeep, truck, mule, and boat, he found widespread abuse of timber lands, lack of tools and capital, and severe erosion even on newly developed land. Farms did not conform to the topography but had the same rigid boxy shapes familiar to any traveler in the American Midwest. Conservation of any kind was unknown. Most farmers in the new lands had been crowded out of the old settlements and had arrived without resources. Dominy also blamed German immigrant farmers for cultivating the land too intensely and causing erosion. Overall, he noted a complete lack of agricultural education and poor centralized planning.⁴⁶ He recommended the establishment of a formal agricultural bureau, production of tung oil, low interest loans for farmers, and a scientific

⁴³ Ibid.; and Rowland, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*, 129.

⁴⁴ FED-OH, 112-114.

⁴⁵ Floyd E. Dominy, "Agriculture in Paraguay," 1942, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Professional File, 1942 Paraguay, 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1-3, 26-27.

approach to cattle breeding. Dominy urged the Paraguayan government to build sawmills and tanneries rather than ship raw materials to neighboring countries for processing. Despite the national government's initial aloofness, Dominy managed to broker a cooperative agreement and received a promotion for his efforts.⁴⁷

Dominy was no stranger to either legitimate or manufactured controversy in his early government career. In one instance, he overheard the head of the OIAA's Venezuela group, a Mississippian, counseling a new employee about "how to work niggers." Dominy had little tolerance for racism, either in his new Virginia community or abroad. At the first opportunity he had the man sent home, a unilateral decision with the potential to embarrass everyone from the American ambassador to Nelson Rockefeller. In the showdown that followed—which essentially began with the ambassador's "who do you think you are to come down here and start giving orders" speech—Dominy went the offensive. As he recalled later, "I looked him right in the eye, and I said, 'Mr. McCaffrey, with your background in the State Department, I wouldn't doubt for a minute that you could go to any embassy or legation anywhere in the world and, in three days, come to a pretty accurate conclusion as to how it was being managed. And,' I said, 'by God, that's what I can do in my field.'"⁴⁸

Overall, the Food Supply Division's wartime record was unimpressive. The office did distribute seeds, tools, and advice, but with a limited number of trained personnel the application was uneven. Dominy later complained that Rockefeller had little management ability and staffed the agency with college buddies.⁴⁹ Without doubt, the OIAA improved the lives of a small segment of rural people, although largely as the byproduct of trying to develop more efficient

⁴⁷ FED-OH, 114-116.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 117-118. The name of the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela at this time was Frank P. Corrigan, not someone named McCaffrey.

⁴⁹ Ibid., MD, 118.

production methods for supplying the U.S. military. In fact, the division had sometimes struggled to maintain a positive image among both Latin Americans and competing bureaucracies in Washington. From the start, OIAA administrators downplayed the region's contribution to the U.S. war effort and instead highlighted tangible local benefits.⁵⁰ Officially, "the Coordinator and his associates were as much interested in long-range projects looking toward improvement in conditions in the hemisphere as they were in those concerned with the war effort."⁵¹ In the long-term, some of these efforts paid off, like Wallace's movement to build agricultural experiment stations. The introduction of hybrid seeds was also important. By 1948 Mexico was producing enough food to feed itself, part of what would later be termed the "Green Revolution."⁵²

But Dominy's personal experience showed how limited the OIAA's reach truly was. Of the eleven countries he surveyed or gave planning assistance to during the war, only Paraguay, Peru, and Costa Rica continued OIAA agricultural plans into the next decade. American aid was most effective where the native government had a system analogous to the United States, including ministries of agriculture with specialized departments.⁵³ OIAA programs opened up new areas to colonization but the agency did little to ensure that land was cultivated with long-term conservation in mind. Some of the overall ineffectiveness stemmed from staff disagreements over the appropriate level of assistance. Should the United States be supplying shovels and hoes or building hydroelectric plants? At what level of society should assistance occur, and how much input should local communities have in decision making?⁵⁴ As with many New Deal agricultural programs, most OIAA benefits went to large operators, despite official

⁵⁰ J. D. LeCron to Hilding Anderson, 16 June 1943, NARA-RG229, box 77, folder Foods – Miscel.

⁵¹ Rowland, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*, 8.

⁵² Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 251.

⁵³ Rowland, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*, 133.

⁵⁴ Adrian A. Walser to H. G. Clement, 17 February 1944, NARA-RG229, box 74, folder: Food Supply 1944.

rhetoric to the contrary.⁵⁵ The OIAA signed food supply agreements with several Latin American countries, although most of these began to expire in mid-1944. With less need for food and the threat of fascist encroachment long past, the OIAA began transferring responsibility for its programs to local governments.⁵⁶ Lacking time to work out internal disputes and define a clear sense of mission, the Food Supply Division's life was over before it really began.

Dominy would not remain with the OIAA long enough to see it dissolved in 1946. His work with the OIAA contributed marginally to the war effort and he had not yet participated in the conflict that would, along with the Depression, come to define his generation. Dominy was thirty-four years old in 1944 and a married father of two children, making him ineligible for the draft. Rockefeller appealed to Dominy to continue his work in Latin America. Yet Dominy was already anticipating the day when his young son would ask him about his experience in the war. During rotations home to Washington, he heard U.S. Navy recruiting announcements on the radio calling for men who were still young enough to serve but old enough to have leadership experience. He applied for the navy's military government training program and began a six-month training program at Columbia University in April 1944. The course was designed to groom future staff members of military occupation governments.⁵⁷

With his wide range of experience and expertise, Dominy did well at Columbia. He and his classmates, a collection of physicians, lawyers, law enforcement, and other professionals, were destined for Formosa (Taiwan). The course of instruction included planning exercises for reoccupying Japanese-controlled territory and some basic language training. In one report,

⁵⁵ Rowland, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*, 133.

⁵⁶ Floyd E. Dominy to Nelson A. Rockefeller, 22 February 1944, NARA-RG-229, box 74, folder: Food Supply 1944; Floyd E. Dominy, "Biographical Material," 2 December 1953, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Employment Background and Experience; and Anthony, "Record of the Office of Inter-American Affairs."

⁵⁷ FED-OH, 9.

Dominy analyzed the problems the U.S. faced in gaining support in the Philippines, Malaya, and Hong Kong. He described a variety of subjects including racism, political administration, and problems in the domestic economy but agriculture was always at the center of his thoughts. The Japanese had broken up large estates and redistributed land to peasants, creating a new social arrangement the Americans could not ignore. "Every man who sweats over the soil wants his own piece of land to sweat over," Dominy argued. "He will support the agency or system that assists him to realize this desire." An ardent liberal, Dominy cited the importance of a healthy agricultural base needed to export Franklin Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" or the vision of Henry Wallace's more controversial "Century of the Common Man." Dominy's superiors were impressed: "This, as other of your reports, is full of vitality, serious thought and healthy idealism. It is realistic but not cynical." Overall, he received high marks at Columbia, and his fitness reports indicate future suitability as a staff officer.⁵⁸

Dominy might reasonably have assumed he would soon be the new agricultural secretary in the Formosa occupation government. But this was not to be. When General Douglas MacArthur won the military's internal debate over strategy in the Pacific, plans to use Formosa as a staging base for the invasion of Japan were shelved. Dominy's group at Columbia disbanded. With a limited military skill set and no formal training as a naval officer Dominy found his career on hold. He might have spent the duration shuffling from one minor stateside assignment to the next but for Admiral Chester Nimitz's ill-conceived plan to farm the Pacific islands. The idea of supplying American forces with fresh produce was outwardly similar to the OIAA's work in Latin America, although the ecological conditions were literally a world apart. Acting on the advice of Knowles Ryerson of the Bureau of Economic Warfare, the military

⁵⁸ Floyd E. Dominy, "Analysis of Japanese Occupation Techniques" 22 May 1944 and attached evaluation slip from "The Staff," FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Civilian Supply – Rationing – Price Control c. 1945.

shipped over machines, seed, and fertilizer and searched for someone with an agricultural background. They found their man languishing at Fort Ord in California. In December 1944, the Navy released Dominy from administrative Purgatory and he shipped out to Guam. Assigned to the staff of Admiral John Hoover, commander of the Central Pacific Forward Area, Dominy began the least productive stretch of his professional life.⁵⁹

What Dominy found in the Marianas appalled him. The islands were wholly unsuited to mechanized agriculture. The lush green sugar cane fields which had so impressed Knowles Ryerson and Chester Nimitz from the air turned out to be uneven and strewn with coral. Based in Guam, Dominy visited neighboring Saipan and Tinian and found the same conditions. But orders were orders and an admiral's pet projects are sacrosanct, so despite his protests to Hoover, Dominy eventually built an eighty-cow dairy on Guam and tried to scratch out vegetable fields in the rocky soil. He worked in conjunction with the Foreign Economic Administration of the Bureau of Economic Warfare, which had established moderately successful farming operations elsewhere in the Pacific. Using indigenous labor and the efforts of hundreds of enlisted sailors with farming backgrounds, Dominy created farms in the Marianas that produced a pitiful amount fresh produce considering the extraordinary number of personnel stationed in the region. The dairy produced milk only with tremendous cost and effort. Dominy doubted much of it even ended up with the wounded in the hospitals where it belonged.⁶⁰ About the only boost to American moral was among the Navy's ex-farmhands who avoided onerous jobs elsewhere.⁶¹

Confined to the war's rear areas, Dominy's chief adversary was boredom. Having a job that was not materially contributing to the war effort did not help his outlook. He kept up a

⁵⁹ FED-OH, 10-12; Commander, Central Pacific Forward Area to Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, 16 March 1944, NARA-RG313, box 1, folder 3; and Commander Service Force to Commander in Chief 25 November 1944, NARA-RG313, box 43, folder 2.

⁶⁰ FED-OH, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

steady correspondence with nine-year-old Janice, although she did not write him as often he wished. As additional islands fell to the Americans, Dominy's geographic range increased. But he found the same poor agricultural potential everywhere he went. His most successful venture was not directed at farming for food but in controlling the environment of Iwo Jima. Weeks of hard fighting and an equally vigorous effort to scratch out roads, runways, and camps had all but destroyed the island's vegetation. The underlying volcanic ash quickly became a serious airborne hazard for machinery. Using a captive Japanese soldier as a guide, Dominy studied the island.⁶² Each day "Radio Iwo" broadcast his landscaping advice. Regarded at first as an attempt at G.I. humor, his tips eventually spurred soldiers to plant vines and grasses around American facilities.⁶³ "It has greened up a great deal in 2 ½ months," he wrote Janice after an inspection trip. "Well it ought to grow—it was fertilized with the blood of thousands of Japanese and American men." No doubt beginning to feel the disgust of the protracted Pacific campaign, he added, "perhaps your generation will know why they fought. I'm beginning to doubt my generation knows."⁶⁴ In one of the few Navy duties that seemed to give him satisfaction, Dominy transplanted coconut trees from Guam to the raw earth surrounding the graves of thousands of sailors and Marines who died taking Iwo Jima.

Like many around the world in the summer of 1945, Dominy kept the radio set next to his bunk bed tuned in at night and waited for news of Japan's surrender. He knew he might languish in the Pacific for months before he was eligible to come home and warned the family not to expect him right after the surrender.⁶⁵ While a drawdown of forces was at the forefront of

⁶² Floyd E. Dominy to Janice Dominy, 8 April 1945, courtesy of Janice DeBolt, copy in the author's possession.

⁶³ "Two Garden Tips No Gags," *Long Beach (CA) Sun*, 27 July 1945.

⁶⁴ Floyd E. Dominy to Janice Dominy, 28 June 1945, courtesy of Janice DeBolt, copy in the author's possession.

⁶⁵ Floyd E. Dominy to Janice Dominy, 12 August 1945, courtesy of Janice DeBolt, copy in the author's possession.

everyone's mind, the military bureaucracy and system for demobilization meant that Dominy was not a priority for return. He found himself marking time along with millions of other American military personnel eager to resume their interrupted lives. Altogether, Dominy's wartime agricultural work in Latin American and in the Pacific had been limited in scope but both assignments had given him valuable insight into bureaucratic management. While he later reflected fondly on his OIAA experience, his navy experience had been disappointing. Summing up his military career, Dominy later figured "my principal contribution was more or less a negative one in that I was instrumental in preventing approval of a lot of crack-brained, agricultural programs conceived, in my opinion, without regard to the physical limitations inherent to the climate and soils."⁶⁶ If nothing else, the military taught him that it was much better to dream up a pet project than to carry one out.

In his first decade of government service, Dominy was a classic example of what Max Weber called "a single cog in an ever-moving mechanism," a bureaucratic functionary who despite ambition and a willingness to take risks and alienate his superiors, was incapable of influencing major policy changes.⁶⁷ Although he was building up his civil service time, he had yet to land long enough in one spot to begin carving out a niche for himself. But he did learn how to get things done in an expanding bureaucracy, and he saw the tangible effects of New Deal liberalism and government conservation firsthand. Moreover, he acquired an intimacy with western landscapes that would serve him well during his tenure as commissioner. In his travels through the West and Latin America, he was able to think critically about American agriculture,

⁶⁶ Floyd E. Dominy to J. A. Hill 7 August 1947, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence File 1938-1954 Personal.

⁶⁷ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. and eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 228.

sharpening the knowledge he developed as a youth and college student. He had spent too much time on the fence rail to romanticize rural agrarian life. He understood American farmers, right down to their bank balance.

The New Deal and the war that followed concentrated power in the executive branch, although this did not easily lead to sweeping agricultural reforms or permanent conservation policies. In these two fields especially, fragmentation between and within federal agencies often produced little more than paper studies and reams of congressional testimony.⁶⁸ Dominy continued to face these challenges as he climbed the civil service ladder in the postwar period. But exposure to social planning, as imperfect and incomplete as it was, instilled in Dominy an abiding sense that the federal government had a duty to improve the lives of ordinary Americans. That the arid West should continue to be settled was never in doubt. The only question was how best to engage the full capacity of the federal government in the task. In this regard, he also carried forth the torch of John Wesley Powell.

⁶⁸ Graham, Jr., *Toward A Planned Society*, 53-55 and 64-67.

Three: The Making of a Bureaucrat

“Well, goddamn it,” Floyd Dominy said into the telephone. “I don’t know what you’ve done the last two years to win the war. But I’ve been out in the Pacific trying to win the war, and I want thirty minutes of your time! That’s all I need! But I want it today!” At the other end of the line was Goodrich W. Lineweaver, head of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s Operation and Maintenance (O&M) Division. The two agreed to meet for an interview in the massive Interior Department building two blocks south and west of the White House. Lineweaver had no positions for someone with Dominy’s civil service eligibility and tried to steer him to one of the Bureau’s western offices instead. But housing was tight all over the country as millions of veterans left the service and Dominy had no intention of abandoning his suburban homestead at Hickory Knoll. Lineweaver let Dominy tour the building and interview prospective supervisors. After rejecting the Economics and the Allocation and Repayment sections, Dominy settled on Land Use and Development. The section head was an old county agent like himself, “a real solid kind of fellow.” Dominy reported on the first of April 1946 as a land development specialist.¹

During the Great Depression, the Bureau of Reclamation had thrilled the nation as it tamed the West’s wild rivers with majestic structures like Hoover and Grand Coulee dams. Big dams had also contributed materially to the war effort, powering defense industries and maintaining an uninterrupted supply of food. Yet the great dams concealed a secret. Forty-six irrigation districts were in some stage of financial default. Especially troubled were northern, high-altitude projects away from the favorable climate of California and the Southwest. To be sure, the Bureau maintained unquestioned technical competence. But the agency also had detractors and for a time in the 1940s the future was uncertain as it cleaned up inefficient and poorly planned projects from the pre-war era. For much of the 1940s and early 1950s, Dominy

¹ FED-OH, 13-15.

found himself at the center of the Bureau's efforts to consolidate power in Washington. An element of conservative opposition to reclamation that had drifted along quietly during the Depression and war years resurfaced when peace and prosperity returned. As agency heads, Cabinet secretaries, and Congress were carrying out public battles over the future of reclamation, agriculture, and natural resources policy, a cadre of career civil servants like Dominy was doing the quiet yeoman work that would guide the Bureau's path for the next two decades.

The Bureau faced two pressing challenges in the immediate postwar period. To begin with, the agency needed to reestablish its relationship with its historic constituency, the small-scale irrigator. Several federal projects had already failed outright. The Bureau had to restore the viability of dozens of small, remote projects throughout the West before it could justify the sort of large-scale river basin projects that were clearly the way of the future. The Bureau's second, related problem was more complicated. The big-dams of the Depression era were products of a unique moment in time. The circumstances of those years, especially the president's direct, personal involvement, did not provide an adequate model for the postwar world. While the Bureau could celebrate past engineering achievements, the agency still had much work to do getting water onto the land. In general, the mood of the nation was drifting away from heavy-handed, centralized planning. Cold War fears of "creeping socialism" meant the Bureau had to win over Congress and a skeptical public.

The Bureau's revival required a return to its mandate for aiding rational settlement of the West. Rapid urbanization required an emphasis on large-scale multipurpose projects. No longer would the Bureau maintain even the pretense that irrigation projects were financially self-supporting. Without subsidies from other aspects of reclamation, particularly power, projects were not cost effective even by the most generous calculations. In fact, the Bureau expected

hydropower revenues to cover sixty-five to ninety percent of future irrigation project costs. Bureau officials had to build a national constituency and convince the American people that reclamation had value beyond the irrigated communities of the arid West. This should have been easy enough for anyone pondering the improbability of a Las Vegas swimming pool or the sight of a fresh supermarket tomato in the depths of a New England winter. But ecological thinking of that sort had barely begun to develop. At the same time, small-scale irrigators on family farms were increasingly aware that the American mainstream was passing them by, a development that would have troubling consequences across all sectors of American agriculture.

As he lay sweating on his bunk at night in the Pacific, Dominy had listened to radio stories about the Bureau of Reclamation's plans for postwar expansion and a new wave of western homesteading on irrigated lands. Although thousands of families had already tried and failed to wrest a living from the West's arid lands, government planners hoped the promise of nearly free land and a new start in the West would entice a million returning veterans and help prevent a postwar economic depression. But Dominy still had his civil service eligibility and had no interest in an irrigated homestead. With his agricultural background, the engineering-oriented Bureau of Reclamation was not even an obvious career choice. Dominy had already sworn off a career in engineering, preferring the fence-rail conference to a drafting table. But with so many irrigation districts either behind in payments or in outright default, the Bureau had quietly begun assembling agronomists and other agricultural specialists during the war. By the time Dominy shipped out from Guam in January 1946, he had had his sights set on the Bureau of Reclamation.

Dominy quickly came to the attention of Commissioner Mike Straus and the Bureau's top brass. In the spring of 1946, South Dakota senator John "Chan" Gurney forwarded a *Dakota*

Farmer article attacking the Bureau for its mishandling of the Belle Fourche Project. The 57,000 acre project was one of the first to be authorized after passage of the 1902 Reclamation Act. By the 1940s its problems were so extensive that even politicians who knew nothing of reclamation or agriculture cited it as a symbol of government inefficiency and waste. Belle Fourche was an unlikely site for a major agricultural project given western South Dakota's short and unpredictable growing season. But as historian Donald Pisani has shown, Theodore Roosevelt made the "fatal mistake" early on of expanding reclamation beyond a few carefully developed, model projects. Despite the rhetoric of efficiency in natural resource conservation that defined Roosevelt's administration, reclamation projects quickly became just another scrap in the congressional pork barrel. Not only was the federal government now planning projects in dubious locations, the Reclamation Service had more pending projects than resources to complete them. Even though building stable rural communities was one purpose of arid lands reclamation, the projects' human dimensions suffered from lack of attention.² Despite unquestioned technical expertise in hydraulic engineering, the Bureau had long been unwilling to give due attention to social planning in irrigated communities.

Belle Fourche's shortcomings reflected hasty project approval. Engineers based reservoir storage calculations on just nine months of stream flow data, which the dry decade of the 1930s proved to be woefully inadequate. The widely held belief that the West was uniformly fertile meant that project settlers lacked critical information about potential soil productivity. Belle Fourche also suffered from drainage problems, which raised water tables and increased the soil's salt load. This was both a social problem and an engineering oversight. Early on, the Jeffersonian ideal of equal agrarian opportunity opened reclamation projects to all comers. But building a new

² Christopher J. McCune, "Belle Fourche Project," *Historic Reclamation Projects*, Bureau of Reclamation, 2001, 8-9; and Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 29-30, 50.

irrigated farm required extensive knowledge and capital resources. Many of the earliest project settlers had no experience with irrigated agriculture and grossly overwatered crops. Waterlogged land effectively reduced the size of farms and irrigators were increasingly unable or unwilling to meet private loan and government payments. The project experienced a brief period of prosperity during the World War I agricultural boom, but predictably fell on hard times in the 1930s.³

Straus asked Goodrich Lineweaver to prepare a reply to Gurney's letter. Unsatisfied with Lineweaver's tepid response, Straus asked Dominy to redraft it. In the letter, Dominy acknowledged the project's many failings, but noted how the Bureau applied the lessons of Belle Fourche to later projects. In particular, projects now required settlers with "minimum standards of character, industry, health, farm experience and available capital." The government was also taking responsibility for educating and assisting irrigators in the labor- and capital-intensive first years of a new farm. Reflecting on his own experience, Dominy remembered how Belle Fourche supplied critical pasturage for Campbell County's emaciated cattle during the bleakest days of the Depression. A project's value was not limited to the bottom line. Reclamation projects had made significant contributions to the war effort and the nation's material wealth. Dominy noted the stopgap nature of prior relief measures but assured Gurney that the Bureau was also fixing the structural problems that had led to failure. Only through failure at Belle Fourche and similar projects had western reclamation been possible. "I do not apologize for the Belle Fourche Project," Dominy wrote in closing. This was the just tone Straus was looking for.⁴

Dominy's unapologetic reply reflected the hard realities the Bureau faced as family farms became less relevant to postwar American society. It also foreshadowed a major ideological shift in the agency. Historically, the Bureau had done little to assist farmers once they settled on the

³ McCune, "Belle Fourche Project," 8-9, 18-27.

⁴ Michael W. Straus to Chan Gurney, 16 July 1946, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Professional File, 1946-1959; and Dominy, Oral History Interview, 128-130.

land. The Bureau's old hands accepted the idea that under all but the best climate and soil conditions, two or three generations passed before most irrigated farms became viable. But for all their faults, projects like Belle Fourche were anchors for rural communities. Reclamation also boosted tax revenue and provided year-round produce for a nation increasingly dependent on supermarkets. The Bureau simply had to do more for its project farmers. This meant greater coordination with the state land grant universities and extension services that provided most of the technical assistance. The Bureau also made strides in predevelopment construction for individual farms, roughing out irrigation works and leveling land. But these measures added to project costs and without subsidies from power revenue distributed over large areas of the West, most small-scale irrigators could not survive the difficult early years of a project. In the future, standalone projects like Belle Fourche would not hold up to congressional or public scrutiny.⁵

With so many troubled projects needing attention, the Allocation and Repayment branch was destined to be one of the Bureau's busiest offices. Each project was tangled in a unique legal and legislative morass decades in the making. Early on, Dominy recognized that the ex-banker running the Repayment section was "misassigned." As he predicted the chief soon "fell flat on his ass" and quit. Lineweaver offered to transfer Dominy to the vacant position. Despite the seeming banality of its work, the office's core of civil servants was the Bureau's ideological engine and a natural fit for Dominy's experience. Repayment emphasized the Bureau's new concern for the social problems of irrigation communities, a focus that prevailed for more than two decades. (When Dominy became commissioner in 1959, he promoted many of his old Allocation and Repayment associates to key positions, providing significant ideological continuity between the 1930s and the 1960s.) The job required political acumen. Restructuring contracts was not simply an in-house administrative problem. Most amended contracts required

⁵ Ibid.

congressional approval, usually after hostile negotiations with irrigation districts. In effect, the Bureau had to air its dirty laundry before the public and hostile elements in Congress. Even as it looked ahead to the future, the Allocation and Repayment section was responsible for shoring up the Bureau's ideological footing and rebuilding its nineteenth-century program.⁶

Dominy's promotion suited him fine but created a long-running personal rift. He had stepped over William I. Palmer, the assistant branch chief. Bill Palmer was affable, intelligent, and capable but Lineweaver believed he spent far too much time socializing in the halls or on the telephone to be an effective section head. Dominy demanded Lineweaver explain the situation to Palmer. But Lineweaver "was a very genteel Kentucky gentleman" and the sort of bureaucrat who preferred to address conflict in memoranda, and then only when necessary. He stayed silent, leaving Palmer understandably upset. When, after a few days, Dominy made it clear he would not have Palmer "sulking around," Palmer transferred to California. He continued a successful career in the Bureau and even became an assistant commissioner once Dominy took charge of the Bureau. But Dominy's eagerness to establish his authority in Repayment cost the section a good mind and the family farmer lost an advocate.⁷

Despite his penchant for socializing, Palmer had been a key figure in planning the Bureau's early postwar vision. Lineweaver hired him in 1944 as part of a wave of non-engineers brought in to address long-neglected social and economic problems. After reviewing the state of projects throughout the West, Palmer believed the Bureau had failed to convince the nation of irrigated agriculture's value, which endangered future project approval. Palmer and his fellows noted that farmers received just eight to ten percent of the nation's income, although Americans

⁶ Archie B. Goodman, "Reclamation Repayment, 1946-1970," 15 January 1970, GGS-CSU, box 8, folder: Branch of Operation and Maintenance; and FED-OH, 16.

⁷ FED-OH, 16-18; and Harold E. Aldrich, Oral History Interview, conducted by Brit Allan Storey, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, MD, 88.

were spending thirty percent of their income on food. The differential accounted for processing, transportation, and marketing costs, which diffused benefits throughout the country. “This relationship is evident in its more direct operations,” Palmer noted, “but becomes more obscure as a distance from the source of supply to the consumer increases.” He suggested a repayment scheme of “human food equivalents.” This would deemphasize the sale value of specific crops and instead take a holistic farm-to-table view “from hay to beefsteak, from grain to omelet, as well as from lettuce to salad.” He argued for a simple solution, evaluating “the identity of food, as long as it retains its identity as food, as the gross benefit to society.” Up to that point, Congress simply wrote off infrastructure costs that were not subsidized with hydropower or were beyond an irrigator’s ability to pay. This created an easy target for fiscal conservatives.⁸

While Reclamation did not adopt Palmer’s complex accounting scheme of therms, calories, or man-days of food—a series of calculations that would no doubt have overtaxed many members of Congress—the larger point was that the agency had failed to make a stronger case for the national importance of irrigated crops. Reclamation was not just a program that benefitted western land barons at the expense of eastern taxpayers, nor were irrigators getting handouts. The general view of both Congress and executive branch agencies was that farmers should supply most of their own food and thus reduce their rights to income accordingly. Bureau planners still believed the primary purpose of the 160-acre limitation was to maintain a lifestyle that tied families to the produce of their land. It was this nineteenth-century ideology and not fears of speculation or land barons that drove resistance to relaxing acreage limitation restrictions. Palmer reasoned that irrigated farmers, who typically diversified their crops, had a better diet and standard of living than single-crop farms elsewhere. The “farm food privilege”

⁸ E. D. Eaton to Goodrich Lineweaver, 13 April 1945, WIP-USU, box 5, folder 10; and William Palmer to E.D. Eaton, 12 April 1945, WIP-USU, box 5, folder 10.

was no small matter, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the farm family's diet and justifying a reduced income compared to laborers in the food processing industry.⁹

Palmer's work showed the difficulty of coordinated federal planning even after the experience of the New Deal and war periods. Beyond the nation's growing discomfort with centralized planning, the enormity of the task and the federal bureaucracy's byzantine structure thwarted even the most well-meaning planners. To begin with, the Bureau dealt with irrigation districts as a whole and so had little data on why individuals defaulted.¹⁰ Palmer had presented an exquisite breakdown of family farm life, down to the calories in a pound of flour and the energy efficiency of a steer. Yet he was also making assumptions ignorant of the trends of American economic and social life. Farm families were beginning to demand the same consumer lifestyle as other Americans, even as Congress demanded they retain their nineteenth-century eating habits and accept the reality of lower incomes. At the same time, suburban consumers were demanding lower grocery prices and spending less on food.¹¹ Meaningful planning of the kind Palmer advocated would also have required coordination with bureaucratic rivals in the USDA, who continually but erroneously argued that Bureau projects simply added to crop surpluses. Nor did Palmer consider the problems of farmers in the humid East, who faced similar price differentials, income disparity, and social problems. His paperwork exercise did little more than acknowledge that most Americans no longer had any tangible connection to the family farm or where their food came from. In the end, Palmer's efforts reflect the Bureau's growing need to justify the true cost of keeping the agrarian ideal in a rapidly changing world, a

⁹ Palmer to Eaton, 12 April 1945.

¹⁰ Lloyd H. Fisher to G. W. Lineweaver 18 December 1946, WIP-USU, box 1, folder 5.

¹¹ The best examination of the postwar American economy under Dwight Eisenhower is Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). See especially pp. 103-109 and 367-369 for a discussion of suburban discontent with high food prices. See also Palmer to Eaton, 12 April 1945.

counterproductive proposal if one looked too hard at the data for projects like Belle Fourche or the social and economic transformation of postwar America.

While Bureau economists and statisticians quietly addressed failing projects, another, more public, contest was playing out in congressional hearing rooms and newspaper opinion columns. Reclamation projects generally enjoyed wide bipartisan support from politicians across the arid West. This was an advantage especially in the Senate where westerners comprise a third of the body. But the historic relationship between water bureaucrats and legislators has not been as cozy as Reclamation's critics claimed. For every congressional booster, one did not have to look too hard to find an equally strident detractor. In part this was due to the specific details of reclamation law or competition between competing agencies. But the Cold War also had an impact. The federal reclamation program was an inviting target for anyone who still nursed a grudge against the New Deal.

Conservatives, including some western Democrats, were quick to brand reclamation projects as socialistic. In the East, this fear was rooted in a general suspicion of big government. Westerners like California Democrat Sheridan Downey were more specific in their attacks. They saw "socialist" acreage restrictions on farms receiving federal water as an impediment to free enterprise. Midwestern politicians, whose constituents had strong ties to USDA programs, feared reclamation would add to crop surpluses, further depressing the agricultural economy in their states. Even unity across the West's pro-reclamation coalition was not always guaranteed. Opinions ranged from those who believed the Bureau had not done enough to those who thought the Bureau was doing far too much. Through the end of Dominy's tenure in 1969, Bureau commissioners struggled to maintain western unity in Congress. This meant convincing

easterners of reclamation's national importance and convincing westerners to put regional concerns above parochial ones, a difficult prospect as both water and funding began to dry up.

As commissioner, Dominy had his share of congressional opponents and public battles with legislators. But his troubles paled in comparison to Mike Straus's experience in the late 1940s. Despite his unkempt appearance and easygoing manner, Straus vigorously defended the Bureau from Congress while placing social planning on an equal footing with engineering. A former journalist and protégé of Interior secretary Harold Ickes, Straus combined the altruism and opportunism typical of many who gravitated to Washington early in the New Deal.¹² He quickly became one of the Interior Department's "commonwealth liberals" who, Clayton R. Koppes argues, held "a distinctive holistic view of natural resources and society."¹³ Except for a brief stint on the War Production Board, Straus had been in the department since 1933, rising from public relations to assistant secretary. In December 1945, President Harry Truman appointed Straus to head the Bureau of Reclamation. The choice was an unlikely one. Despite experience in Ickes' inner circle, the Chicagoan had no background in engineering or agriculture. He was a champion for social causes but like many New Dealers he had little firsthand knowledge of the population his agency served. In truth, he was much like the Bureau engineers who preceded him, preferring to build magnificent structures rather than oversee the less glamorous work of actually putting water on the land.¹⁴

Straus may have begun his bureaucratic career as a "commonwealth liberal" enamored with centralized planning and social justice, but he was ideologically flexible when it came to

¹² Paul F. Healy, "Our Most Arrogant Bureaucrat," *The Saturday Evening Post* 224 (April 19, 1952): 46-47 and 145-150.

¹³ Clayton R. Koppes, "Environmental Policy and American Liberalism: The Department of the Interior, 1933-1953," *Environmental Review* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 19.

¹⁴ "Michael Wolf Straus," FED-AHC, box 18, folder: Professional File, 1951-1967 Straus, Michael W.; and Dominy, Oral History Interview, 24-25.

bureaucratic survival.¹⁵ In his new position, Straus fought hard to expand the Bureau's reach, fending off challenges from private and state interests as well as other agencies in the executive bureaucracy. The first postwar challenge to Straus's turf was a proposal for integrated river basin authorities modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA.) Truman strongly supported a Columbia Valley Administration (CVA) in his first term and gave qualified support to a similar proposal for the Missouri River.¹⁶ Straus fought hard against the CVA despite the endorsement of his boss, Julius Krug, who replaced Ickes as secretary in March 1946. General Lewis A. Pick, chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, also opposed the CVA. Straus and Pick developed a less comprehensive plan, one that would still lead to full development of the Columbia River but without creating a superagency like the TVA. Private power supporters, state governments, and other interest groups throughout the Northwest joined Straus and the Corps in opposition. In the end, the combined resistance proved too much and Truman endorsed the Pick-Straus proposal, hoping to provide at least some coordination between the rival agencies.¹⁷ In fact, Congress and the executive bureaucracy had obstructed the last best hope of centralized river basin planning. Future development of the Columbia River would be drawn out and completed piecemeal.¹⁸ After losing the CVA, Truman made no serious attempt to repeat the process in the Missouri Basin, which posed far more difficulties in integrating interests along its entire course.

The Bureau faced challenges to its survival elsewhere. In the late 1940s the major test of irrigation policy was the massive Central Valley Project (CVP.) Sprawling across 400 miles of

¹⁵ See Gerald Nash's response to Clayton R. Koppes, "Environmental Policy and American Liberalism: The Department of the Interior, 1933-1953," in "Comment," *Environmental Review* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 42-47.

¹⁶ The agency was to be an "administration" rather than an "authority" to help win over local opposition to expanded federal control.

¹⁷ Phyllis Komarek deLuna, *Public versus Private Power during the Truman Administration: A Study of Fair Deal Liberalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 41-49.

¹⁸ David Arlin Kathka, "The Bureau of Reclamation in the Truman Administration: Personnel, Politics, and Policy," (Ph.D. Diss, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1976), 110, 127-128; and deLuna, *Public versus Private Power during the Truman Administration*, 50-52.

California's San Joaquin Valley, the project today serves four million acres of prime farmland with water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin watersheds. Twenty dams and more than five hundred miles of canals aid navigation, produce hydroelectric power, and supply municipal water for much of the region's urban centers. Ambitious Californians had long imagined such a grand project but their proposals promised to be expensive, technically challenging, and a legal nightmare. But the Depression provided an opening. California legislators voted to authorize the project in 1933 and quickly sought federal funding rather than try to finance the project with a state bond issue. Significantly, Franklin Roosevelt gave the job to the Bureau of Reclamation, meaning that future water deliveries to farmers were subject to reclamation law and acreage limits. Project construction began in 1937 and by 1944 Shasta Dam on the Sacramento River supplied its first power.¹⁹ But while construction on much of the project's infrastructure was well underway at war's end, the social and legal complications were far from unraveled.

Straus's protracted problems with Congress on the irrigation front, which might have cost a less well-connected man his job, were largely because Senator Sheridan Downey. He was the author of the self-serving 1947 polemic *They Would Rule the Valley*, which condemned the Bureau for heavy-handed enforcement of acreage restrictions in the Central Valley. Downey attacked the Bureau's empire of "politicians and propagandists" bent on destroying the economy of northern California. The Bureau, he argued, had lost its moorings as a professional engineering agency and was now drifting dangerously toward the shoals of socialism and bureaucratic inefficiency. He facetiously sympathized with small farmers but for a variety of convoluted reasons argued that supporting them at the expense of big growers would only "bring ruin to thousands of our California farmers and return to the desert hundreds of thousands of now

¹⁹ Norris Hundley, *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, revised edition, 2001), 253-262.

rich and productive acres.”²⁰ Downey believed fruit barons like Joseph DiGiorgio, who owned thousands of acres of Central Valley lands, were unfairly maligned and the real victims of the nation’s failed agriculture and irrigation policies. Their very size allowed them to serve as anchors for the entire fruit industry, he argued, allowing small-scale growers to thrive and ensuring California produce was available year-round in American supermarkets.²¹

Unlike many of the Bureau’s early “virgin lands” projects on the public domain, the Central Valley had extensive prior settlement, creating complex questions of prior appropriation and property rights. Farmers were already tapping the region’s large groundwater reservoirs which posed novel legal problems. Even without political pressure, untangling water rights and enforcing excess land laws would have been very difficult. The Bureau pleased no one as it dithered on a resolution. Even more galling to Downey and opponents of acreage restrictions was the appointment of Richard Boke to head the Bureau’s Sacramento Office. Boke, who had served briefly with Dominy in Latin America during the war, did not have an engineering background or even a college degree. Downey claimed Reclamation Commissioner Harry Bashore had lost control of the Bureau to “left-wing groups inside and outside the Department” long before Straus replaced him in 1946.²² Matters came to a head in November 1947 when the Bureau shut down construction work on components of the Central Valley Project, ostensibly because of depleted funds. Then, with spectacularly poor timing, Boke went on vacation.²³

The spring and summer of 1948 found Straus, Boke, and reclamation law on trial before the Publicity and Propaganda Subcommittee of the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Department. Committee chair Forrest Harness, a conservative Indiana Republican and

²⁰ Sheridan Downey, *They Would Rule the Valley* (Sheridan Downey: San Francisco, 1947), 2-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 171-181.

²² *Ibid.*, 14-16.

²³ Frank T. Bow to the Editor, *The [Washington, DC] Evening Star*, 14 June 1949.

New Deal-Fair Deal foe, invited Senator Downey to lead off the hearings. Downey charged the Bureau with “high crimes and misdemeanors” and called for the impeachment of several high-ranking officials in Reclamation and Interior. At best, Downey and Harness argued, the Bureau was guilty of gross mismanagement and incompetence. At worst, they had colluded to embarrass Congress during an election year. Furthermore, Straus and his cronies had supposedly spent taxpayer monies to propagandize their socialist-leaning land policies. Only after twenty-five days of hostile testimony was Straus allowed to defend himself.²⁴ He addressed his challengers directly but might well have been speaking to all of the Bureau’s critics down through the years. “We have been accused of running programs too fast,” he said, “and also running it too slow; we have been accused of disseminating too much information, and also of disseminating insufficient information; we have been accused of not being engineers, which is true. I have been accused of being a dillywhacker, which may be true, and all manner of other accusations.”²⁵

But by this point, Straus’ testimony was irrelevant. Harness had made up his mind a month before Straus took the stand, recommending that the Interior Department appropriations bill contain a proviso blocking pay for top Bureau leaders who were not qualified engineers. Although the trial was still ongoing, Harness “felt that the evidence already at hand justified” the legislative measure.²⁶ California Democrat Alfred J. Eliot inserted a last-minute rider in the House’s 1949 Interior appropriations bill that required the Bureau’s commissioner, assistant commissioners, and regional directors to be qualified engineers with five years of experience. Otherwise, they would not be paid. Not coincidentally, this applied only to Straus and Boke. These tactics were of dubious constitutionality and an affront to the civil service process. Straus

²⁴ Drew Pearson, “Tax Plan Lets Rich Inherit Earth,” *Washington Post*, 14 June 1948.

²⁵ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, *Investigation of Bureau of Reclamation Department of the Interior*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 1948, 911-912.

²⁶ Forest A. Harness, “Harness Asks Removal of Commissioner Straus,” 14 May 1948, MWS-LOC, box 15, folder: Harness Committee Preparations, 1948.

urged Truman to sign the appropriations bill. With Congress now adjourned a veto would have cut off construction and maintenance funds for the entire department. Truman reluctantly agreed, dismayed with Downey's disregard for the separation of powers and civil service procedures. Truman complained that "this type of action subjects Federal officials to the risk of being legislated out of office if they incur the wrath of special interests as a result of vigorous enforcement of the law." Truman recognized the attacks were as much about Fair Deal public power policies and the administration's defense of acreage limitations in the Central Valley as they were about any supposed wrongdoing in the Bureau.

Public reaction to the Bureau's spat with Congress was mixed. Liberal supporters in the press and the executive branch lauded Straus for his defense of the "family-sized-farm." Truman even manipulated the situation to his political advantage, transforming what had been an intraparty squabble between the Bureau and the Democrat Downey into a wholesale repudiation of the "Do Nothing Congress," Truman's term for the Republican-controlled Eightieth Congress.²⁷ Reclamation's Republican supporters like Utah senator Arthur V. Watkins correctly pointed out that the Eightieth Congress had in fact appropriated more money for the program than any other Congress in history. The problem, Republicans argued, was the "outrageous extravagance and waste" of Fair Deal reclamation, which included mismanagement and padded budgets.²⁸ These kinds of attacks on administrative efficiency were code for dissatisfaction with continued liberal planning and federal oversight in the West. In any event, the 1948 elections returned a Democratic majority to both houses in Congress. In October 1949 the first session of the Eighty-first Congress voted to repeal the Straus-Boke proviso and restore their pay, including nearly a year of back salary. Immediately, Downey pushed for another investigation. He spoke of

²⁷ Kathka, "The Bureau of Reclamation in the Truman Administration: Personnel, Politics, and Policy," 72.

²⁸ "Straus' Farewell Blast," *Worcester (MA) Gazette*, 14 February 1953.

a “criminal conspiracy” to waste millions of dollars of tax money, saying nothing of the cost to the taxpayer of his own personal vendetta against the Bureau.²⁹ But little came from his efforts.

Superficially, Straus and the Bureau had held the line against attacks on a hallowed piece of legislation. In reality, Straus had already overturned the spirit, if not the letter, of acreage limitation law a year before. To meet Downey’s earlier rounds of attacks, Straus and the Bureau devised a system they called “technical compliance.” Reclamation law had long been interpreted to mean that a husband and wife could jointly receive water on 320 acres. Straus broadened that interpretation considerably. A corporation, for instance, could receive water on 160 acres for each of its shareholders and an owner could deed land to family members, including minor children. Technical compliance changed no laws, but gave the Bureau a moral shield when confronting the realities of California’s preexisting scheme of land ownership. Technical compliance also signaled to large landowners that the Bureau was a friendly alternative to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which was not bound to observe any acreage limits.³⁰ In any case, the doctrine of technical compliance forever let the genie out of the bottle despite later efforts by some Bureau personnel to return to a strict interpretation of the law.

No one in the Bureau, Congress, or the Truman White House had the courage or interest to address the acreage limit question directly. Political expediency and Straus’s instinct for bureaucratic survival forced a solution that provided little guidance for the future. The standard 160-acre limit was difficult to maintain on most virgin lands projects and would have been impossible in a more complex social environment like the San Joaquin Valley. A group of related families working multiple parcels might have allowed family irrigation communities to

²⁹ Sheridan Downey, “Statement of Hon. Sheridan Downey, A United States Senator from the State of California,” undated, MWS-LOC, box 15, folder: Controversy.

³⁰ Clayton R. Koppes, “Public Water, Private Land: Origins of the Acreage Limitation Controversy, 1933-1953,” 624-626; and Kathka, “The Bureau of Reclamation in the Truman Administration: Personnel, Politics, and Policy,” 70, 101-02.

resemble the Dominy clan's mutually supportive efforts on the dry Nebraska plains a century before. But of course, technical compliance opened the floodgates for widespread abuse. Instead of a supportable family network, every infant and obscure cousin in a family could become a paper land baron. Technical compliance gave large growers quasi-legal protection but did almost nothing to change day-to-day operations or patterns of land ownership. Conditions in the field remained unchanged. Large numbers of underpaid migrant workers still labored for a handful of corporate growers in terrible conditions.

The aftereffects of the acreage limit battle in California rippled throughout the arid West. Several studies showed that irrigated farms in parts of the Missouri Valley, for instance, needed to be at least 480 acres to support a family. But a chastened Straus was not willing to consider asking for exceptions to reclamation law in these areas. When acreage limit supporters in California offered to make a sizeable donation to the National Reclamation Association for the organization's support, the issue was shelved. The one-size-fits-all acreage restriction, which was perhaps viable in California but not North Dakota, was not flexible enough to accommodate the American West's vast differences in ecological and social conditions. In the end, it brought ruins to thousands of small farmers.³¹

Despite increasing responsibility, Floyd Dominy maintained contentious relations with his superiors. He was not afraid to bypass normal channels when he felt his own or the Bureau's best interests were threatened. His supervisor, Goodrich Lineweaver, could have begun termination proceedings or used the civil service workaround of a lateral demotion to an obscure position elsewhere, like one of the Bureau's overseas advisory offices. Instead, Dominy had

³¹ Kenneth F. Vernon Oral History Interview, conducted by Brit Allan Storey, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, MD, 86-87, 251-255.

nearly free rein inside the department. He was rapidly becoming a master of office politics and was adept at creating elaborate bureaucratic paper trails to document his seemingly single-handed fight against the agency's ineptitude.³² According to one critic, Dominy's modus operandi was to "settle in a branch with a weak man as chief and learn as fast as he could. Then he would flap up to the ledge occupied by the chief and knock him off."³³ In reality, Dominy followed a slower path to power, creating an equal share of allies and enemies along the way. When he could not defeat his opponents he simply outlasted them. In the muddled civil service system, a supervisor needed to balance the trouble and effort of removing a career employee with the day-to-day difficulties that employee caused in the workplace. Lineweaver, never one for open confrontation, was apparently content to let a sleeping dog lie. But the more time Dominy spent in the field, the more headaches he caused his supervisors.

Dominy made two trips to Wyoming's troubled Riverton project in late 1951 and early 1952. What he found on the first trip disturbed him and he broadcast his displeasure throughout the Washington office. Despite the Bureau's frequent assertions that it had learned from the mistakes of the past, construction and settlement on Riverton showed the agency lapsing back into old habits. Settlers reported serious drainage problems on their land and were anxious about the future. They were justifiably suspicious of inconsistent Bureau policies and activities. In the Midvale District, farmers grossed just \$5,638 per year (more than \$1000 below the national farm average.) More troubling was the fact that \$1400 of that came from off-farm employment.³⁴ In a detailed memo to Lineweaver, Dominy laid out the project's many problems and passed on

³² See, for example, the internal exchange about the Milk River Project in Montana, Floyd E. Dominy to Goodrich W. Lineweaver 2 November 1949 and Goodrich Lineweaver to Floyd E. Dominy, 29 October 1949, both in FED-AHC, box 14, folder: Professional File, 1946-1959 Memoranda 1946-1959.

³³ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 1993), 220.

³⁴ "Economic Indicators: August 1956," undated, available at <http://fraser.stlouisfed.org/download-page/page.pdf?pid=1&id=8126>, accessed August 2012.

Wyoming senator Joseph O'Mahoney's urgent recommendation that a new repayment contract be negotiated over the winter.³⁵ Dominy also made more pointed recommendations in a less-detailed but widely circulated letter to Straus. He reminded the commissioner of the unapologetic honesty Straus demonstrated (in Dominy's ghostwritten letter) to Senator Chan Gurney over the Belle Fourche Project. Dominy recommended the Bureau suspend further construction and land distribution at Riverton until problems could be resolved.³⁶

Dominy was also becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Bureau's bloated structure. Under Straus the Bureau had expanded its ranks considerably. Dominy's most difficult task was coordinating the Washington and regional offices with the demands of an endless parade of other interests ranging from the irrigator in overalls to congressional staffers. Riverton irrigators had grown tired of negotiating the tangle of red tape separating the project manager, the district office, the regional office, and the actual decision makers in Washington. "Our Bureau has so many administrative layers," Dominy said, "that the Project Manager at the end of the line who deals directly with the water users has his authority sliced so thin that he can make no decisions without consulting the district or the regional layer." The Bureau's structure was difficult to explain to irrigators and a far cry from the sort of autonomy he had exercised as "king" of Campbell County two decades earlier. Dominy recommended eliminating the district offices, although Straus failed to act on the suggestion. Impressed with Dominy's forthrightness, Riverton irrigators insisted that Straus send a personal emissary for future negotiations.³⁷

³⁵ Floyd E. Dominy to E. D. Eaton, 17 December 1951, FED-AHC, box 14, folder: Professional File, 1946-1959 Memoranda 1946-1959.

³⁶ Floyd E. Dominy to Michael Straus, 17 December 1951, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family.

³⁷ "Mr. Dominy's Trip Report to the Riverton Project," 13 March 1952, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family.

Dominy was especially bothered with the Bureau's development plans in the Missouri River Basin. Under the Flood Control Act of 1944, the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers agreed to divide responsibility for water projects in the vast basin, largely to protect each agency's sphere of influence from a superagency like the TVA. The Pick-Sloan plan, so named after its principle creators, reconciled the interests of the two agencies, ensuring the Bureau's upstream interests in the basin's arid states would not be subsumed by navigation needs on the river's lower stretches. The Bureau's outline was contained in Senate Document 191, a comprehensive but general plan describing project development potential on the Missouri and its tributaries.³⁸ Many in the Bureau and the Department of the Interior believed Senate Document 191 constituted a mandate to develop everything within it. This reflected the Bureau's postwar admission that most irrigation projects would only be viable as part of comprehensive river basin development plans financed with hydropower revenues. This was especially true in the difficult agricultural areas of Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas. But many of the project proposals were tentative and required additional study.

Dominy disagreed with the Bureau's eagerness to follow the plan blindly. At a meeting in December 1951 between himself, Lineweaver, and several Bureau managers, Dominy voiced opposition to Assistant Secretary William Warne's proposal to irrigate North Dakota's Heart River Valley. This project was on a tributary of the Missouri River and similar to many of the Bureau's earlier, marginally successful efforts. While the area did contain some irrigable land, growing conditions were not ideal. Heart River farmers were not even sure they *wanted* a Bureau irrigation project and were unwilling to enter into a contract. In the absence of a repayment contract, Dominy and the Bureau's chief counsel rejected suggestions to continue construction of

³⁸ Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians Revisited: The Continuing History of the Pick Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society, 2009), 12-18.

Heart Butte Dam. Doing so would have gone against historic precedent and was not at all in accord with Commissioner Straus's oft-stated belief that water users had to pay off any distribution works. Dominy argued that taxpayers had already subsidized construction of the project's dam and reservoir and should not have to pay any more. Having been rebuffed at the meeting and wanting to ensure his views were "a matter of record," Dominy fired off a memo to the attendees and included a blind carbon to Straus with a personal note. Even as he was being hospitalized with ulcers, Dominy wanted to make sure that his voice was heard.³⁹ Lineweaver immediately acted to pull Dominy's offending memo from the files, but to no avail. Straus offered little help, and in fact, much of the trouble in the Missouri Valley was either Straus's personal doing or his ultimate responsibility. Pick-Sloan and Senate Document 191 were exactly the sort of long-on-vision but short-on-detail proposals he favored.

Mike Straus's contest with Congress touched on two major ideological questions. First, did small-scale irrigation farmers still have a viable place in American society and if so, what should their relationship with the government look like? Intense focus on the Bureau's lax enforcement of acreage limitations then and since has clouded understanding of the social and economic dynamics of small irrigated farms at midcentury. Second, what was the Bureau of Reclamation's role in postwar America? Sheridan Downey's attack on Bureau leadership for their lack of engineering credentials had little to do with their technical ability. No one expected a commissioner to double-check the work of his low-level underlings or design the next generation of hydraulic structures. Instead, it was a question of philosophy. Would the Bureau emphasize social planning or would it return to its historic mandate, simply building hydraulic structures wherever Congress deemed? Plans to build multipurpose, multi-dam projects placed

³⁹ Dominy to Eaton, 17 December 1951; and Dominy to Straus, 17 December 1951.

the very essence of New Deal-Fair Deal liberalism on trial and had profound implications for the future of the American West. But before the Bureau of Reclamation could look ahead, it had to correct past mistakes. Even within the reclamation community, only a handful of people knew exactly how many skeletons were in the Bureau's closets. One of them was Floyd Dominy and he would use this knowledge to begin his leap to the top of the agency's ranks.

Four: Reinventing Reclamation

Across the West, dozens of federal reclamation projects were in serious trouble. The root causes of failure could usually be found in poor engineering design and a general disregard for the social problems of irrigated communities. Many farmers simply could not remain solvent. They faced rising costs and diminishing crop prices. On projects with poor drainage or bad soils, they also contended with a continually dwindling number of acres they could farm effectively. The last straw for many was the seemingly haphazard system of repayment contracts between the Bureau and irrigation districts. Sorting out these contract repayment problems was the core task of Floyd Dominy's first years in the Bureau. More than any other experience, the amendatory contract process was responsible for Dominy's meteoric rise to the top. It gave him a detailed knowledge of the overall reclamation program, both from a legislative and historical perspective, as well as first-hand observations of the West. He also gained invaluable experience testifying before Congress and proved himself an expert witness. Despite a reputation for bellicosity and combativeness, Dominy demonstrated patience and tact before Congress as he explained complex laws to non-lawyers, payout plans to non-economists, and geography to easterners who were not quite sure where the West's major drainages were located.

At the end of the war, the Bureau had seventy-four projects in some stage of development or completion. Planners had also identified at least 400 more potential project sites. But few of these proposals had any hope of standing on their own merits. Officials in the Bureau and the Department of the Interior had long understood that without financial support from other aspects of reclamation, particularly power revenues, most projects were unviable even by generous calculations. As commissioner, Mike Straus transformed this vision into policy, ushering in a

major ideological shift in the agency's thinking. Straus had not arrived at this conclusion spontaneously. Reclamation law had evolved considerably since 1902, as Congress and the Bureau had been forced to acknowledge the near impossibility of reclaiming the arid American West. The original 1902 law compelled irrigators to repay construction costs within ten years. Very quickly, however, irrigators and federal officials recognized that few projects would pay out on schedule. Indeed, some projects were so poorly planned they would probably never pay out. In the decades after 1902, Congress attempted five major overhauls to reclamation law by extending payment schedules or introducing novel ideas like pegging repayment rates to crop values. Some individual projects also had unique repayment plans built into their authorizing legislation. But generally the new laws were little more than stopgap measures.

The Warren Act of 1911 was the first attempt to address failing project economics. It allowed the Reclamation Service to sell excess federal project water to private irrigators, which added crucial revenue to the reclamation fund. But it also had the potential to favor speculators and wealthy land owners, marking the start of the agency's drift away from small farmers. Too, it foreshadowed future repayment troubles. Three years later, Congress tackled directly the dire financial conditions of many irrigation projects. The Reclamation Extension Act of 1914 extended repayment periods to twenty years. Overall the law stood to benefit irrigators throughout the West but dealt a serious blow to the Reclamation Service. Because of the Service's demonstrated inability to ensure financial soundness on their projects, the law gave control of the program to Congress. No longer would the Secretary of the Interior be able to select projects based solely on engineering merit.¹

¹ William D. Rowley, *The Bureau of Reclamation: Origins and Growth to 1945* (Denver, CO: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 2006), 181-186.

The most significant restructuring of early reclamation law was the Fact Finders' Act of 1924. Interior secretary Hubert Work appointed a special six-member commission to investigate conditions on federal reclamation projects and recommend changes. They found that while some irrigators could in fact have met their repayment obligations but simply chose not to, most reclamation projects were poorly situated and financially unsound. The commission's final recommendations were very much a product of the conservative 1920s. While acknowledging significant problems on most federal projects and the moral necessity of continued reclamation development, the commissioners refused to grant blanket repayment moratoriums or provide financial assistance to struggling farmers, insisting that they make better use of their resources. The commission also failed to address the growing clout of large landowners, many of whom were circumventing acreage limitations.² A bold but ill-considered recommendation linking repayment ability to crop returns did make it into the final legislation. Irrigators would now repay at a rate of five percent of a ten-year moving average of crop returns. Despite the law's short two-year lifespan, twenty-one districts throughout the West contracted under this scheme. In the end, the Fact Finders' Act attempted to maintain the agrarian myth without actually creating mechanisms to protect farmers from the uncertainties of the global agricultural economy. Despite the fanfare surrounding the commission, most of the problems that plagued irrigators in the 1920s were little changed two decades later when Dominy joined the Bureau.

Not until 1939 did Congress pass a sweeping overhaul of the entire 1902 law, a move that allowed reclamation to survive in the postwar era.³ Although the 1939 act made possible the massive multi-state, multi-purpose projects of the late 1950s and 1960s, it also acknowledged

² Brian Q. Cannon "'We Are Now Entering a New Era': Federal Reclamation and the Fact Finding Commission of 1923-1924," *Pacific Historical Review* 66, no. 2 (May 1997): 204-208.

³ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Repayment Histories and Payout Schedules, 1952* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1953), 1-2.

that farmers would be charged only what they could pay from the produce of their land, not necessarily a “fair” price in the eyes of the American taxpayer. This allowed the Bureau to reassess troubled projects and bring them into a paying basis. As Dominy said in 1952, “if there is one thing that act says all the way through, it is that the repayment contract will be on the ability-to-pay premise.”⁴ Of all the legislation Dominy dealt with throughout his Bureau career, none was more important than the Reclamation Project Act of 1939.

The first iterations of reclamation law supported only single-purpose irrigation projects. While many early reclamation projects had subsidiary benefits from power production or flood control, irrigated agriculture was always the primary purpose. The 1939 act was the first explicit recognition of the economic necessity of navigation, flood control, and hydropower sales (and later, fish and wildlife benefits.). Congress now deemed these capabilities critical aids to western settlement.⁵ No longer were repayment contracts simply deals brokered between irrigators and the government. According to the Bureau, the act “brought into Reclamation law the concept that benefits from Reclamation projects were more than local in scope, and benefits that were national in character should not be a burden on the beneficiaries of Reclamation projects.” Another significant revision was the creation of a development period that delayed the start of repayment for ten years. (Annual operation and maintenance payments were still due upon initial receipt of water.) This was a critical cushion for irrigators struggling through the first hard years on the homestead, especially since banks gave no such grace period on agricultural loans. In effect, the 1939 law and its derivatives gave the Bureau a mandate to plan multiple-use projects, something that had been done as early as the Salt River Project in 1903 and was best exemplified

⁴ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. *Repayment Contracts for Frenchtown, Malta, and Glasgow Irrigation Districts, Montana* 82nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1952, 26.

⁵ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Public Lands. *To Amend the Reclamation Project Act of 1939* 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 1948, 69-70; and U.S. Department of the Interior, *Repayment Histories and Payout Schedules*, 1952, 2.

in the Boulder (Hoover) Dam Project Act. Unfortunately for irrigators living on projects built in the first decades of the twentieth century, the economic subsidy provisions were not retroactive under their original contracts.

A primary purpose of the 1939 act was to allow restructuring of contracts negotiated under the 1924 Fact Finders' Act. But World War II delayed the process and by 1952 only six of the twenty-one districts had revised their contracts. Negotiations also stumbled over section 9(e) of the 1939 act, which allowed the Secretary of the Interior to contract with a district for up to forty years, recovering annual operation and maintenance charges plus "an appropriate share" of construction costs. These contracts could then be renewed ad infinitum, in effect making the federal government a utility provider. While this had the benefit of supporting projects that were otherwise unfeasible, most western irrigators and their congressional representatives were skeptical of such an arrangement. Utility-type contracts, they believed, threatened state and local water rights. In theory, an Interior secretary eighty years hence could decide not to renew contracts, effectively destroying the property value and livelihood of an entire irrigation community. Others feared the potential for a government water monopoly.⁶

Attempts to revise the 1939 act after the war showed the government's inability to resolve the contradictions between a nineteenth-century agricultural program and the realities of the modern global economy. Some in Congress, like Montana Republican Wesley D'Ewart, claimed revisions to the legislation were not meant to make the lives of individual farmers easier. Irrigators were still expected to pay to their maximum ability. But by shortening repayment periods or expanding subsidies from hydropower and flood control, the Bureau could construct otherwise infeasible projects. Commissioner Mike Straus and reclamation boosters in Congress recognized that for reclamation to continue as a key partner in settling the postwar American

⁶ U.S. Congress, *To Amend the Reclamation Project Act of 1939*, 6-7, 57.

West, the Bureau needed to demonstrate its importance to the nation. He proposed adding a number of national economic benefits to the existing list of subsidies for reclamation, including transportation, defense, and health improvements. But these recommendations did not sit well with many traditionalists, who argued that further amendments to reclamation law would only dilute the program's original intent, since practically any project with powerful political backers could be authorized. It would also place extraordinary power in the hands of political appointees in the executive branch.⁷ Neither side need have worried. Congress passed only piecemeal changes to the law through the 1950s and the core of the Reclamation Act of 1939 remained intact. Rather than recognizing reclamation's national significance, the minor changes reflected only the influence of individual legislators protecting special interests.

Dominy's first step in consolidating his bureaucratic power over the repayment process was to wrest control from the Bureau's lawyers. Given the complex nature of water law, the Bureau's solicitors handled contract negotiations until about 1946. Yet like their engineer counterparts, they were little concerned with social conditions in the countryside. Their early attempts to restructure contracts were technically correct but their success rate in creating lasting deals was low. Nor were they held in high regard within the Bureau's management ranks. "To sneak in secretly, obtain a little information, prepare a report and hand the results to the water users on a take-it-or-leave it basis causes negotiations to degenerate to a mere battle of wits with each party suspicious of the other," a member of the Bureau's Boise office observed.⁸ Nor were they very efficient. The lawyers "weren't accustomed to working against a deadline," one regional director complained. "They'd take something and stick it under the bottom of the pile,

⁷ Ibid., 21-28, 51, 67, 92, 122.

⁸ Gil Stamm to Floyd E. Dominy 2 May 1948, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence File 1938-1954 Personal.

and when it floated to the top, they'd stick it under the bottom of the pile again.”⁹ Throughout it all, the Bureau continued to deliver water to districts that had stopped paying. Finally by 1948, the negotiations process came largely within the purview of Dominy's office. This was a crucial though unheralded battle in the agency's history, significant not only because of its sweeping importance to many western communities but also because Dominy and his allies in the Allocation and Repayment branch would come to rule over the Bureau for much of the next two decades.

The specific and unique failures of each project prevented the Bureau from adopting a standard approach to repayment. While section 9(e) of the 1939 law allowed wide latitude in determining a project's repayment ability, Mike Straus gave remarkably little direction to his Washington staff or the district offices. While he was absorbed in the big-picture work of expanding the Bureau's responsibility and prestige, subordinates working on mundane but vital matters of financing or contract negotiations had difficulty discerning any coherent policies coming out of the commissioner's office.¹⁰ Straus had neither an engineering nor an agricultural background and seemed unsuited for management of a decentralized bureaucracy like the Bureau. Rather than overseeing a bureaucratic juggernaut as his critics claimed, Straus actually presided over a number of distinct fiefdoms, each with their own internal power dynamics. In the days when even a long-distance phone call was a rarity, Bureau personnel in the field had considerable freedom in day-to-day operations. To ensure uniformity in the renegotiation process, Dominy had to coordinate the far-flung regional offices.

⁹ Kenneth F. Vernon Oral History Interview, conducted by Brit Allan Storey, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, MD, 65.

¹⁰ See for instance the discussion on the Yuma Project and All-American Canal in C. L. Naffziger to Floyd E. Dominy, 17 February 1948, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence File 1938-1954 Personal. See also Floyd E. Dominy to William I. Palmer, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence File 1938-1954 Personal.

A large share of Dominy's later power came through his congressional alliances and the amended repayment process marked the beginning of several of these important relationships. Goodrich Lineweaver, though nominally Dominy's immediate superior, contented himself to sniping at Dominy in memoranda and chose not to take an active role in shaping repayment policy.¹¹ Lineweaver was an able congressional witness, a critical skill for any bureaucrat hoping to make an impact in Washington, but he had no stomach for defending decades of the Bureau's poor decisions. In subordinating the task to Dominy, Lineweaver gave up the opportunity to be the Bureau's voice at a critical juncture in the agency's history. At the same time, the interior committees in Congress were assuming the leadership structure and personality dynamic that would continue into the late 1960s. Dominy knew that a strong showing in Congress—one that made him and not Straus or Lineweaver the indispensable source of reclamation knowledge—would determine the Bureau's fate and cement his own position within the bureaucracy.

Dominy renegotiated contracts with every one of the Bureau's troubled irrigation districts. A cluster of congressional hearings in early 1952 revealed the complexity of repayment problems, even between districts on the same project. After a lengthy hospitalization for ulcers, Dominy headed up to Capitol Hill in January to support new repayment contracts in Montana. The first was Frenchtown, a small project just west of Missoula built under the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. From an engineering perspective, Frenchtown was about as unsophisticated as a reclamation project could be. But it was an anchor for a small rural community, just the kind of project reclamation's early supporters had envisioned. Drawing water from the ample supply of the Clark Fork River, the project had a small retention pond but no storage reservoir and a scant thirty-eight miles of canals and laterals. A few dozen farms

¹¹ Goodrich Lineweaver to E. D. Eaton, 29 October 1949, FED-AHC, box 14, folder: Professional File, 1946-1959 Memoranda 1946-1959; and Floyd E. Dominy to Goodrich Lineweaver 2 November 1949, FED-AHC, box 14, folder: Professional File, 1946-1959 Memoranda 1946-1959

irrigated about 4,500 acres of small grains and pasture. By the early 1950s, the district was meeting its annual payment obligations but had fallen in arrears \$5,000 when it failed to make a step increase in payments in the mid-1940s.¹² The Bureau saw trouble ahead when the next increase (from \$5,000 to \$7,500 per annum) came due in 1954. Even if the district could not meet the entire obligation, Bureau officials believed the best policy was to force irrigators to pay something rather than have the entire district fall behind.¹³

On the House subcommittee on irrigation and reclamation was John Saylor, a Republican from Pennsylvania coal country. Right away he called on Dominy to explain how the irrigators could find themselves unable to pay despite record crop prices. Questioning what this meant for larger projects, Saylor called for a top-to-bottom assessment of the entire reclamation program, requesting the Bureau supply information on every project in its history. “I am satisfied in my own mind that not all is well in the Bureau of Reclamation,” he said, “and I do not believe that the members of this committee...are in a position to deal properly with this matter piecemeal.” Saylor’s pointed queries showed unfamiliarity with the basics of western reclamation, to be sure. But they also indicated his instinctual distrust of a government bureaucracy that had such an intrusive and potentially burdensome relationship with the people. After admitting his inexperience, Saylor sermonized that Congress was little more than a rubber stamp for executive policy making. His fellow members should either own up to the reality that they were no longer the nation’s law-making body or alternately suppress “some of the bureaus downtown.”¹⁴ Although Saylor made it clear his anger was focused on the Bureau and not Dominy, this was the

¹² U.S. Department of the Interior, *Project Data* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1981), 477, 479; and U.S. Department of the Interior, *How Reclamation Pays* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947), 71-73.

¹³ U.S. Congress, *Repayment Contracts for Frenchtown, Malta, and Glasgow Irrigation Districts, Montana*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

start of a contentious relationship. Dominy made many powerful enemies in Congress through the years but none was as persistent a critic as Saylor.

Saylor's provocative request for ten "very pertinent questions with regard to each and every project" surprised some of the other committee members, including Wayne Aspinall and chairman Clair Engle.¹⁵ Both were concerned that Saylor's request came without the subcommittee's full consideration, a breach of protocol for a junior member. Like Saylor, Engle believed that a holistic approach to the repayment problem was needed, although he expressed little of Saylor's obvious distaste for the program. Engle echoed Straus's belief that Congress should consider a wide range of reclamation's "national" benefits. Likewise, Aspinall also supported the reclamation program's goals, if not the Bureau's specific practices. Writing Dominy a month before the Frenchtown hearing, Aspinall "confidentially" remarked that of late he had "not been too satisfied with some of the actions of the Bureau. Nevertheless, I know that I am a comparably new comer as far as the Washington legislative is concerned and I intend to be sure of my ground before I start spading too deeply."¹⁶ In reality, Aspinall, who would become chair of the House interior committee a few years later, was not inclined to challenge the Bureau unless his own Colorado interests were threatened.

The committee also addressed differences between Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps projects. Why was the Bureau legally bound to charge irrigation water users while the Army Corps could distribute water free of charge? Was this not discrimination against western water users? A western Bureau project and an eastern Corps project both kept good land in production through flood control and irrigation. Engle answered with a metaphor. It was, he said, like the difference between putting out a fire and building a house. The government had an

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wayne Aspinall to Floyd E. Dominy, 24 December 1951, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Asst Commr 8/15/57.

obligation to put out fires (or control floods, in this case.) But with an “affirmative improvement, which supplies water and builds wealth...they expect you to pay for it.” But what of the national benefits of reclamation? Countries like Italy fully subsidized reclamation projects, a “much more generous” policy than in the United States. Saylor argued that it was simply a matter of attitude. The Army Corps, he said, was in the practice of turning over projects soon after completion. On the other hand, the Bureau seemed to make it a point “to control the lives and future of the people...whom they get under their thumb.” Engle responded that “it is easy to have the Santa Claus attitude when you don’t have to ask anybody to repay.” In Frenchtown’s case, Dominy noted, the Bureau turned over the works to the local irrigation district just four years after the project’s approval. Engle closed the morning session by asking Saylor to circulate his list of questions to the committee so that they could all take a comprehensive look and do “some real thinking” about how to address the repayment troubles. As it turned out, it was Dominy who did the thinking, and his staff labored for five months to assemble the data.¹⁷

The committee next took up amended contracts for the Malta and Glasgow districts on Montana’s Milk River Project. As the committee members recognized, the project had made every possible mistake in design and execution. Its hasty approval in the wake of the 1902 act ensured the United States could lay first claim to the river’s water, which flowed through Canada for a stretch. But the resulting project was strung out for nearly 400 miles in the cold, hard country along the Montana Hi-Line. Early project plans failed to include a regulating reservoir, making irrigation flows unreliable in early spring when irrigators first needed water but while the upper canal system was still frozen. To correct this problem and boost employment during the Depression, Franklin Roosevelt Fresno Dam under the National Industrial Recovery Act. But the

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, *Repayment Contracts for Frenchtown, Malta, and Glasgow Irrigation Districts, Montana*, 7-9; and Edward J. Talbot to Floyd E. Dominy, 22 October 1969, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: 1968, 1969 Congratulations-Commissioner.

dam added a financial burden to an already struggling project and by 1950 the district had fallen behind its payment schedule by more than \$200,000. To make matters worse, the project had outstanding repairs to complete. Congress had already appropriated repair funds but without a new contract the district could not draw on them.¹⁸

By the time a new contract reached Congress, Dominy and his staff had done at least two or three years of legwork with the districts. State laws typically required approval of proposed contracts in the state courts. In Montana, sixty percent of the district's landowners *and* owners for sixty percent of the irrigable land had to petition the state court to approve a contract. The process was time-consuming, but it allowed irrigators a remarkable degree of control.¹⁹ The Bureau's regional office in Billings had renegotiated contracts with each of Milk River's three districts in the late 1940s. But when Dominy saw the draft contracts he knew he could not defend them before Congress. "It was a complete bailout," he said later. "They had given the farmers everything." He voiced his concerns with Lineweaver and the Billings office, which gave him a half-hearted invite to negotiate the contracts himself. To their surprise, he agreed. Dominy believed that the irrigators should be made to pay something and that the government deserved a return on its investment. But he also believed in treating irrigators as equal partners. When he went to Milk River he refused to take "any of those clowns" from the Bureau's Montana offices. The only other Bureau employee present was the project manager, who actually lived in the community with the irrigators. Even the Bureau's typical seating arrangements irked Dominy. Rather than "lecture to them like a goddamn bunch of high school kids," Dominy insisted they all sit around a table, even if the table was nothing more than a plywood sheet and some

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁹ U.S. Congress, *Repayment Contracts for Frenchtown, Malta, and Glasgow Irrigation Districts, Montana*, 23.

sawhorses. Remarkably, Dominy and the district representatives created a new contract in just one day, one that got the district back on paying terms with the federal government.²⁰

Half a century after the original 1902 reclamation act, few in government questioned the law's fundamental structural flaws that restricted an individual farmer's prosperity. The Interior department still looked to rural communities as a benchmark for "a satisfactory level of family living" when assessing a district's ability to repay construction obligations, despite the growing economic gap between city and country.²¹ With the notable exception of John Saylor, the interior and reclamation subcommittee's members were generally sympathetic to reclamation. But "sick" projects like Milk River still concerned many of them. Rather than try to defend the project's indefensible economics, Dominy argued that inflexible repayment requirements were to blame. Projects like Milk River produced good crops and had built strong communities, he argued, even if raw economic data showed otherwise. Saylor poked at Dominy, wanting to know if "this project [was] designed when they had engineers at the head of it or when they had newspapermen at the head of the Bureau?" Not rising to the bait, Dominy explained that most early projects had done well in the year-round growing climate of the Southwest. But northern projects, of which Milk River was the furthest north, were more prone to remedial action. "In my own judgment as a westerner, I don't think any of them have been failures," Dominy told the committee. "I don't think that Congress has wasted the public money in any case. I think it was good development of the West."²²

Subcommittee members expressed concern at the length of the amended contracts and their open-ended payout schedule. The Department of the Interior estimated repayment periods

²⁰ FED-OH, 18-19.

²¹ U.S. Congress, *Repayment Contracts for Frenchtown, Malta, and Glasgow Irrigation Districts, Montana*, 9-11, 34-36.

²² *Ibid.*, 25-26.

for the Glasgow and Malta districts would be a staggering 116 years and 106 years, respectively. But even this estimate depended on the final disposition of some 35,000 acres of marginal lands. After ten more years of trial and experimentation with different crop regimes on these heavy clay soils, the lands were to be reassessed as one of the top four “paying” classes or retired into class six. In the latter event, total district liability would be reduced since the government would charge off the bad land. Depending on the size of the acreage withdrawal, the Malta contract could be reduced to seventy years and Glasgow to perhaps ninety. Alternately, improvement in land classification could have extended the contracts beyond 150 years in the most extreme scenario. The Bureau also hoped to sell surplus water from the reservoir behind Fresno Dam, reducing the contract length somewhat.²³ Congress was understandably reluctant to approve a contract that would tie down several future generations of irrigators. Perhaps the projects might simply be charged off. Dominy countered that irrigators *should* pay something for water, just as they paid property and income taxes as part of their production costs. What he was against was a water charge so high that it would take the farmer and “bleed him down to the nickel.” The point of balance was allowing the farm family “a reasonable standard of living...including some accumulation for old age,” while also recognizing project charges could not realistically be repaid in a single lifetime.²⁴

But even if irrigators were paying to the “maximum of their ability,” a debatable metric in itself, how could Congress justify the massive subsidies that made up the difference between irrigator repayments and actual construction costs? Dominy argued that the Bureau should receive the same consideration for its value to society and communities as flood control projects. Like flood control, reclamation was an indirect benefit that was hard to quantify. But as he saw

²³ Ibid., 27.

²⁴ Ibid., 29.

it, the benefits were unmistakable to “anyone who knows the West and who travels it.” The “Federal expenditure in bringing water to the land...reaches a long way down into our economic chain from community to community [and] that makes us a great nation.” On the issue of repayment contracts lasting a century or more, the farmers themselves, according to Dominy, were not at all concerned with the extended payout period, choosing instead to view the contract in terms of its annual cost per acre. So long as this was manageable, the contract was a good one. Some committee members remained unconvinced. Wesley D’Ewart argued that the Milk River contracts were setting a dangerous precedent. Reclamation was supposed to be self-liquidating, not a “utility-type contract which this committee has expressly opposed time and again.”²⁵

In April 1952, the House irrigation and reclamation subcommittee took up a bill to amend contracts for four districts on the North Platte Project: Goshen, Gering-Fort Laramie, Pathfinder, and Northport. Like Milk River, North Platte was one of the first projects authorized under the 1902 act. It was also the irrigation project that had so impressed Dominy as a teenager. North Platte’s repayment problems illustrate the changing meaning of reclamation to both local communities and the nation between 1902 and the 1950s. Even relatively isolated projects had to come to terms with the Bureau’s new emphasis on vast, integrated river development. North Platte also shows how, even within the boundaries of a single project, irrigators did not all agree on the best way to manage their districts. Different political, ecological, and historical conditions allowed a range of solutions to seemingly similar problems. By 1947, only two of the four districts were current on their debt; Pathfinder had a minor unpaid balance equal to one percent

²⁵ Ibid., 30-31.

of its total obligation to date. The Northport District was in worse shape, with a “serious” indebtedness equal to twenty-five percent of the construction cost.²⁶

North Platte irrigators faced many of the same difficulties farmers everywhere faced: lack of capital, unpredictable weather, and lack of control over global commodity markets. But North Platte farmers also had to contend with the blessing and curse of hydroelectric power facilities. Power revenues remained high when North Platte was the only producer in the region. But in the 1930s, changes to federal power policy affected the project’s relationship with consumers. Development of hydroelectric plants on the Kendrick and Colorado-Big Thompson projects substantially increased surplus power. The Rural Electrification Administration’s (REA) policy of lowering rates to make cheap power available during the Depression and a later move toward integrated power marketing in the Missouri Valley in the 1940s only compounded the problem. Electric power revenue-per-acre dropped dramatically from ninety cents in 1931 to thirty-four cents in 1950.²⁷

By the early 1950s, North Platte had become “an island of high-priced wholesale power” in a sea of low-cost producers. Even still, the project’s financial problems might have been manageable. But the districts’ contracts were under the 1924 act, which pegged payments to five percent of a ten-year running average of gross crop revenue. While this scheme recognized the link between farmer incomes and actual growing conditions on a project, it left little wiggle room when a bad crop year inevitably followed two or three good seasons. In the inflationary years of the early 1950s, North Platte irrigators were getting less for their crops even as other federal power producers squeezed them out of the regional power market. High gross revenues due to

²⁶ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. *Amendatory Repayment Contracts, North Platte Project*, 82nd Cong., 1st sess., 1952, 4-5; Robert Autobee, “North Platte Project,” U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 1996, 22-23; and U.S. Department of the Interior, *How Reclamation Pays*, vii-viii, 179-193.

²⁷ U.S. Congress, *Amendatory Repayment Contracts, North Platte Project*, 4-5

inflation did not necessarily equate to high net revenues, or as one congressman quipped, “the bigger volume of business you do, the quicker you go broke.” North Platte irrigators, who were still liable for the power plants’ construction charges and their normal O&M and rehabilitation costs, argued that the Bureau’s power marketing arrangement in the region was “a confiscation of our property by acts of the Government without due compensation.” The amended contracts would relinquish their rights to future revenues in exchange for a reduction of the outstanding construction charges. This was little more than a bookkeeping transaction since the federal government already owned the power facilities. In the Pathfinder District, for example, the new contract reduced the irrigators’ obligation by thirty dollars per acre.²⁸

As the country began to reconsider water development from a multipurpose perspective in the late 1920s and 1930s, the legislation matured to consider reapportioning costs between irrigation, flood control, power, and other benefits. But under the archaic system that conceived North Platte, construction charges for all facilities were simply lumped together. The financial burden was not shared by all project beneficiaries but rather fell solely on the irrigators’ shoulders. Testifying before the House, North Platte irrigators argued they were not looking for favors but rather a level playing field with other, newer Bureau projects. “We have met our obligations in the past and we want to continue to do so,” said one man. “I wish to state our district is not here for a hand-out,” said another.²⁹ With the exception of the Northport District, which adamantly opposed divesting their power interests, the North Platte irrigators were overwhelmingly in favor of the new contract.

Like the other districts, Northport also had grievances with the federal government’s mismanagement of the project over the years. Irrigators recalled a litany of the federal

²⁸ Ibid., 13-15, 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 15, 18.

government's bad decisions and broken promises. But their complaints focused on the fact that the district even existed at all. Under the 1902 Reclamation Act and the 1904 Kinkaid Act, the federal government set aside lands in Nebraska and elsewhere as potentially suitable for reclamation, superseding homesteading laws. Homesteaders on these lands were required to conform to reclamation law with the understanding that the federal government would develop reclamation infrastructure in time. But after failing to develop the project fully, the government eventually bought excess water from the private Tri-State Land Company and passed its share of O&M charges to the Northport District. In addition, farmers had to pay for construction of water carriage works connecting project lands to the private canal.

Unfortunately, the Bureau built the works at a time of high construction prices during World War I. Most observers at the time agreed the project was financially unsound but was important to the war effort. However, Tri-State required cash payments at the beginning of the growing season. Since few farmers had the resources to make the payments, the district defaulted the charges back to the government. Nebraska Senator George W. Norris and Reclamation Commissioner Elwood Mead negotiated a new contract, putting irrigators under a graduated repayment system with the first payments due in 1939. Both men acknowledged the payment schedule was impossible to meet but hoped to give Northport temporary relief until a better solution could be found. The new contract in 1952 was not much better, however. It eliminated power revenues, as paltry as they were, and reduced Northport acreage by fifteen percent, thus raising the per-acre liability within the district. While retiring marginal land made sense ecologically, even a small reduction was more than some farmers could bear. The district,

receiving surplus water under a Warren Act contract, had already faced a twenty-percent reduction in water delivery during the dry years of the late 1940s.³⁰

The Northport district laid out a compelling case condemning the federal government's past mistakes and arguing that what might benefit the other three districts would deal a death blow to Northport. They asked Congress not to cave to pressure from the other three districts since "there is no reason to believe that if this trend is allowed to go unchecked and continue, that it will not eventually reach clear down to a socialization of each individual farming unit." Northport hoped to be stricken from the bill and allowed to retain its share of power revenues. Only John Saylor seemed to be sympathetic to the district's argument, with its overtones of creeping socialism and dim view of the Bureau of Reclamation.³¹ In later years, Saylor would make his stand against reclamation as an environmentalist. But in the early 1950s he faithfully recited the party line about reclamation's threat to American democracy.

When it suited Saylor, he could become an ardent champion of "the people," even if those people were living on a subsidized water project. Part of North Platte's problem, he said, was the expansion of newer, integrated power facilities in the Great Plains. Saylor even claimed that the Bureau had intentionally developed other power sources to the detriment of North Platte. The original North Platte settlers had entered into repayment contracts with the government in good faith, only for the Bureau to price them out of power market intentionally. "This action of the Bureau, I think, is terrible." No argument from the Bureau, fellow congressmen, or even the North Platte irrigators themselves could convince Saylor that the Bureau had done anything other than act inappropriately. He mounted his soapbox to remind his colleagues of their mission: "one of the principal things we are down here for, I think, is to make sure that a group like the Bureau

³⁰ Ibid., 18, 28-30.

³¹ Ibid., 32, 48.

of Reclamation does not go out and take advantage of the people. It may be that in desperation or as a last resort they have come up with what they think is the best deal possible. I do not think it is our duty to let the Bureau get away with it.”³²

In the middle of the House hearings, North Platte irrigators also had a chance to testify before the Senate. Here too, the focus was on hydropower. But when Dominy took the stand he explained the problem in terms of crops, not power revenue. While the North Platte Project’s history was somewhat unique, the failure of the 1924 act was really to blame. Despite increased gross revenue, farmers still were not making enough to maintain a decent standard of living, let alone pay off their construction obligations. The 1939 act allowed the Secretary of the Interior an option to replace the old five-year crop average with a best-ten-of-thirteen-year scheme, placing the irrigators’ ability-to-pay at the forefront of economic considerations. This allowed the Bureau, if they wished, to bypass Congress completely and avoid conflict. But as an economist, Dominy did not care for any of the moving average plans even though the Bureau had already renegotiated contracts under these terms with six districts. Dominy did believe, however, that any new contracts structured on the “ability-to-pay” premise were ultimately in the best long-term interest of the Bureau, irrigators, and the American taxpayer.³³

Back in the House, Saylor and other Republicans tried to make the North Platte situation a referendum on Bureau power marketing procedures and rates. As often happened in the debate over public power, the problems of farmers drifted into the background. Saylor pushed Dominy to admit that North Platte would not have been feasible without power subsidies, at least when judged by the “rules that the Bureau had at that time.” Dominy agreed only that “it would have been a much more arduous task. It would have caused greater sacrifices among the earlier settlers

³² Ibid., 56.

³³ U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. *Amendatory Repayment Contracts, North Platte Project*, 82nd Cong., 1st sess., 1952, 12-14.

than even was caused, because in any of our western developments the first family or two on the farms have a pretty rough struggle.”³⁴ Early reclamation supporters like Commissioner Frederick H. Newell saw reclamation settlement through a Darwinian lens, believing only the most industrious settlers would—or should—survive.³⁵ This view held remarkable sway within Bureau ranks; failures were expected, in fact if not in actual legislation. Wayne Aspinall came to the Bureau’s defense, and argued that Congress, not the Bureau, established power policy. Perhaps in a strictly legal sense, replied Wesley D’Ewart, but the Bureau had “morally done wrong.” He was convinced the entire show was nothing more than the Bureau’s attempt to expand the reach of public power into the region.³⁶

Congress eventually approved the amendatory contracts for Frenchtown, Milk River, North Platte, and nearly fifty other failed or failing projects. While not all of them would stand the test of time, they provided significant breathing room for thousands of irrigators. The amendatory contract process was significant in other ways. It restored faith in the Bureau of Reclamation. Even liberal advocates of reclamation were concerned that the Bureau had not been up to the task of managing the social and agricultural aspects of its projects. These elements could easily have been transferred to other agencies within the USDA. Stripped of its social and agronomic functions, the Bureau would have become but a pale shadow of the much larger and more active Army Corps. And increasingly, the Army Corps was moving toward an expanded presence in the West’s major river basins.

The amendatory contract hearings also established the ideological battle lines between various factions in the executive bureaucracy and Congress. Dominy had acquitted himself well before the Interior committees, showing patience and restraint as members like John Saylor

³⁴ U.S. Congress (House), *Amendatory Repayment Contracts, North Platte Project*, 66.

³⁵ Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government*, 30, 311 fn 99.

³⁶ U.S. Congress, *Amendatory Repayment Contracts, North Platte Project*, 78-79.

grandstanded and asked impertinent or ill-informed questions. The Milk River and Frenchtown hearings earned Dominy praise from Clair Engle and a commendatory letter in his personnel file.³⁷ He was clearly the Bureau's rising star, rearticulating an emphasis on small farmers that had been sorely neglected in the past. Wayne Aspinall would soon become the chairman of the House interior committee where he spent most of the next two decades championing reclamation and western resource development. John Saylor, who would become a relentless critic of Bureau policies and eventually contribute to Dominy's final ouster, was also staking an ideological claim in the committee, showing that even a minority member can have considerable clout.

With the Bureau's reinvention nearly complete, the agency seemed poised to embark on a crusade to bring water and power to the West on a scale never before seen. But life in the Bureau was about to change. Since 1933, Democrats had maintained control of both houses of Congress except for the brief period from 1947 to 1949. The general election of 1952 was nothing short of a national referendum after two decades of the Roosevelt-Truman New Deal-Fair Deal. The nation was deeply divided over the war in Korea and the unpopular Truman declined to run for another term, leaving the well-heeled and reserved Adlai Stevenson to carry the liberal torch. His Republican opponent was the popular former general Dwight Eisenhower, who won in a landslide. In the House, Republicans won twenty-two seats and gained a bare one-seat majority in the Senate. Central to Eisenhower's economic outlook was a continuation of a consumer-driven society. This had a direct impact on the nation's farmers.

Conservation-minded liberals in the bureaucracy were also about to face the stiff winds of political change. Although Eisenhower had little apparent affinity for domestic affairs,

³⁷ Clair Engle to Michael Straus 29 January 1952, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence File 1938-1954 Personal; and Goodrich Lineweaver to Floyd E. Dominy 4 April 1952, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence File 1938-1954 Personal.

reclamation and natural resources were key elements of his political campaign in the West. Once-unknown places like the remote Hells Canyon on the Snake River became household watchwords and natural resource management became a partisan issue. In an August campaign speech, Eisenhower remarked that the West, when viewed from the air, “looks like one great, huge untapped reservoir of resources for America.”³⁸ Before the dawn of mass environmental movements, the question was not whether Americans should exploit resources to the fullest, but rather who should profit the most. Eisenhower espoused a “partnership” philosophy, which reflected the simplistic but widely held notion that the federal government should only do what individuals and local governments could not do themselves.

In practice, of course, this was unevenly applied. On a swing through the Pacific Northwest, the candidate reassured his audience that the federal government would still be in the business of building dams. After all, the whole purpose of the original 1902 reclamation act had been to “hasten settlement of the West.” But an Eisenhower administration would not dominate the partnership, a clear reference to the ongoing controversy over a proposed federal dam in Hells Canyon. Eisenhower promised to rein in the bureaucracy, speaking of twenty or more federal agencies “trying to manage your business, putting their long noses into everything that affects you from morning to night.”³⁹ This small-government ideology found a receptive audience, even among otherwise liberal Democrats who believed government superagencies like the proposed Columbia and Missouri valley authorities threatened their interests.

Farm policy was another high-profile campaign issue. At the time Americans spent no less than twenty percent of personal incomes on food (compared to less than ten percent today.)

³⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Natural Resources, State Leadership,” 20 August 1952, MWS-LOC, box 7, folder: Speeches and Statements Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953.

³⁹ Dwight Eisenhower, “Reclamation to Continue” 6 October 1952, MWS-LOC, box 7, folder: Speeches and Statements Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953.

On the campaign trail, Eisenhower attacked the liberals' chief agricultural policy (named after Truman's Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brannan) and accused Democrats of "using Federal power to extort the farmers' vote."⁴⁰ The Brannan Plan called for commodity price supports to offset the difference between production cost and market price, with the goal of reducing disparity between farm and non-farm incomes. Its pro-family-farm bias was also evident in a radical provision to limit the subsidies any one farm could receive, effectively preventing large agribusiness from making undue gains at taxpayer expense. Dominy had once advocated such a plan, arguing for parity payments up to \$20,000 in gross farm income, a plan he believed would be resented only by "absentee land owners, operators of 'factory farms' and absentee owners who own a number of farms as a side line to a successful business or profession."⁴¹ The Brannan plan ran into predictable opposition from Republicans, who suspected socialism; urban media outlets and economists who feared higher consumer prices and inflation; and farm groups that resented a plan developed without their input.⁴² Everyone agreed on the necessity of maintaining the cherished family farm. But few were willing to make the personal or political sacrifices necessary to keep family farms in operation in a consumer-driven, Cold War society.

Antipathy toward Brannan and the USDA may actually have saved the Bureau. Brannan had long complained that Bureau officials were uncooperative and frequently duplicated programs and siphoned off resources. Having two major agencies with similar functions was not only inefficient but counterproductive to both. Hundreds of former USDA employees, including Dominy, were now working for the Bureau. Brannan complained of the limited number of trained agricultural personnel in the nation. The Bureau, Brannan rightfully charged, was also

⁴⁰ Dwight Eisenhower, "Farm Program," 6 September 1952, MWS-LOC, box 7, folder: Speeches and Statements Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953.

⁴¹ Floyd E. Dominy, untitled, undated report, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family.

⁴² Virgil Dean, "Why Not the Brannan Plan?" *Agricultural History* 70, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 274-277.

guilty of constructing projects with little understanding of soil conditions, crop types, and other technical factors. He urged Congress and the Bureau to remember that irrigation and agriculture, not power development or flood control, were still the primary purpose of the Bureau's dams. His concerns fell largely on deaf ears. While congressional critics frequently attacked the Bureau of Reclamation for the "sovietization" of American agriculture, lingering conservative resentment toward New Deal farm policy was even stronger.⁴³ When the Bureau did try to institute detailed agricultural planning into its projects, as it did on the Frenchman-Cambridge Project in the Missouri River Basin, it received considerable pushback from Congress.⁴⁴

Dominy might have been a lifelong Democrat, but he was not displeased to see Eisenhower sweep into the White House or the thorough housecleaning of the executive bureaucracy that followed. During the campaign, Eisenhower signaled his intention to clear out the "incompetents, fumlbers, moss-backs, cronies, crooks and the disloyal in the executive department [and] the policies and philosophy of the superstate together with all the economic wizards who are promoting that alien doctrine."⁴⁵ In fact, Dominy's future bureaucratic success practically demanded a Republican victory, one that would displace Mike Straus and rein in the Bureau's expansionist tendencies. Reflecting his New Deal pedigree, Straus was a man of big ideas and ambitions who was clearly concerned with uplifting the downtrodden. But he had no eye for details. What this meant in practical terms was that the Bureau had enlarged considerably without clear direction. Straus spent federal money planning projects that would not be built and presided over a period of major personnel increases.

⁴³ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Public Lands, *Irrigation and Reclamation*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 1947, 47-53, 116-117, 119, 125, 127-144.

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Public Lands, *To Amend the Reclamation Project Act of 1939*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 1948, 81.

⁴⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Government Service, State Relationships," 18 September 1952, MWS-LOC, box 7, folder: Speeches and Statements Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953.

Straus's tolerance for Dominy's outspoken behavior had protected Dominy and allowed him to prosper. But Dominy was critical of ballooning project costs in the Missouri Valley and Straus' habit of beginning pre-construction work on projects prior to congressional authorization. While maintaining cordial if not close relations with Straus, Dominy was less enthused about his immediate supervisor, Goodrich Lineweaver. Straus, Lineweaver, and Assistant Commissioner Bill Warne were all holdovers from the Harold Ickes regime. This lineage was a frequent target for Republicans, who now insisted that a professional engineer head the Bureau. When Straus left in January 1953, Fred G. Aandahl, former North Dakota governor and one of the Interior department's new assistant secretaries, became acting commissioner. In practice, this meant Lineweaver was running the Bureau.

When Eisenhower won the election, Dominy wasted no time reaching out to his Republican contacts in Congress, noting his disgust with Bureau policies and arguing for a wholesale replacement of top leadership. Dominy clearly had great ambitions for himself, perhaps even coveting an assistant commissioner position. He shrewdly attached copies of recent Bureau memos so that the recipient would have no question as to who was on the wrong side of reclamation policies, especially from a conservative viewpoint. Dominy spoke in the plural about removing "incumbents" and "top layers" of Bureau management. This group would surely have included Goodrich W. Lineweaver. For the new commissioner, he suggested Newcomb Bennett, an experienced project planner who had supported Dominy's criticism of the Heart River and Missouri Valley programs.⁴⁶

Eisenhower's nomination of Douglas McKay for Interior Secretary signaled a sea change in natural resource policy in the United States. A month after the election, *The Denver Post*

⁴⁶ Floyd E. Dominy to Wesley D'Ewart 18 November 1952, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family; and Floyd E. Dominy to Jesse Spielman, 18 November 1952, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family.

addressed the apparently misplaced “fear that Ike, a rookie in the game of power politics for rich stakes, will be overwhelmed by the affluent and crafty veterans of the exploitation racket.” But the paper reassured its readers that Eisenhower would not be foolish enough to repudiate the Republican Party’s heritage of conservation, nor would he hand over the management of public lands and resources to the states, a move that would have placed the West’s resources firmly in the hands of special interests.⁴⁷ As it turned out, McKay brought to the office the worldview of many western communities dependent on resource extraction. He firmly believed the Interior department had become a great “socialist dragon” under Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman.⁴⁸ This outlook troubled many western Democrats. They branded the new secretary “Giveaway McKay” over his apparent fast and loose distribution of the public domain. He would do little to change their minds in the coming years.

Two weeks after the inauguration, Eisenhower gave his first state of the union address. He noted the need for a strong federal program of natural resource management to meet the challenges of a rapidly expanding population. He again spoke of the importance of a partnership between federal, state, and local governments. He also highlighted the role of “private citizens,” an ambiguous term that most critics believed was shorthand for allowing private enterprise and special interests the opportunity to exploit natural resources without restraint. By the end of the month Eisenhower sent a memo to McKay that effectively prohibited the secretary from independently establishing or altering water policy. Even at this early stage, McKay was beginning to show that he was not quite up to the challenges of the job. Eisenhower made it clear that the White House and the Bureau of the Budget would guide future decision making. Only

⁴⁷ “Don’t Let the ‘Gimme Boys’ Fool You, Ike,” *The Denver Post*, 17 December 1952

⁴⁸ Quoted in Elmo Richardson, “The Interior Secretary as Conservation Villain: The Notorious Case of Douglas ‘Giveaway’ McKay,” *Pacific Historical Review* 41, no. 3 (Aug 1972): 335.

projects of the most vital importance would be built. Financing had to reflect the administration's concern with balanced budgets, non-federal interests should be given the widest latitude possible, and the department had to be cognizant of a project's impact on public opinion.⁴⁹

Eisenhower was not content merely to reduce the federal role in natural resource management. He also aimed to streamline the bureaucracy and eliminate agency overlap. Reclamation supporters in the 1950s were most disappointed in the administration's limited funding of projects and a low number of "new starts." But Eisenhower's policies also reflected a perceptible ideological shift, a move back to the pre-New Deal outlook that privileged engineering over social concerns. Word went out to the Bureau's regional offices that employees were to refocus on the technical feasibility of the reclamation program and disregard the economic and demographic concerns that had gained ground under Truman. Anything more was tantamount to empire building. Liberal hopes of basin-wide valley administrations were dead. Reorganization and a sharp reduction in reclamation personnel hit the agency's social planning divisions hard.⁵⁰ McKay announced his immediate intent to replace the unpopular Mike Straus, long a target of Republicans fed up with government overreach. Straus was a potent symbol of New Deal-Fair Deal liberalism and one of the last of the original New Dealers to hold a high-profile federal position.⁵¹ Within a year the Bureau cut nearly 2,800 positions, or twenty percent of its staff.⁵² But despite these setbacks, the Bureau would survive the Eisenhower period and remain a key partner in settling the postwar American West. By the late 1950s it was poised to

⁴⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower to Douglas McKay, 25 February 1953, FAS-DDE, FAS Eyes Only series, box 1, folder: Reclamation Projects/Multiple-Purpose Dams.

⁵⁰ Vernon, Oral History Interview, 145-147.

⁵¹ Paul C. Pitzer, "Visions, Plans, Realities: A History of the Columbia Basin Project," (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 1990), 122.

⁵² Wilbur Dexheimer to Douglas McKay, 19 January 1954, NARA-RG48, Subject File of Fred Aandahl 1953-1960, box 9, folder: Survey Team Reports.

build a series of water projects far more complex than anything even the most visionary New Deal planners could have imagined. But all that lay in the future.

Five: A Rising Star

Just as the Bureau of Reclamation seemed to secure its footing within the Washington power structure at the end of the Truman era, the shifting political power dynamic forced the agency into another period of readjustment. Goodrich Lineweaver seemed a logical choice to replace Mike Straus, who barely waited for Dwight Eisenhower to complete the oath of office before fleeing town. Through much of 1953 Floyd Dominy managed the Operations and Maintenance Division while Lineweaver acted as the Bureau's interim commissioner. But Dominy's postelection letter-writing campaign found some sympathetic recipients. One was Congressman John Saylor, who enthusiastically endorsed Eisenhower's campaign rhetoric of limited government and strict fiscal conservatism. With mounting opposition against Lineweaver, longtime Bureau engineer Wilbur Dexheimer became commissioner.¹

With most troubled projects now on a paying basis, the Bureau turned to comprehensive river development. Irrigation remained a central consideration, but the Bureau began to distance itself from its small farmer constituency. Feeding off the explosive growth of the West's urban centers, the Bureau emphasized hydropower as reclamation's paying partner. This attracted the attention of conservatives highly suspicious of public power boondoggles masquerading as irrigation projects. With a limited amount of money and water to go around, building consensus across the East-West-South sectional gap and between western political and regional factions was critical. As the primary broker between Congress, the White House, and clientele groups in the West, the Bureau had to be ideologically flexible. While relations between the Bureau and the Eisenhower administration were often strained, the Bureau and Congress increasingly found

¹ Thomas G. Smith, *Green Republican: John Saylor and the Preservation of America's Wilderness* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 50-51. See also chapter four, note 47 in this work.

common ground. That Dominy's rise to the top of the Bureau's ranks occurred at the same time was not a coincidence.

Wilbur Dexheimer's appointment seemed to signal a return to the Bureau's engineering bias. But three factors bridged the gap from the New Deal-Fair Deal period to John F. Kennedy's New Frontier. The first was the ongoing effort to amend repayment contracts. Through the mid-1950s the Bureau was still working diligently to apply New Deal solutions to Progressive Era problems. The second factor was continuity in Congress. For six of the eight years of Eisenhower's administration, Democrats controlled both houses of Congress. A bipartisan coalition of pro-reclamation westerners continued to dominate the House and Senate Interior committees. To be sure, the House appropriations committee that actually funded reclamation projects retained its bipartisan fiscal conservatism. Yet Eisenhower would support passage of the upper Colorado River Storage Project in 1956, a plan developed during the Truman administration and a blueprint for future multiple-project, multiple-use river basin development. The third factor had a negative impact on farmers, although it too was an outgrowth of liberal economic philosophy. Like Truman and Roosevelt, Eisenhower generally endorsed a consumption-driven economy.² But acreage restrictions in reclamation law prevented full adoption of the mechanized economies of scale that had already transformed most of American agriculture. Congress sympathized with suburban housewives protesting high supermarket prices but criticized farmwives who failed to can enough of their own produce. Increasingly, farm

² The best examination of the postwar American economy under Dwight Eisenhower is Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). See especially pp. 103-109 and 367-369 for a discussion of suburban discontent with high food prices. See also Otis L. Graham, Jr., *Toward A Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

families relied on one spouse working outside the home to stay afloat.³ Once a powerful component of the New Deal liberal coalition, farm families were becoming all but irrelevant for a new generation of liberals heading into the 1960s. This change was not lost on the Bureau.

The rift between the Bureau and the White House was not entirely new. The Bureau had faced serious challenges from Harry Truman in the late 1940s. The president's plan for federal superagencies modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority would have increased the overall federal presence in the West but reduced the Bureau's role. Mike Straus and his counterparts in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers successfully fought off that challenge without damaging relations with the president. Truman had hoped simply to streamline the federal system while simultaneously expanding the reach of Fair Deal liberalism. By contrast, Eisenhower hoped to curtail the entire bureaucratic juggernaut.⁴ Both approaches reduced the agency's autonomy and threatened to alter the balance of bureaucratic power within the agency.

While the largest personnel cuts occurred in regional field offices scattered throughout the West, targeted personnel reductions among top management shifted the Bureau's center of power from Washington to the Chief Engineer in Denver, away from politicking and social planning. Commissioner Dexheimer's attempts to circumvent the Interior department survey team's reorganization recommendations were less about reducing personnel cuts across the board than about retaining authority in the Washington offices.⁵ Although Dexheimer was an engineer with little experience in the Washington bureaucracy, he understood the value of centralized

³ William Palmer to E. D. Eaton 12 April 1945, WIP-USU, box 5, folder 10. For a sample of irrigators' complaints in the Columbia Basin, see U.S. Department of the Interior, "Report of Department of the Interior Hearing on the Land Limitation Provision of the Columbia Basin Project Act," 3 January 1957, FED-AHC, box 20, folder: Professional File, 1957-1961 Columbia Basin Hearings.

⁴ Karl Boyd Brooks, *Public Power, Private Dams: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 66-67.

⁵ Wilbur Dexheimer to Douglas McKay, 19 January 1954; Ralph Tudor to Wilbur Dexheimer, 15 February 1954; and Wilbur Dexheimer to Ralph Tudor, 9 April 1954, all in NARA-RG48, Subject Files of Fred Aandahl 1953-1960, box 9, folder: Survey Team Reports.

power. Dominy nearly became a victim of the 1953 reorganization and suspected Lineweaver was trying to manipulate the reduction-in-force requirements to protect his favored underlings. Dominy went straight to assistant interior secretary Fred G. Aandahl and exposed Lineweaver's duplicitous behavior.⁶

Under Truman, the Bureau had also endured three periods of "no new starts" for reclamation projects, and the president had even impounded congressional appropriations that exceeded White House budgets. Military operations in Korea in the early 1950s had a significant impact on domestic spending, especially on non-critical public works construction. Unlike the period during the two world wars, the Bureau was unable to make a case for reclamation's contributions to national defense. Still, the Bureau's funding would hardly suffer through most of the 1950s. Appropriations were down considerably from the banner year of 1950 when Reclamation received nearly \$336 million. But Eisenhower administration officials were quick to spin the facts, arguing that Democrat-controlled Congresses consistently appropriated less money for reclamation than the administration recommended. Failure to recommend new starts, they said, was a question of efficiency, of accelerating work on active projects to prevent a glut of half-completed projects that committed future Congresses to extraordinary outlays.⁷ As a percentage of the total federal budget, reclamation's share remained constant.⁸ Calls for efficiency dovetailed nicely with the administration's emphasis on balanced budgets.

Implementation of the administration's economic vision fell largely to the Bureau of the Budget. After World War II, presidents rarely voiced public support for or opposition to specific water projects. (Not until Jimmy Carter issued his infamous "hit list" of pork barrel water

⁶ FED-OH, 180-84.

⁷ Fred A. Seaton, "Statement of Secretary of the Interior," 31 March 1958, FAS-DDE, Subject series, box 5, folder: Budget – Interior 1957-1958 (1).

⁸ "Press Conference," 1 September 1959, FAS-DDE, Interior series, box 5, folder: Press Conference September 1, 1959 [transcript].

projects in the late 1970s did an American president dare to take a high-profile stance either for or against water project development.)⁹ Few outside the Washington bureaucracy recognized how powerful the Budget Bureau had become since its creation in 1921. No cabinet secretary or agency head could ignore its prerogatives. Budget's position as gatekeeper to the president and clearinghouse for executive agency proposals gave its director extraordinary power to shape policy. Historically, Budget officials have been conservative in fiscal outlook, regardless of the party in power. While the agency's top echelon changes at the pleasure of the president, the core bureaucrats remain from one administration to the next. Budget's growing power increasingly drew the ire of Congress. Detailed investigations of executive agency programs threatened Congress' constitutional authority over the national purse. "I think what they ought to do is tell us how much money is available and how much we can spend," griped on member of the House Public Works Committee in the late 1950s.¹⁰ Congress alone should retain authority as to how the money was actually spent.

In the waning days of the Truman administration, the Budget Bureau published the innocuously titled "Reports and Budget Estimates Relating to Federal Programs and Projects for Conservation, Development, or Use of Water and Related Land Resources," more commonly referred to as Circular A-47. The document reflected the recommendations of the Federal Inter-Agency River Basin Committee (FIARBC) of 1950 and proscribed rigid methods for calculating water project cost-benefit ratios. FIARBC's conclusions troubled Reclamation officials. To begin with, *every* reclamation or flood control project had to produce a surplus of benefits over costs,

⁹ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 1993), 313-323.

¹⁰ John J. Riley, interview by Richard J. Fenno, 8 June 1959, National Archives and Records Administration, available at <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/research/special-collections/oral-history/fenno/riley.html>, accessed September 2012.

meaning that unsound projects could not be buried within a larger river basin package.¹¹ The report also looked unfavorably on project payout periods exceeding a hundred years (a limit the Budget Bureau later reduced to fifty years.)¹² A project's secondary benefits such as recreation facilities or wildlife habitat were to be carefully considered in the planning stages. Thus the Bureau of Reclamation could not simply tack on recreation subsidies when they stocked a new reservoir with trout. In short, circular A-47 gave opponents new ammunition to fight unpopular projects. As a policy guide rather than law it allowed latitude for argument and political persuasion. Throughout the 1950s the Bureau continued to submit proposals based on dubious estimates of secondary benefits.¹³ Using the false logic of cost-benefit ratios, both proponents and detractors could argue about a project's merits using the same superficially objective economic calculations. These restrictions guided decision making for water projects until the Kennedy administration cancelled the circular in 1962.¹⁴

In truth, reclamation planners never embraced cost-benefit analysis with enthusiasm, responding only to congressional pressure during World War II to submit projects in line with Army Corps practices.¹⁵ Despite the rhetoric of scientific conservation that surrounded the first generation of reclamation projects, political calculations usually trumped economic concerns. Historian Theodore Porter's analysis of the Army Corps' adoption of cost-benefit analysis in the interwar period shows an agency beset by detractors. The practice "grew up not as the natural language of a technical elite, but as an attempt to create a basis of mutual accommodation in a context of suspicion and disagreement. The regime of calculation was not imposed by all-

¹¹ U.S. Federal Inter-Agency River Basin Committee, Subcommittee on Benefits and Costs. *Proposed Practices for Economic Analysis of River Basin Projects* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1950), 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24-26.

¹³ Maynard M. Hufschmidt, "Benefit Cost-Analysis: 1933-1985," *Water Resources Update* 116 (March 2000): 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Appropriations. *Public Works Appropriations for 1956*, Central Section, Part I, 84th Cong., 1st sess., 1955, 62.

powerful experts, but by relatively weak and divided ones.”¹⁶ Even when cost-benefit analysis became standard after World War II, both supporters and opponents of reclamation projects simply manipulated figures to support their positions.

By extending project payout periods, sometimes in excess of a century, the Bureau could invariably meet a one-to-one cost-to-benefit ratio. Using more realistic payout periods, including the forty-year standard period favored in the 1939 Reclamation Act, opponents could single out unviable projects from river basin development plans. Cost-benefit analysis also placed the Bureau in an ideological bind. The agency propagandized the national value of reclamation projects, but cost-benefit analyses were decidedly local in character. While irrigation certainly had national benefits, secondary factors like recreation typically only served local populations.¹⁷ In any case, Congress routinely failed to challenge the math behind cost-benefit ratios, focusing instead on the final number. As Porter observed of Army Corps project proposals, “this regularization of the planning process could not but enhance the standing of the Corps. Except when it was challenged by powerful opponents, its numbers were generally accepted on no more authority than its own reputation.”¹⁸ Much the same could be said for the Bureau of Reclamation.

During the campaign, Eisenhower promised that the federal government—and the Interior department especially—was out of the business western empire building. This was especially so when it came to public hydropower projects. The Hells Canyon Dam controversy showed that in matters of public-versus-private hydropower production, conservative opposition to federal dam building was as strong as any fight the emerging environmental movement would

¹⁶ Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 149

¹⁷ Maynard M. Hufschmidt, “Benefit Cost-Analysis: 1933-1985,” *Water Resources Update* 116 (March 2000): 43.

¹⁸ Porter, 156.

put up in later years. Both the federal government and the Idaho Power Company had plans for hydroelectric development in the Snake River Canyon. The federal proposal called for a single massive dam to anchor a multi-purpose project modeled on the Columbia River Basin Project then under construction in Washington. The Idaho Power Company's proposal was much more modest, placing three low dams along the river. A large federal dam would have flooded out these sites, making a compromise plan impossible. The Eisenhower administration settled the question when they chose not to contest Idaho Power's application for a Federal Power Commission license. The debate centered only on who should benefit most from the West's resources. That dams should have been built in any case was never seriously questioned. In any case, proponents of federal reclamation were justifiably concerned that private power's "victory" in Hells Canyon presaged the possible end of major federal water projects for some time to come.¹⁹

By summer 1953, the Department of the Interior and the Eisenhower administration had solidified their power policy for federal water projects. While conceding that most multipurpose projects were beyond the capability of local governments or private enterprise, the administration would not oppose smaller, private efforts to build hydroelectric facilities on western rivers. Eisenhower also opened the door for private industry to build power distribution infrastructure directly from federal dams. The first major test of this policy came as the Interior department embarked on its most ambitious plan to date, the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP.) The project's entire economic feasibility depended on transmission of hydroelectric power across the vast expanses of the West.²⁰ With western populations rapidly increasing amid a major buildup of defense and industrial centers, electrical distribution was rapidly becoming as politically

¹⁹ The best survey of the Hells Canyon controversy is Brooks, *Public Power, Private Dams*.

²⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Statement Issued by the President" and attachments, 18 August 1953, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Fred G. Aandahl, box 1, folder: Power Policy.

contentious as control of irrigation water. Like the big agricultural growers in California and the Southwest, private power interests were a formidable contender in shaping western water policy.

In 1954, Dominy played a minor but high-profile role in the battle to authorize the CRSP, one that brought him to the attention of the environmental movement. The CRSP was the first integrated, multipurpose regional reclamation project of the postwar era and reflected the Bureau's practice of packaging financially unsound irrigation projects within a larger river development program. One of the project's proposed features, a dam at Echo Park on the Green River in Colorado, sparked an outcry among conservation groups. The dam and reservoir site were wholly within the remote Dinosaur National Monument, a seldom-visited unit of the National Park Service. The first round of CRSP testimony in 1954 spotlighted the conflicting mandates between Department of the Interior agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation and National Park Service. Overall, however, the department was development-oriented and Interior and administration officials disingenuously argued that the reservoir would not harm Dinosaur's fossil specimens, glossing over the philosophical problem of building a dam within a national monument. Environmentalists from the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, National Parks Association, and other conservation groups argued that a dam at Echo Park violated the spirit of the national parks. Dam opponents recognized that any hope of preserving Dinosaur would come from allies in Congress. They found their champion and a vocal spokesman in John Saylor, who hounded Interior officials mercilessly over the project's details. With open disdain for the federal government's designs on the Colorado River, Saylor attacked witnesses with a fearsome combination of informed scrutiny and petulance.²¹

While few who saw the proposed dam site would have argued that the Echo Park location was *not* aesthetically spectacular, project planners believed they had no other choice. They

²¹ Smith, *Green Republican*, 63-69.

argued a reservoir behind Echo Park Dam would have had the lowest surface evaporation losses of any alternative site. Estimating evaporation rates on such a large reservoir was an inexact science at best. But even by their own standards, the Bureau's math did not add up. As historian Thomas G. Smith wrote in his analysis of the CRSP deliberations, "evaporation loss-figures were hardly inconsequential because even an annual savings of 100,000 acre-feet would be sufficient to furnish all the water needs of a Denver-sized municipality."²²

The Sierra Club's David Brower argued that the Bureau had in fact miscalculated evaporation losses, openly challenging the Bureau's monopoly on technical knowledge. As it turned out, the Bureau had made a simple but embarrassing math error when it presented the various scenarios for reservoir placement within the upper basin. Worse still, department officials were apparently aware of the miscalculation but did not adjust their conclusions. Instead, they attacked Brower's lack of engineering credentials. After congressional hearings, Brower continued to pursue the evaporation problem with the help of Cornell University physics professor Richard Bradley, although their additional findings failed to influence reclamation's boosters. The experience proved to Brower that "the citizen group doesn't have a chance when confronted by a bureau which can assign whole teams to the task of confusing an issue and, when necessary, lying about it."²³

Eventually, the Bureau accidentally conceded its error. In a personal letter to Bradley in April, Dominy proved the environmentalists' argument had been generally correct. By building a "high" dam downstream at Glen Canyon instead of the lower version originally planned, the Bureau could excise Echo Park from the CRSP along with another dam at Split Mountain on the

²² Ibid., 63.

²³ David Brower to Stratton, 7 August 1959, with "Appendix – Minority Report," SC-BANC, box 64, folder 2; and Mark W. T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 192-200.

Green River. The difference in evaporation, when viewed over the entire project, was negligible. But Dominy had not been privy to high-level discussions on the matter and simply signed a letter in the capacity of “acting” commissioner. As often occurs in a bureaucracy as large as the Bureau, Dominy had neither written the letter himself nor worked out the calculations and he was apparently unaware that the letter contradicted official testimony. The letter proved the Bureau was either amateurishly incorrect or lying about earlier estimates. As the letter made its way through the Bureau’s approval chain, Dominy had only been able to contact one of the four drafters before he signed it. Brower pounced on the Bureau’s misstep. Within days *The New York Times* announced the Bureau’s mistake.²⁴ Echo Park proponents were stunned.

The evaporation controversy enhanced Brower’s reputation among environmentalists and sparked his rise within the Sierra Club. But whether this “David-and-Goliath” battle really swayed public opinion, as some historians and environmentalists have claimed, is questionable.²⁵ Controversy and poor public relations were nothing new for the Bureau. Mike Straus, subject of the 1952 *Saturday Evening Post* article titled “Our Most Arrogant Bureaucrat” and the target of a congressional smear campaign, would certainly have agreed.²⁶ In the Echo Park matter, Dominy was merely the Bureau’s messenger but Brower and his allies would long remember Dominy’s apparent duplicity.

Dominy had also learned a valuable lesson. He believed environmental groups had beat the Bureau this time around, but not because of sound arguments about park inviolability or evaporation mathematics. Rather, the Bureau “didn’t put up any fight like I [later] put up for

²⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, “Statement of Floyd E. Dominy,” 28 July 1954, FED-AHC, box 14, folder: Memoranda – 1946-1959; and Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness*, 201-205.

²⁵ Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness*, 191-192.

²⁶ Paul F. Healy, “Our Most Arrogant Bureaucrat,” *The Saturday Evening Post* 224 (April 19, 1952): 46-47 and 145-150.

Glen Canyon and Rainbow Bridge and so on.”²⁷ The lopsided ratio of mail against Echo Park seemed to prove his point. In the future, he would work hard to win the Bureau’s case in the court of public opinion. The evaporation incident, which cost Dominy some political capital within the department, also provided a valuable lesson on organizational loyalty. Under Secretary Ralph Tudor was understandably upset, having been the department’s most prominent spokesman for the CRSP and thus the original source for the erroneous evaporation figures. So was Commissioner Dexheimer, who claimed not to have known about Dominy’s letter until he read about it in the newspaper.²⁸

After two years of acrimonious debate, Congress authorized the CRSP in 1956. Echo Park Dam was not included. The CRSP included four major storage units on the upper Colorado Basin: Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, Curecanti (renamed for Wayne Aspinall in 1980), and Navajo. The legislation also authorized eleven irrigation projects throughout the upper basin. Dominy’s role in the process had been minor but the legislative fight set the stage for much of the controversy that hounded him as he advanced to the commissionership. In particular, construction of the Glen Canyon Dam would be troublesome. It was on this controversy that John Saylor, Dominy’s greatest and most durable congressional antagonist, found his voice as a champion for environmental rights. Congress’ failure to make good on a promise to protect the spectacular sandstone arch at Rainbow Bridge, as Lake Powell backed up behind Glen Canyon Dam, further soured relations between the Bureau and environmental groups. And while Congress had *authorized* the CRSP, Bureau leaders still had to go back before Congress each year to request construction funds.

²⁷ FED-OH, 213.

²⁸ Floyd E. Dominy, “Statement of Floyd E. Dominy,” 28 July 1954; and Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness*, 201-205.

Lake Powell would become Dominy's greatest source of pride and truly legitimize recreation as a feature of multi-purpose water projects. But it was also a lightning rod for criticism. The CRSP spawned much of the intra-regional conflict over water resources that came later. Already, water interests on Colorado's western slope were concerned that a lack of regional unity was responsible for water losses to the lower basin and transbasin diversions across the Rockies to eastern Colorado.²⁹ Despite evidence to the contrary, Echo Park proponents remained convinced the Sierra Club, John Saylor, and other dam opponents were really working for California water interests. Old line conservationists had yet to recognize the environmental movement's growing power and legitimacy.

Although the CRSP hearings were shaping up to be the biggest legislative battle in the Bureau's history in the spring and summer of 1954, Dominy had bigger problems elsewhere. In the end, these incidents were relatively minor. But they were critical steps in Dominy's rise to power. In early 1954, a seemingly trivial decision regarding operating criteria for Montana's Canyon Ferry Reservoir touched off a minor scandal in the Bureau offices. In a memo to Commissioner Dexheimer, Goodrich Lineweaver tried to circumvent reclamation law and allow water users on the small and soon-to-be-completed Crow Creek Unit to receive water without first forming an irrigation district or signing a repayment contract. As Irrigation Division chief, Dominy was upset with Lineweaver's illegal recommendation and his failure to coordinate with the irrigation and legal divisions. After a conference, Dominy and the Bureau's chief counsel argued against delivering water to Crow Creek and urged a stronger stand against similar violations of precedent and policy. Dexheimer agreed in principle. But he went ahead anyway

²⁹ Anton Danni, "Resolution," 3 May 1954, SWCD-CSS, box 9, folder 18; and D. L. Williams to Archie B. Toner 4 May 1954, SWCD-CSS, box 11, folder 17.

with a \$236,000 appropriation request to finish work on the unit in spite of serious drainage concerns and a general “reluctance on the part of some landowners to change their way of life” by entering into a binding federal water contract.³⁰

The Crow Creek situation was of the kind that earned the agency the epithet of empire-builder long before environmentalists picked up the term. The tiny unit was an inconsequential component of the Missouri Basin’s massive Pick-Sloan plan and had simply been pulled along with the tide of legislative inertia during initial authorization. But when Bureau witnesses brought the project before the subcommittee for Interior Department appropriations in early 1954, chairman Ben Jensen, a no-nonsense fiscal conservative, questioned why the Bureau was proceeding on a project it recognized might never be put into operation. Dexheimer lamely argued that the Bureau felt compelled to finish project construction since the previous Congress had appropriated funds. Jensen wondered aloud if Congress had not simply made a mistake that should be corrected. Dexheimer seemed to agree, but noted the Crow Creek Unit was meant to replace the loss of tax-bearing irrigable land inundated behind Canyon Ferry Dam in the early 1950s. Jensen signaled his committee was not interested in making good on the government’s promise to recompense the county for lost land.³¹

Dominy believed the Crow Creek matter had been resolved. But he discovered Lineweaver had convinced Congressman Wesley D’Ewart to try to get language in the Interior appropriations bill allowing contracts with individual Crow Creek irrigators rather than a district

³⁰ Dominy to Dexheimer 12 April 1954, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Dominy Family; and U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Appropriations. *Interior Department Appropriations for 1955*, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1954, 1030.

³¹ Floyd E. Dominy to Wilbur Dexheimer 12 April 1954; and U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Appropriations. *Interior Department Appropriations for 1955*, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1030-31. Later, Dominy reflected with pride: “I was the first person in government to challenge the Congress on an Appropriation Act. I took the position, and I still think I’m right, that an appropriation from Congress is authority to spend, not a requirement to spend. And that the administrator still has the option of spending that money or not, at his discretion.” See FED-OH, MD, 125.

contract as required under reclamation law. Lineweaver was again attempting to circumvent reclamation law, as well as the policy Bureau officials had worked out earlier in the month. When Dominy confronted Lineweaver, he lied. But further investigation showed Lineweaver had not only told D'Ewart the Bureau was willing to accept individual contracts, but had in fact pestered the congressman's office until Lineweaver could make his case. Secretary McKay's office initiated a special investigation and Dexheimer attempted to close ranks within the Bureau. Lineweaver's motivations for his subterfuge are unclear, but he soon found himself pushed out of the Bureau.³² However he did not go far. The Bureau's "most loved man" in the recollection of one of his subordinates, was soon at work as a staff assistant for reclamation on the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee.³³ Although Lineweaver himself had been passed over for the commissionership for political reasons, he likely would have helped block Dominy's further advancement had he remained in the Bureau. Dominy now had one less obstacle to the top.

Many voters who had helped Eisenhower on his way to a landslide in 1952 and gave Republicans control of Congress had simply been registering a protest against the Korean War or other specific issues with the Truman administration. Not surprisingly, Congress changed hands again in the 1954 midterm election as voters now registered dissatisfaction with Republicans.³⁴ The country had dipped into a year-long economic recession beginning in the summer of 1953. Many Americans had also grown tired of Wisconsin Republican Joseph McCarthy's assault on civil liberties and the senator's ham-fisted crusade to root out communist influence in government. As in 1952, natural resource policy was an important if not quite decisive issue in

³² Dominy to Dexheimer 12 April 1954.

³³ Harold E. Aldrich, Oral History Interview, conducted by Brit Allan Storey, National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, MD, 35.

³⁴ James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1968), 437.

the election. The administration's anti-public power stance and "giveaways" in natural resources and public lands were easy targets for Democrats.³⁵

But more important than the change in party control in Congress was the change in committee lineups. Congressional committees are the engine of government policy and the post-election shakeup of committee assignments had a major impact on legislation. For Dominy and the Bureau of Reclamation, appropriations continued were always more of a concern than project authorization. On the surface, the return of a Democratic party with a liberal tradition of public works investment seemed advantageous to the Bureau. Western Republicans supported reclamation almost to a person, but eastern Republicans and conservative southern Democrats pushed back, especially against projects with purely local benefits. The appropriations process was further complicated because fiscal conservatives in Congress had little tolerance for fiscal conservatives in the Budget Bureau. Congressional traditionalists believed their body, and not some executive office, should have the final say on how the nation spent its money.³⁶

The Democratic resurgence in Congress returned Missouri Democrat Clarence Cannon to the chair of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. Cannon decided that the scattered appropriations process for civil works, which dispersed appropriations authority for water and other conservation projects among several subcommittees, was inefficient. The Bureau of Reclamation, which had been reasonably successful when obtaining appropriations as part of the overall interior department process, would now be thrown into a pool with all other public works agencies. The readjustment placed the Bureau in a tough spot. Only two of the ten members of the public works appropriations subcommittee came from reclamation states in the arid West. "So we lost all of our old Western friends," Dominy remembered later. "We got a subcommittee

³⁵ Elmo Richardson, "The Interior Secretary as Conservation Villain: The Notorious Case of Douglas 'Giveaway' McKay," *Pacific Historical Review* 41, no. 3 (Aug 1972): 339-40.

³⁶ John J. Riley, interview by Richard J. Fenno, 8 June 1959.

that's completely Corps of Engineers-oriented from Mississippi, and Louisiana, and Tennessee. And they don't give a shit about Reclamation, they're Corps oriented."³⁷ While the Corps and the Bureau did not compete directly for funding during the appropriations process, few could avoid comparing their starkly different institutional cultures.

Under the new arrangement, appropriations hearings for the 1956 public works budget began in April 1955. In what was arguably the Bureau's most important week of the entire year, Commissioner Dexheimer decided to skip out on much of the proceedings to attend a nuclear test in Nevada. After just two days of testimony he left the proceedings in the hands of Assistant Commissioner Ed Nielsen. Dominy believed Nielsen was wholly unqualified for the job. (The two would become persistent foes in the years to come.)³⁸ Crucially, Dexheimer was missing hearings on the Colorado River Basin, the bread-and-butter of Bureau work, and the Missouri River Basin, which was the primary interest area of the Army Corps and the eastern-biased subcommittee. Dexheimer had also decided, over Dominy's objections, to bring in regional directors from the Bureau's western offices, none of whom had any experience testifying before Congress. Most had spent their entire careers in the radically different work environment of a project office or dam site.³⁹ By contrast, Dominy was already accustomed to the sometimes combative environment of a congressional hearing. He had been a technical expert "backstop" for upper echelon administrators and had represented the Bureau during the amendatory contract hearings. The repayment process had also given him the invaluable opportunity to visit nearly every project in the West. Few, if any, of the Bureau's 13,000 employees shared a similar level

³⁷ FED-OH, 31.

³⁸ At the time, public works were divided into three regions: eastern, central, and western. The Bureau's projects were in the latter two sections.

³⁹ FED-OH, 26-34.

of familiarity with the entirety of the program. Dominy's one major shortcoming, however, was that he had never been responsible for carrying the Bureau's entire weight during a hearing.

On the first morning the Bureau was scheduled to appear before the appropriations committee, Dominy arrived in his office at five to prepare in case he was called as backstop.⁴⁰ He pored over the entire agency budget, including areas outside his responsibility. To his surprise, Nielsen and the other Bureau leaders did not call for his support. In an opening statement, Assistant Secretary Fred Aandahl parried the committee's general questions with milquetoast support for private power, parroting the administration's belief that the federal government should build public works, but only where private interests could not. But things began to fall apart the next day when Nielsen and Stanley Crosthwait, the Bureau's assistant commissioner for administration, were left to explain the minute details of water projects scattered all over the West. (Dominy later recalled Nielsen's foolish half-boast that that he did not "know the names of the projects in this year's budget, and if I hear the name, I won't know what state they're in.") Regional director Rudy Walters, who should have been able to backstop Nielsen, did not hold up under pressure.⁴¹ The hard-nosed eastern congressmen were rarely concerned with the specifics of canals and pump units. Instead, they attacked the Bureau and questioned the need for subsidized water projects at a time of nationwide crop surpluses.

The congressional committee system is such that members can take as much or as little interest in the proceedings as they choose. They are not required to be even passingly familiar with the technical matters at hand. As chairman of the appropriations committee, Clarence Cannon enforced a policy that subcommittee members should not engage with agencies that had significant dealings in the member's own district, a respectable position but one that resulted in a

⁴⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

⁴¹ Ibid., 33.

lot of ignorant committee members. This arrangement placed significant power in the hands of the technocrats who presented their programs. But it also meant that bureaucrats like Dominy were sometimes left in the unenviable position of having to defend the ideological underpinnings of their agency's entire existence.

The first item for discussion that second day was the Colorado-Big Thompson Project. Nielsen stumbled over numbers and the project's complex history. At times he contradicted and talked over Crosthwait.⁴² Their answers were always a phrase too short and failed to anticipate follow-up questions.⁴³ California Republican John Phillips pressed regional director Frank Clinton and Brigadier General William Potter of the Army Corps about the Fort Peck Project, essentially asking Clinton to justify the project's New Deal-era authorization to generate and market power. Phillips grew frustrated with Clinton's inability to supply basic figures on project costs and power revenues. When Clinton spoke of a general need for power in the region, an exasperated Phillips charged "but you do not know how much power you have and you do not know how much power you can sell; all you know is that you need a new powerhouse."⁴⁴ Phillips ended the examination by remarking that Clinton was "a difficult witness to get information out of." The committee dismissed the Bureau.⁴⁵ According to Dominy, they gave the witnesses two days to re-prepare while the Army Corps finished testifying.⁴⁶ Dominy received word from his congressional allies that the Bureau was foundering, but without a formal invitation to testify from either his colleagues or a committee member, he could do little.⁴⁷

⁴² U.S. Congress, Committee on Appropriations. *Public Works Appropriations for 1956*, 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56-65.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶ FED-OH, 33-34. In this interview Dominy stated "two weeks" although the printed transcripts of the hearing indicate two days as a more likely possibility.

⁴⁷ FED-OH, 34.

Although Bureau officials seemed not to know it, the appropriations committee had little tolerance for agency witnesses who were unprepared or appeared evasive. In fact, a single witness's behavior could torpedo an entire agency budget. As the committee's ranking Republican once asked an interviewer, "Would your wife buy groceries from a man she didn't like, even if she could save a little money? No... Well, it's just the same with us. Some administrators come over here and lie to us. We cut them, just to show [them] they can't do that." A witness' only acceptable response when they did not have an accurate answer was "I don't know, but I'll get it for you, tomorrow."⁴⁸ Of course, the difference between an untruthful witness and one who was simply fumbling, frightened, or unprepared was in the eye of the beholder. While it is impossible to know how much Nielsen, Crosthwait, and the others hurt the Bureau's testimony, the committee eventually cut more than five million dollars from the administration's recommendation. This was even at a time when the Budget Bureau's Circular A-47 was coming under increasing congressional scrutiny for curtailing congressional authority to approve and fund water projects.⁴⁹

Two days later, the committee finished its examination of Army Corps work in the Missouri Basin. Near the end of his testimony, General Potter noted his pending transfer. All five committee members lauded the general as "an excellent witness" and a "man who knows his subject perfectly." "We are afraid that the Missouri will shed some salt water," Wisconsin Republic Glenn Davis said, "over no longer being in such tender and enthusiastic hands as it has been for the last several years."⁵⁰ And then, like a parent turning from a favored child to a naughty one, the committee again took up the Bureau's work.

⁴⁸ Ben F. Jensen, John J. Riley, interview by Richard J. Fenno, 28 May 1959.

⁴⁹ "Budget Bureau's Powers Grow," *Washington Star*, 3 May 1955.

⁵⁰ U.S. Congress, House. Committee on Appropriations. *Public Works Appropriations for 1956*, 195.

At that moment, Dominy and Wyoming senator Gale McGee were meeting over lunch to discuss the Bureau's upcoming Senate testimony. McGee wanted to avoid a repeat of the Bureau's poor House showing. After lunch, Dominy discovered Nielsen had been desperately trying to reach him. Sensing impending disaster, Nielsen wanted Dominy as a backstop. Dominy hurried down to the hearing room in the Capitol basement and sat against the wall, believing he had already been approved as a witness. Wyoming's Kendrick Project on the North Platte River was first up for discussion. Kendrick was typical of the Bureau's early, poorly planned efforts. South Carolina's John J. Riley questioned whether it made economic sense to spend over a million dollars more on drainage for such a troubled project. Washington's Don Magnuson questioned why, fifteen years into the project, irrigators had not paid a cent toward construction charges or operation and maintenance costs. Just as Walter began to answer, Nielsen waved him off and called on Dominy.

In Dominy's own retelling of the story, his uninvited appearance was a major breach of congressional protocol, making his bid to salvage the Bureau all the more heroic. The official transcript is less dramatic, with Nielsen simply asking Dominy to take the stand. But in any case, his testimony was in stark contrast to his colleagues. He spoke extemporaneously and without interruption for several minutes, a rarity in a proceeding generally consisting of single-sentence questions and answers. His language was frank and he even countered the Bureau's assertion that the lands were "productive if they can be kept drained and good, sound water practices are used."⁵¹ Dominy agreed with Magnuson that additional drainage work was probably wasteful given the land's poor condition. But while the project might have made little sense in economic terms, it was still a benefit for the region. The solution, Dominy figured, was not to compare Kendrick to more productive projects elsewhere in the West, but rather to make the best of the

⁵¹ Ibid., 198.

realities of Wyoming's economy and a previous generation's bad decisions.⁵² Glenn Davis, a committee newcomer and reclamation novice, noted his "considerable discouragement" but was "glad to know there is some thinking in trying to pull this project out of its present doldrums."⁵³

The next day the testimony moved on to a rogue's gallery of some of reclamation's most questionable and troubled projects across the Great Plains. The committee's tone was still sharp, but the mood in the hearing room was lighter. Dominy continued to supplement the testimony with his remarkable grasp of reclamation law and amendatory repayment history. Committee members, incredulous at the Bureau's past disregard for sound engineering practices, repeatedly demanded Bureau witnesses account for the agency's prewar actions. As always Dominy was politely unapologetic about past failures. While discussing the history of the Bostwick Division of the Missouri River Basin Project and the failure of dry land agriculture in the Plains during the Depression, Dominy returned to the Bureau's chief ideological function: settling the arid West. "We hope through irrigation development that we will help to stabilize the area. The principal economic base of that area is agriculture, and this program, if it can be justified at the costs we have, must be justified on that basis, that it will help stabilize the economy of a major segment of our great country."⁵⁴ In theory, at least, the Bureau was still learning from past mistakes and had much to offer the nation as it continued to settle the West.

The hearings were exceptionally detailed and covered the Bureau's many projects and requests for funds in detail. On occasion, even reclamation's most ardent congressional champions registered their complaints against individual projects or the seeming absurdity of the Bureau's accounting procedures. But these comments were buried in thousands of pages of testimony. Nor did the Bureau's harshest critics have the heart to question reclamation's core

⁵² Ibid., 203-204.

⁵³ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 250.

ideological underpinnings. “We really have to face some day,” John Phillips casually remarked during the 1954 hearings, “the questions we are discussing, not only of economic values but social values, and the subsidy of protecting an area for its people.”⁵⁵ That day would come, of course, but the drive would not come from Congress or the Bureau. As with any congressional hearing, questions and remarks from the committee as often as not reflected short-term political calculations, as members jabbed at the opposing party for the official record. These actions may have played well to voters back home but did little to address serious policy questions.

Hearings continued uneventfully for several more sessions over the next few weeks and Commissioner Dexheimer returned at the beginning of May. Dominy argued later that his performance before the House “made me Commissioner,” although he would spend two more years as the Chief of the Irrigation Division before his promotion to an assistant commissioner position in August 1957.⁵⁶ While Dominy was perhaps better than most at deflecting these criticisms, he faced the same scrutiny up until the day he left the Bureau in 1969. Congressional hearings followed a familiar pattern. Neither the Bureau nor its opponents seemed swayed by factual witness testimony or the occasional display of grandstanding from the committee members.

Rather than saving the Bureau, he had instead proved himself capable when all of his competitors have proved incompetent. Dominy displayed both the overall techno-legal reclamation knowledge that colleagues like Crosthwait and Nielsen lacked, the details that a regional director like Walter should have known intimately, and the poise to answer up for the Bureau’s past wrongdoings without being combative. Dominy’s answers were a blend of facts and ideological rhetoric. He continued to make the case that reclamation was good for the nation

⁵⁵ Ibid., 248.

⁵⁶ FED-OH, 30.

even as it benefitted isolated rural economies. Whether projects like Kendrick or the Bostwick Division should have received any more money was debatable even then. But despite the committee members' pointed criticisms and questions, Dominy had managed to redeem both the specific projects in question and the Bureau's reputation. He did not single-handedly carry the Bureau's testimony from that day forward, as he later claimed. However, he did right the ship at a critical moment and prevented a complete disaster.

Gale McGee, who had earlier been concerned the Bureau would fail before the Senate appropriations committee, need not have feared. There, the process was in the hands of Arizona Democrat Carl Hayden, an unabashed promoter of reclamation and soon to be one of Dominy's most important congressional allies. Senators, fewer in number than their House colleagues, generally have more committee assignments, meaning that they are both less time-involved and less knowledgeable of the details of their committees. A single senator has the possibility then of effectively being a one-person committee, with the other members merely adjuncts. The Bureau's testimony before Chairman Hayden had the air of a casual conversation among confederates. At times, the seventy-seven-year-old senator practically spoon-fed answers to the witnesses. Hayden's committee dispensed with project details after a few perfunctory questions on the status of each. Dominy had no trouble answering the committee's questions and had little reason to defend the cause of reclamation.⁵⁷

By the latter half of the 1950s, Floyd Dominy had established a reputation as a no-nonsense troubleshooter in one of the American West's most important federal agencies. He was still a champion for small farmers but continued to argue before Congress that acreage limits

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations. *Public Works Appropriations, 1956, 1955*, 84th Cong., 1st sess., passim.

were slowly squeezing farmers off the land. In the West, he continued to cultivate a network of political contacts that reached all the way back to his county agent days. As head of the Bureau's irrigation division, he was often the single link between western irrigators and the congressional committees that had so much influence on their lives. In Washington, congressional leaders increasingly looked to him for straight answers. Largely due to his efforts, all the Bureau's failed projects had been put into paying status, closing a significant chapter in Reclamation history. Yet even as the Bureau was about to embark on the massive dam building campaign with the Colorado River Storage Project, one major loose end remained: the Pacific Northwest's massive Columbia Basin Project. Here on the Bureau's last major standalone project, farmers had come to see acreage limitation laws as both irrelevant and indefensible in a modern consumer economy. The conflict that ensued nearly cost Dominy his career.

Six: The Messiah of Capitol Hill

The Columbia River Basin is a land of paradoxes. East of the Cascade Mountains, the river flows through some of the nation's driest country. But the Columbia annually discharges more than ten times the volume of the Colorado River. For decades, regional boosters in Washington State had envisioned various schemes to lift irrigation water hundreds of feet up onto the arid plains and harness the river's potential energy for industry. But the federal government showed little interest in the region until the 1930s. The Columbia Basin Project was the best-planned in the Bureau of Reclamation's history and the last of the agency's projects to be designed with a nineteenth-century mindset. Superficially, it met every test of the 1902 law and should have, as the metaphor often went, bloomed the desert as a rose. Here Thomas Jefferson's yeomen were to make their last stand against modernization and corporate farming. Yet the project failed to meet the visions of its creators and instead illuminated many of the contradictions between reclamation ideology and American society in the 1950s.

Disgruntled farmers on the Columbia Basin Project would eventually single out Floyd Dominy as the source of their problems. For his troubles he would gain powerful enemies in Congress. But he persevered, largely because he also gained equally powerful benefactors. Difficult work lay ahead for Dominy and his fellows in the Bureau. The moral victory that had come with passage of the Colorado River Storage Project gave way to the less glamorous but no less difficult job of squeezing funds from a reluctant Congress. Throughout the lean years of the late-1950s, Dominy made himself indispensable to both his superiors and western politicians as he tirelessly preached the Gospel of Reclamation. By 1959 his hard work had catapulted him to the top of the Bureau's power structure, no small feat for an economist in an agency filled with thousands of engineers.

As planned, the million-acre Columbia Basin Project was the ultimate expression of New Deal liberalism. Even President Franklin Roosevelt took a personal interest in the project. He envisioned 100,000 families living in the basin, twenty percent of whom would be engaged in non-farm activities. The project would only be open to the most destitute people then “adrift” in the country. “In other words,” he wrote to Interior Secretary Harold Ickes in 1939, “I want to give first chance to the ‘Grapes of Wrath’ families of this nation.” In truth, Roosevelt was not even looking for farmers. He knew that many of the new migrants would prove “shiftless” and so training and assistance from the government would be needed. Industry could be localized, making the basin self-sufficient and diverse crop patterns would limit reliance on imports. The president even suggested residents could manufacture their own shoes. Roosevelt’s eye for the minutiae (“certain woolen goods can be manufactured and it might be possible to work out small glass and crockery factories”) overlooked the enormous problems of planning a desert community of half a million people.¹

Like Roosevelt, many New Deal-era reclamation planners looked back to the nineteenth century for guidance even as their colleagues elsewhere in the federal government were planning for a modern consumer economy. While agricultural policies in the South and elsewhere favored landlords at the expense of tenants, the Columbia Basin was designed to avoid tenancy altogether. Project planners maintained the intent behind the 160-acre ideology while adjusting farm sizes to actual conditions, an unprecedented practice. The first soil surveys of the basin in the 1940s far outshone the Bureau’s past weak efforts. But ever jealous of its turf, the Bureau chose not to coordinate with the Department of Agriculture. In the Columbia Basin, with fertile

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt to Harold Ickes, in *Franklin D. Roosevelt & Conservation, 1911-1945*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: General Services Administration, 1957), 406-407.

soils and favorable growing conditions, a farm or “unit” with good Class I soils averaged forty-five to sixty-five acres, although two neighboring farms could vary in size by dozens of acres. At the time, planners recognized that mechanization would affect economic viability, but a second study in 1948 allowed only marginal upward revisions in unit sizes.² According to the authorizing legislation, farms were to be only large enough to support “an average-sized family at a suitable living level.”³ Unlike most project areas, Bureau water delivery was tied to units, not acreage, and a farmer could receive water on just one unit even if it was well under the traditional 160-acre size. This policy and the law’s ambiguous references to “average” families and “suitable” living standards sowed the seeds for future conflict.

By the end of World War II, the return of better environmental conditions in the Great Plains region and the general rise in national prosperity meant the project was no longer needed for resettling destitute refugees. Not to let their efforts go to waste, the Bureau of Reclamation now hoped veterans could be enticed to settle. Superficially, this new attempt at homesteading stood to be more equitable and less haphazard than the irrational pattern of the nineteenth century. But the new homesteading program was but a bare shadow of its nineteenth-century predecessors. The Bureau received more than 150,000 applications for less than 3,500 homesteads. The Bureau’s effort could be dismissed as irrelevant. But as Brian Cannon showed in his comprehensive study of the veteran resettlement effort, “the unfolding of the quintessential element of the Old West—homesteading—within an urbanizing, modern West created exceptionally vivid contrast.”⁴ The West, in short, was moving in two directions at once.

² U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, “Farm Units—Columbia Basin Project: Standards, Size and Comparison,” 31 December 1956, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: Professional File, 1956-1957 Columbia Basin Hearings.

³ U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, “Farm Units,” 31 December 1956.

⁴ Brian Q. Cannon, *Reopening the Frontier: Homesteading in the Modern West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 4.

Even with a population of able-bodied, motivated settlers, the Columbia Basin Project had many obstacles to overcome. The Department of the Interior and Congress had created legislation with acreage restrictions even more onerous than in the 1902 Reclamation Act. A Columbia Basin irrigator could not legally expand beyond his original unit. Yet, selection criteria for a new homestead practically begged for those who had already attained a certain degree of stability and affluence. To be eligible for a farm, a land lottery applicant had to show \$7,500 in cash assets, a large sum but only a fraction of the total capital required. To become fully established, planners estimated an additional \$20,000 was necessary.⁵ Applicants also needed to demonstrate evidence of past of farming experience. These sensible requirements reflected the 1924 Fact Finder's Commission observation that early project settlers often had little farming experience or money. But the project's small unit sizes on farms made irrigators unattractive clients at the bank.⁶ And, since the 1920s, farm work invariably meant mechanized operations. What the Bureau was asking for, then, was a modern, mechanized, capital-intensive business model grafted onto a plot most nineteenth-century farmers would have found small. Even under optimal conditions, Columbia Basin irrigators could not compete with farmers elsewhere.

And conditions in the region were far from optimal. Soil surveys had proven to be woefully inadequate. Some irrigators found themselves with considerably less good land than they had hoped for. Farmers complained they were competing with nearby projects in Oregon and Idaho, where most farms had larger parcels in conformance with the 1902 law.⁷ The basin also lacked food processing plants. Refrigerated shipping to urban centers was expensive and

⁵ Paul C. Pitzer, *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994), 280.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, "Farm Units," 31 December 1956.

⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Report of Department of the Interior Hearing on the Land Limitation Provision of the Columbia Basin Project Act," 3 January 1957, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1956-1957 Columbia Basin Hearings.

unreliable. Farmers on the new irrigation project were also required to pay up front for annual operation and maintenance costs, plus on-delivery for extra water services during the growing season. Private loan payments for equipment and improvements were due right away. To meet their debts, farmers planted cash crops rather than develop stable crop rotations. Fertilizer was necessary to compensate for the lack of humus in the soil, but in the remote Pacific Northwest it was double the national price. Basin farmers believed they had been left behind by the rising tide of American affluence. As Assistant Secretary Fred Aandahl pointed out, economic conditions had changed since the Depression and most farmers were no longer content just to maintain subsistence on a small plot.⁸ Although one could be critical of the irrigators' apparent grasping materialism, they were just as concerned with health care, educational opportunities for their children, and retirement security.

Many farmers leased land to make ends meet, often working 160 acres or more. In 1955, the president of the Quincy-Columbia Irrigation Board found that two-thirds of the project's irrigated units were lessee-operated.⁹ Technically, the lessees were tenant farmers. But most owned a full unit and house elsewhere in the community. Eighty-acre units that had seemed more than enough for one family to handle during a new farm's first labor-intensive years proved to be undersized once payments came due. More free time simply allowed farmers to get jobs in town. By removing the ability to buy more land nearby, federal planners ensured that irrigators had no way to develop an "unearned" increment on their investment. This failed to acknowledge that small-scale land speculation, as Lafayette Dominy had practiced in Nebraska, gave irrigators a

⁸ Fred G. Aandahl to Fred Seaton, 16 January 1957, FAS-DDE, Subject series: Interior Department, Reclamation subseries, box 1, folder: Columbia Basin.

⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Report of Department of the Interior Hearing on the Land Limitation Provision of the Columbia Basin Project Act," 5 January 1957, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1956-1957 Columbia Basin Hearings, 2.

financial cushion and was vital to preserving farm communities.¹⁰ The unit and block system did not prevent tenancy, but actually accelerated the practice. It allowed money to flow to absentee owners in Portland, Seattle, and Spokane, many of whom were not greedy land speculators but simply failed farmers who had drifted on to better prospects. “It is sound economic thinking,” one irrigator told Interior officials, “that it is better to have one successful full time farmer than two part time farmers making a bare existence.”¹¹ Another complained that he needed own one unit and lease three others just to survive. Of his lease fees, more than half went to out-of-state owners.¹² Allowing Columbia Basin farmers to purchase more than one unit would have changed farming operations little; the money, however, would have stayed in the basin.

Inflation also plagued farmers. Failed irrigators, including a significant number of veterans, generally attributed their woes to financing problems. The Farmers Home Administration (FHA), which administered much of the borrowing for basin farmers, determined that two-thirds of rejections were for either lack of assets or lack of farming experience.¹³ Lack of experience contributed to nearly a quarter of FHA loan rejections. Anecdotal evidence—which was at least as powerful as actual facts in shaping irrigators’ understanding of community problems—suggested the project’s strict acreage limitations discouraged many potential well-qualified applicants.¹⁴ The impact of this self-selection of potential farmers cannot be

¹⁰ Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 56.

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report...Columbia Basin Project Act,” 3 January 1957.

¹² U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report of Department of the Interior Hearing on the Land Limitation Provision of the Columbia Basin Project Act,” 4 January 1957, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1956-1957 Columbia Basin Hearings.

¹³ U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, “Farm Units,” 31 December 1956.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report...Columbia Basin Project Act,” 3 January 1957.; U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report...Columbia Basin Project Act,” 4 January 1957; and U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report...Columbia Basin Project Act,” 5 January 1957.

discounted. Most project settlers were actually transplants from other western irrigation projects, not the war-weary veterans the Bureau had hoped to attract.¹⁵

The land classification surveys that determined initial block and unit sizes often turned out to be incorrect, creating considerable hardship for those on smaller units. As Donald Pisani has noted about earlier western irrigation projects, the Bureau had a tendency to create a class system within projects as new, often less arable land was added to projects at a higher cost than the original settlement program.¹⁶ A similar system also developed in the Columbia Basin since some units turned out to be less productive than the government surveys indicated. Surveying the million-plus acres of the project with complete accuracy would have been time consuming and expensive, if not impossible (although coordinating with the USDA would certainly have helped.) And while the Bureau did allow some farmers on the poorest land to exchange their parcels or adjust boundaries slightly, too many farmers had already settled on the land to force wholesale revisions.

Most farmers wanted to retain the unit and block system since roads and irrigation works were already laid out. What they demanded was to work multiple units up to 160 acres. Competing with mechanized farmers nationwide, basin irrigators argued the small unit sizes prevented an economy of scale. Most banks were simply unwilling to make loans to small-scale operators. Crop rotation regimes required that land occasionally be laid up in low-value cover crops. This required additional planting and harvesting equipment.¹⁷ A farm of 160 or 320 acres required the same level of mechanization as an 80 acre spread, but boosted the material wealth of the farm family enormously. Beyond the cost of farm equipment, prices for housing, health care, appliances, and most material goods were increasing in the inflationary period after World War

¹⁵ Cannon, *Reopening the Frontier*, passim.

¹⁶ Pisani, *Water and American Government*, 278

¹⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Report...Columbia Basin Project Act," 4 January 1957.

II. One cooperative distributor estimated that eighty percent of the households in his area had one or more family members working off the farm to supplement household income.¹⁸ Just a few years after the initial heady celebrations at the project's start, the Columbia Basin looked little different from other failed or failing projects throughout the West.

In the summer of 1956, the Senate's committee on interior and insular affairs considered a revision to the Columbia Basin Project Act. Their bill would have brought the basin in line with most other federal irrigation projects in the West. Every member of a family unit, including minor children, would have been allowed to hold title to 160 acres. Interior officials refused to endorse the bill. They argued that other Northwest irrigation projects had effective irrigable acreage less than the seventy-six acres that made up the average Columbia Basin unit. Even more importantly, the project was more than sixty percent completed and considerable effort would be required to convert unit-based farms into acre-based farms.¹⁹ Officials cited Congress' original intent in the project's enabling legislation which, as noted before, called for farms capable of providing average families with suitable living standards. But the report made one telling recommendation. The department did not want to adjust individual projects piecemeal but rather wanted to study the effects of a west-wide change in reclamation law's acreage restrictions.²⁰

Responding to pressure from the basin's irrigation districts and the state's Columbia Basin Commission, assistant secretary Fred Aandahl held three public hearings in the region in January 1957. Dominy attended as chief of the Bureau's irrigation division. The Columbia Basin meetings were similar to the hardship boards he had attended in Campbell County. But unlike many of Dominy's Depression-era clients who had only a vague notion of agronomic principles,

¹⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Report...Columbia Basin Project Act," 3 January 1957.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Department Recommends Against Change in Columbia Basin Project Excess Lands Law," 5 July 1956, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1956-1959 Columbia Basin Hearings.

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Department Recommends Against Change in Columbia Basin Project Excess Lands Law," 5 July 1956, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1956-1959 Columbia Basin Hearings.

Columbia Basin farmers were painfully aware of their financial liabilities. One noted that although he had harvested a good crop the previous year, only the depreciation on his farm equipment allowed the family to get by. “At that rate, in a few years we wouldn’t have anything left for a living,” he told the board.²¹ With few exceptions, irrigators argued for an increase in acreage, either through multiple unit ownership or by simply allowing the Basin to conform to general reclamation law. At this late stage, no one on either side of the table questioned whether the project should have been scrapped outright. Millions of dollars had already been spent to place thousands of farmers and their families on a questionable venture. Their poignant testimony belies the commonly accepted notion, both among their conservative contemporaries and modern critics, that the farmers were receiving handouts. The federal government did give generous subsidies but it could also be deaf when it came to addressing ongoing problems.

Some at the meetings argued that basic laws of economics would ensure fairness, since each individual farmer would naturally choose the size parcel that matched ability, ambition, and ecological conditions. (They did not acknowledge, however, that those same economic laws might also apply to corporations, which could afford to farm millions of acres with machinery and an endless supply of cheap labor.) The wife of one farmer explained to the board her definitions of “small farms” and “family farms,” debunking romantic perceptions of self-sufficient farm living. In her opinion, a family farm should be large enough to provide full employment for the primary operator each year and “provide income-producing work for other available members of the family.” She argued that “it is a family operation not because it is a specific number of acres, but because the family manages, supervises, and sets the pace, and is enabled thereby to earn a sufficient living.”²² Although this reasoning also justified “family-

²¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report...Columbia Basin Project Act,” 4 January 1957.

²² Ibid.

owned” agribusiness giants in California and elsewhere, her sentiment was clearly toward maintaining non-corporate farming methods.

Shortly after the Basin meetings, the Department of the Interior reversed the position, reaffirmed just months before, that farm sizes in the basin were adequate and that the original project act should be upheld.²³ Explaining the situation to Montana senator James Murray, Assistant Secretary Aandahl noted that his department had “conscientiously carried out the basic directives established by the [Columbia Basin] Project Act.” The fault lay with the act’s ownership limits, which prevented farmers from making an adequate living. He also cited farm financing as a problem. In most cases, farmers were required to begin immediate repayment regardless of their income. Beyond the problems already evident, drainage issues would soon be a primary concern. Planners in 1945 estimated drainage works would cost eight million dollars. A decade later, the Bureau had revised that figure upward to forty million. Although the department believed basin farmers could pay the new charges, Aandahl warned Murray the increased drainage costs would be a factor in adjusting ownership limits. In the end, Aandahl recommended the Senate revise the project act.²⁴

Facing the same cost-price squeeze as their counterparts across the country, Columbia Basin farmers had to find new ways to supplement household income. Some veterans on reclamation’s postwar homesteading projects used G.I. Bill funds earmarked for vocational training.²⁵ But the G.I. Bill did not give prospective farmers the same benefits it gave to small business owners. With the G.I. Bill, a veteran wanting to start a small business could apply for a

²³ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Department Recommends Against Change...,” 5 July 1956.

²⁴ Fred G. Aandahl to James E. Murray, 28 January 1957, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: Professional File, 1956-1957 Columbia Basin Hearings

²⁵ Cannon, *Reopening the Frontier*, 75.

\$2,000 dollar loan from the federal government and expect additional state loans.²⁶ Veterans who wanted a farm, however, were not eligible for financial assistance from the G.I. Bill.

Veterans or not, more and more struggling farm families looked to outside employment. In the late 1950s, perhaps twenty percent of married women on Columbia Basin farms worked outside the home.²⁷ This figure was somewhat below the national average, but even this relatively small percentage challenged the sacred myth of the sturdy, independent yeoman.²⁸ As Bill Palmer's wartime studies on farm households showed, wives and older children were expected to contribute to the "farm food privilege," which justified lower net incomes for farm families.²⁹ Whatever this meant for the role of women and the future of family relations in the United States, it is unlikely Thomas Jefferson ever envisioned a nation of family farms propped up with wage labor.

In September, Congress amended the law to allow Columbia Basin Project farmers to own multiple units up to 160 acres, thus bringing the basin into line with the 1902 Reclamation Act. In truth, it might well have been impossible to legislate the size of land parcels. The trick was allowing farmers land and water enough to maintain a standard of living comparable to other Americans—not just in material goods but in access to health care, education, and recreation—while preventing corporate farming. This was, and still is, an ever-moving target. Climate, global commodity markets, and technology changed much more quickly than the slow gears of Congress could accommodate.

The Bureau's lackadaisical approach to the first obvious warning sign of impending project failure—the rise of tenancy—reflected the head-in-the-sand mentality of Mike Straus's

²⁶ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 142.

²⁷ Cannon, *Reopening the Frontier*, 123.

²⁸ "Facts About Families," *Social Security Bulletin* (May 1959): 13-14.

²⁹ William Palmer to E.D. Eaton, 12 April 1945, WIP-USU, box 5, folder 10.

“technical compliance” policy in California’s Central Valley. Finding lasting solutions would have required serious thought in Congress and executive department bureaucracies, recognizing that two sacred fundamental American principles—the free market and the Jeffersonian ideal—were probably irreconcilable. But by looking backward to the nineteenth century rather than providing mechanisms for rapid adjustment, the government practically ensured the project would fail before a single drop of water made the tortuous journey from river to field. For the time being though, relations between the Bureau and basin irrigators were at least civil. But this would change in rapid order. By the end of the decade the problem of drainage, left unaddressed during the legislative process, became a flashpoint between basin farmers and the Bureau’s new commissioner.

By mid-1957 the Bureau of Reclamation had become largely secure from challenges to its autonomy from other federal agencies, the White House, and Congress. A congressman could complain, as Oregon’s Charles Porter did, that the Bureau was “uncooperative,” especially when compared to the Army Corps. The Corps, Porter’s office claimed, was forthright not only in telling individual congressmen how much they were getting each year for a project, but also how much they *should* be getting. But such criticism had little effect. Under Eisenhower, the Bureau could alternately cite the administration’s fiscal conservatism as an excuse for not supporting a project fully or as a rallying cry for more support. Commissioner Wilbur Dexheimer was quietly holding the line against the Bureau’s foes even if he was not expanding the agency’s authority. As one historian of the Bureau has observed, “many Reclamationists considered Dexheimer’s

principled firmness in quietly refusing to implement some so-called “partnership” policies as the salvation of the Bureau in a period of anti-Reclamation pressure.”³⁰

In May 1956 former Nebraska senator Fred Seaton replaced Douglas McKay as Interior Secretary. Despite some positive actions in environmental protection, especially in the national parks, “Giveaway” McKay never broke free of the perception that he was merely a former car salesman beholden to special interests. Seaton publically endorsed Eisenhower’s brand of fiscal conservatism but worked aggressively to expand Interior’s budget. For the Bureau of Reclamation this meant more than just maintaining ongoing construction. While the agency still received hundreds of millions of dollars each year, reclamation boosters decried the lack of “new starts.” Groundbreaking and dam dedication ceremonies had a grandeur all out of proportion to their significance but signaled “progress” in a way that mundane but vital water and power distribution facilities did not. The Bureau of the Budget, sometimes reflecting the wishes of the president and sometimes working under its own logic, also impacted annual budgets.

The Colorado River Storage Project deliberations showed that the Bureau had completed its reinvention from a local community builder to an agency of large-scale western development. The CRSP had generally received bipartisan support in Congress. Opposition came from predictable quarters: conservative southern Democrats loyal to the Army Corps and northeastern Republicans.³¹ Still, despite challenges from environmentalists and private power interests, Congress authorized the CRSP project largely in accord with the Bureau’s original plans. Now the Bureau now had to work with congressional appropriations committees to receive annual funding to keep the project on track. It was here, during the appropriations process and not in the

³⁰ Michael C. Robinson, *Water for the West: The Bureau of Reclamation 1902-1977* (Chicago: Public Works Historical Society, 1979), 80.

³¹ No author, “Breakdown of votes on Upper Colorado River Storage Project Legislation,” 3 March 1956, HM-CSS, box 12.

friendlier confines of the Interior committees, that Dominy first gained notoriety in 1955 and it was here that he would continue to distinguish himself as the Bureau's rising star.

Relations between the Bureau and its critics on the House appropriations committee were still strained. Ed Nielsen had done little to improve his stock before Congress. Dominy, on the other hand, was building a good reputation, even among members from non-reclamation states. Michigan Democrat Louis Rabaut spread the word about the Bureau's troubles before the appropriations committee, suggesting that perhaps "Dominy was the guy who should be doing these things." Eventually Secretary Seaton brought Dominy in to discuss the Bureau's poor performance on the Hill. Although Dominy and Seaton both hailed from Hastings, Nebraska, they were unknown to one another. Dominy feigned outrage that the secretary would think to ask a mere division chief to air the Bureau's dirty laundry. But when Seaton suggested that Dominy might just be the best person for the job, he was quick to seize as much control as he could. His demands at the time are instructive as to how one person can shape a large bureau's agenda. In addition to the formal title of assistant commissioner, Dominy wanted full control of any proposals or budgetary recommendations before they went to Congress. From then on, every irrigation project from conception to final transfer to water users would literally and figuratively carry Dominy's signature. Not coincidentally, seizing control of the legislative process would displace Ed Nielsen, a man Dominy believed to be wholly incompetent and a threat to both his own career prospects and the Bureau's future.³²

At Seaton's order, Dexheimer reluctantly appointed Dominy to be the Bureau's Special Assistant Commissioner for legislative liaison in August 1957. Dominy also retained nominal control of the Irrigation Division, although Bill Palmer moved up to direct the division's routine activities. Dexheimer's protégé Nielsen would remain, but Dominy's promotion circumscribed

³² FED-OH, 41-44.

much of Nielsen's authority. Significantly, Dominy replaced Nielsen as the Bureau's "legislative expediter," fueling a personality conflict that grew increasingly tense once Dominy became commissioner. Dexheimer also ordered that all congressional correspondence be routed through Dominy's office. Dominy became the single source of Bureau communication for congressional staffs, feeding them information and providing quasi-official policy pronouncements.

For an agency where power was often measured by the web of networks one developed between executive branch offices like the Bureau of the Budget and congressional staffs, this was an extraordinary transfer of bureaucratic power to an underling.³³ Two months later, Dexheimer added the Planning Division to Dominy's control.³⁴ Goodrich Lineweaver, then on the staff of the Senate's Interior committee, wrote Fred Seaton to congratulate the secretary on Dominy's promotion. In one last dig at McKay (and perhaps at Dominy too), Lineweaver applauded Seaton's willingness to diversify the Bureau's upper echelon with non-engineers. Lineweaver, whose own career at the Bureau probably suffered because of Dominy, took credit for bringing Dominy into the Bureau. "He will give the job the best that is in him, I am sure," Lineweaver wrote, "as he knows the game inside and outside of the Bureau."³⁵

Eisenhower's apparent indifference toward western water development caused intense political dissatisfaction throughout the region. This was despite the fact that between 1954 and 1958 the Bureau received steadily increasing appropriations, accounting for roughly a third of the entire Interior Department budget in any given year. In these years Congress had often *cut* from the president's budget recommendations. But some western politicians believed, without

³³ Wilbur Dexheimer, "Appointment of Mr. Dominy as Assistant Commissioner for Legislative Action," 15 August 1957, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Asst Commr 8/15/57.

³⁴ Wilbur Dexheimer, "Commissioner's Memorandum No. 138," FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Asst Commr 8/15/57.

³⁵ Goodrich Lineweaver to Fred A. Seaton, 16 August 1957, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: Correspondence Congratulatory – Commissioner.

apparent justification, that the Bureau was refusing to build even large main stem dams like those authorized under the CRSP until repayment contracts had been signed with all associated water users. Interior officials denied this, arguing that the administration's policy was to ensure that projects "proceed as expeditiously as possible." Repayment contracts only applied to individual irrigation districts, not the large main-stem dams. Still, reclamation supporters and the administration seemed to differ on the meaning of both "expeditious" and what was "possible." The apparently slow rate of new construction on large dams and the no-new-starts policy caused smoldering resentment among western congressional delegations.³⁶ Natural resources, they argued, were critical to national security. A year before the Soviets launched the Sputnik satellite, Montana senator James Murray, chairman of the Senate's Interior Committee, linked the administration's poor progress on satellite and missile development to its equally poor record on dam building. "Resource and scientific development go hand in hand," he told a reporter. "The administration has mishandled and throttled both."³⁷

With budget deliberations for the following fiscal year underway in the summer of 1957, the Bureau hoped for several new project starts in addition to generous continuing appropriations for the CRSP. With construction already underway on the three main-stem dams at Flaming Gorge, Glen Canyon, and Navajo, the Bureau wanted to begin construction on three of the CRSP's subsidiary irrigation units.³⁸ But Eisenhower had already voiced his concern that increased federal spending would hurt the national economy, arguing that "with business activity at a new high, with competing demands for labor, equipment, and money the government should

³⁶ Clair Engle to Fred A. Seaton 7 June 1956, CE-CSUC, box 166, folder 4; and Fred G. Aandahl to Clair Engle, 19 July 1956, CE-CSUC, box 166, folder 4.

³⁷ Associated Press, undated news telegrams, FAS-DDE, subject series, box 6, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (6).

³⁸ Sidney D. Larson to Administrative Assistant Secretary, 9 October 1956, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 6, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (6); and Wilbur Dexheimer to Fred A. Seaton, 21 August 1956, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 6, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (6).

not add to the inflationary pressures.”³⁹ Interior officials were going to have to make their case with the Bureau of the Budget, which translated the president’s economic vision into dollars and cents. Budget cut \$52 million from the total Interior appropriation. They had also cut nearly \$100 million from the Army Corps and eliminated any new starts for the following year. Both Eisenhower and Budget officials were concerned that adding new starts with so much outstanding old work would hinder budget flexibility and unnecessarily commit future funds. This would have had the effect of doubling of the Bureau of Reclamation’s budget over a three-year span.⁴⁰

Ongoing work suffered too. Congress met most of the administration’s budget requests for Bureau work, but in the end the budget for fiscal year 1958 was glaringly short for two projects: the Trinity River Division in California’s Central Valley and the CRSP’s Glen Canyon Dam. Despite the administration’s promise for “expeditious” pursuit of large structures, Commissioner Dexheimer estimated both projects needed a combined supplemental appropriation of twenty-six million dollars. Otherwise, payments to contractors would be exhausted in a few months.⁴¹ In September, the Budget Bureau denied Reclamation’s request for supplemental funding. The Bureau scrambled to delay non-critical work and shuffle construction schedules. They also began to reprogram funds, such as money appropriated for the CRSP’s Navajo Dam on the San Juan River in New Mexico, since its dependent irrigation projects had yet to be authorized.⁴² This was a risky strategy that would anger some members of Congress.

³⁹ Percival F. Brundage to Fred A. Seaton, 6 December 1956, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 6, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (5).

⁴⁰ Percival F. Brundage to Governor Adams 21 March 1957, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 6, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (6).

⁴¹ Wilbur Dexheimer to Fred A. Seaton, 28 August 1957, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 6, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (6).

⁴² U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Second Supplemental Appropriation Bill, 1958* 85th Cong., 2nd sess., 573-575.

In early February, Dominy and Dexheimer appeared before the House subcommittee on public works appropriations to argue for a supplemental appropriation of ten million dollars each for Glen Canyon and Trinity. While some of the Bureau's financial concerns were due to budget shortfalls, they had also contributed to their own woes. Coordinating a multi-year construction project with the eighteen-month-long annual budget cycle was exceedingly difficult. Weather, material shortages, labor problems, and countless unforeseen events all added to the uncertainty. When the Bureau was attempting to plan its 1958 budget, it had awarded new contracts beyond budgetary allowances. Depending on one's perspective, this was a potential violation of the federal anti-deficiency act. (Accusations of anti-deficiency violations had been the catalyst for the attack on Michael Straus and Richard Boke in 1947 after Boke halted work on the Central Valley Project.) Dominy explained to chairman Clarence Cannon that the Bureau had corrected this error by shifting funds from other projects that had encountered "slippage" in work progress.

Like most of his colleagues, Cannon had no tolerance for executive department bureaucrats who treated annual appropriations as anything less than a magnanimous gift. Shifting funds around without Congress' blessing was tantamount to stealing and perhaps even worse than admitting an intentional anti-deficiency violation. Congress was eager to preserve its prerogative over appropriations and agencies were not to interpret their annual allowance as a petty cash fund to be spent at will. Cannon reprimanded Dominy: "It seems to me it is the part of the Department to accept the program and the appropriations as outlined by Congress rather than attempt to get around it and to adopt some other means to supplement it in some way."⁴³ Part of the game with Congress was getting as much money as possible. But even more importantly, an agency had to convert as much of its appropriation as possible to actual program use—from

⁴³ Ibid., 559-564.

dollars to dams in the Bureau's case—while maintaining the fiction that Congress had absolute and ultimate control over how funds were spent within the agency's overall budget ceiling.

During the hearings Dominy answered much of the technical testimony but Cannon pinned responsibility for the Bureau's budgetary problems on Dexheimer. The Republican committee members pounced on troubles at Glen Canyon Dam. Why, one asked, had the Bureau build a vista point for a dam that had yet to be built? Minnesotan Carl Andersen singled out a request for \$1.35 million for permanent worker housing. He recalled construction projects in his youth where the workers lived in tarpaper shacks and believed modern dam builders could do the same. New Yorker John Taber accused Dexheimer of purposefully spending money on frivolous contracts, knowing all along that he would return for a ten million dollar bailout to keep the critical construction work going.⁴⁴ The Bureau did find one sympathetic voice on the committee, however. Ohio Democrat Michael J. Kirwan facetiously "congratulated" the Bureau for its initial appropriation request of thirty-seven million dollars. Had the Bureau received that money, he claimed, a supplemental appropriations would be unnecessary. Instead, Eisenhower's hatchet men in the Bureau of the Budget were to blame. The folks in the Bureau of the Budget had never seen the dam site, Kirwan argued. "I am not blaming you people," he told Dexheimer. "You knew how much it was going to take you to get you through the year."⁴⁵ The Bureau could not be faulted for the administration's arbitrary and nonsensical budgetary rules.

Even as the Bureau owned up to its budgetary problems from fiscal year 1958, prospects for 1959 looked bleak. The major dams at Glen Canyon and Flaming Gorge would consume nearly fifteen percent of Reclamation's total appropriations. Construction on Navajo Dam was

⁴⁴ Ibid., 565-568.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 573-575.

again postponed and the president's meager budget proposals ruled out new starts elsewhere.⁴⁶ By late 1957 the American economy had slipped into its worst economic crisis since the 1930s. The Republican leadership, which took a long-term structural view of the economy that discounted the severity of short-term downturns, did little to arrest the decline despite Democratic pleas for greater deficit spending.⁴⁷ Some western Republican politicians broke ranks to promote reclamation construction as a cure for the nation's financial troubles. Utah senator Arthur V. Watkins, for instance, made a personal appeal to the president to reconsider the no-new-starts policy. Not coincidentally, he called for two major starts in Utah at Vernal and Paonia as well as some forty smaller projects under the 1956 Reclamation Small Projects Act. But Eisenhower held firm and argued against new starts in fiscal 1959, believing surveying and planning work for new projects would do little to affect the unemployment rate.⁴⁸ Rejecting a New Deal-style public works program, Eisenhower recommended only an additional forty-five million dollars for ongoing reclamation work in the next fiscal year's budget.⁴⁹

Predictably, Dominy's promotion to special assistant commissioner caused trouble in the Bureau's offices. Tensions flared in early 1958 when Dexheimer left Washington for a month, leaving Nielsen as acting commissioner. This was a routine matter except that, under Seaton's order, Nielsen could not sign official mail. Letter drafts flew around the Bureau headquarters, with Dominy requesting changes and Nielsen telling Dominy to rewrite the letters himself. Rather than approach Seaton for support, Dominy let the matter fester until Dexheimer's return. According to Dominy, he exploded at the commissioner and gave him an ultimatum: Dexheimer

⁴⁶ Floyd E. Dominy to Arthur V. Watkins, 16 January 1958, FED-AHC, box 14, folder: Professional File, 1960-1964 Memoranda.

⁴⁷ Richard W. Gable, "The Politics and Economics of the 1957-1958 Recession," *The Western Political Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Jun 1959), 557-559.

⁴⁸ "Watkins Pushes Dam Jobs," *The Denver Post*, 15 February 1958, and "Memorandum for Mrs. Whitman," 26 February 1958, DDE-DDE, box 30, folder: Staff Notes February 1958.

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Details of Accelerated Reclamation Program Announced," 12 March 1958, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 5, folder: Budget-Interior 1957-1958 (1).

could promote Dominy to associate commissioner (a non-existent position that would have placed Dominy above everyone but Dexheimer) and banish Nielsen to the Bureau's hinterlands. Or, Dominy would lay the Bureau's troubles before Seaton and, Dominy indicated, perhaps it would be Dexheimer's head on the chopping block. Seaton and Dexheimer worked out the details for Dominy's promotion, creating the associate commissioner position. Dominy believed Dexheimer then undercut his own authority when he told Bureau staff that Seaton had ordered the promotion, rather give appearances that it had been a mutual decision. In a bureaucracy of more than 10,000 people, Dominy found such displays of weakness of authority troubling.⁵⁰

Viewed from one direction, Dominy's lobbying for a promotion is an example of his ruthless pursuit of power. But it also illustrates a fairly common scenario for executive appointees like Seaton when dealing with trouble among the ranks of career civil servants. Nielsen and Dexheimer were failing at their primary mission, which was to promote and defend western reclamation before Congress. Eliminating a career civil servant like Nielsen would have entailed a lengthy and difficult process. Eliminating Dexheimer, who was an appointee serving at the pleasure of the president, was easier but carried with it certain political considerations. It might have attracted undue attention on the Bureau just as it had begun to establish itself as a powerful office in Washington. Nor would it have pacified reclamation interests in the West. Although the construction of the CRSP's keystone dams was underway, almost nothing had been done on ancillary irrigation projects. For Seaton, pushing Dexheimer aside and cashiering Nielsen to the Denver office was the best possible solution. In any case, Floyd Dominy had now become commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation in all but his official title.

⁵⁰ FED-OH, 44- 47; and Wilbur Dexheimer to Fred A. Seaton , 6 March 1958, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1951-1969 Employment – Asst. Commr.

Dominy soon had a chance to prove his worth as the agency prepared a new budget in the spring of 1958. With Dexheimer out of town again, Dominy commanded the hearings. Rather than make personal attacks on Bureau officials, the Democratic committee members used the below-average Bureau budgets of the past years as a prop for denouncing the Eisenhower administration in the midst of a recession.⁵¹ Republican Ben Jensen used his platform to denounce high tax rates and low parity prices for farmers who, he sentimentalized, bought simple goods for their homes while the rest of the population squandered money on stocks.⁵² Dominy answered each remark with equanimity, currying favor with both factions without offending either or making the Bureau appear partisan. He answered leading questions about the no-new-starts policy without slamming the administration. He also stepped carefully around the touchy relationship between the Senate and House appropriations committee. Playing one against the other might have brought a short-term benefit, but over the long haul a successful career bureaucrat could not risk offending either.⁵³ Dominy was direct, forthright, and appropriately deferential to the prerogatives of Congress. It was a far cry from Nielsen's typical bumbling testimony and Dominy received praise in the secretary's office.

By the first week of April 1959, tensions in the Bureau of Reclamation came to a head. During an inspection trip to Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona, Dominy received an urgent phone call from Fred Seaton. Dexheimer was resigning. Would Dominy take the commissionership? Dominy was "dumbfounded."⁵⁴ He already had near-total authority in the Bureau with Dexheimer acting as figurehead, an arrangement that suited Dominy fine. The associate

⁵¹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Public Works Appropriations for 1959*, 85th Cong., 2nd sess., 364-367.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 373-374.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁴ FED-OH, 48.

commissioner position gave him most of the power with little of the political liability. He had hoped and assumed that the arrangement would last until the end of Eisenhower's term in early 1961. But allegations had surfaced that Dexheimer had engaged in consulting work before he had become commissioner, receiving pay for "expert" testimony before the Federal Power Commission. Dexheimer also sanctioned the practice among subordinates. Insofar as this was a conflict of interest for a federal employee to be testifying in matters concerning other federal agencies, the practice was illegal.⁵⁵ Dominy, in fact, had been engaged in at least one significant consulting job in Cuba in 1957, which was technically legal if perhaps not ethical. In any case, Eisenhower and Seaton gave Dexheimer a warm public sendoff, bestowing platitudes and using the occasion to highlight the administration's efforts in the reclamation field.⁵⁶ Seaton, whose loyalty was divided between the conservative administration and the naturally expansionist programs of his department, gained in Dominy an outspoken, competent proponent for reclamation expansion.

Despite Dominy's obvious hunger for power, ascending to the commissionership with just eighteen months left in the Eisenhower administration was not necessarily a good long-term career move. Goodrich Lineweaver had become acting commissioner after Straus left and had seemed a logical choice for permanent promotion. Instead, political pressure and the Bureau's reorganization resulted in his demotion from Assistant Commissioner to *assistant to the commissioner* and his eventual departure. In press releases announcing Dominy's promotion, Seaton added almost off-handedly that Dominy was a Republican, a career death sentence if the Democrats won the White House in 1960. Even if the Republicans had stayed in power, a new president might have seen fit to replace Dominy with his own appointee. (In fact, Richard Nixon,

⁵⁵ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Public Works Appropriations for 1960*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 6-7, 15, 40-42.

⁵⁶ FED-OH, 47-49; and "Dexheimer Quits Reclamation Job," *New York Times*, 4 April 1959.

the unsuccessful 1960 Republican presidential candidate, replaced Dominy after winning the 1968 election.) Seaton had potentially undone decades of Dominy's careful non-partisanship. He had never voted in a primary election or formally identified with either party. His ideology may have rested with the liberal Democrats but his bureaucratic survival depended on the appearance of neutrality. As he would write his brother Ralph after Democrat John F. Kennedy's election in 1960, "a great many Republican administrators will be scratching around to find an udder to latch on to. I, of course, may be among them."⁵⁷

In any case, Dominy wasted no time consolidating his authority. His return trip from Glen Canyon took him through Denver. In later years he recounted with glee the shock he believed his promotion caused in the Denver office. Dominy's career trajectory in the Bureau had been nothing short of remarkable but the agency still had a pro-engineering bias that galled him. While outside observers may have seen the Bureau as a monolithic empire, the center of power was actually split between the commissioner in Washington and the chief engineer some 1,500 miles away in Denver. Each was highly jealous of the other. While Washington received the most press, more than ninety-seven percent of the agency's personnel worked in the West. In the days when long distance phone calls were relatively rare and most important business was transacted by mail, this arrangement gave the chief engineer in Denver engineer considerable autonomy. Dominy's first order of business in Denver was to lay out his new vision with chief engineer Grant Bloodgood. To begin with, the Washington office would be the Bureau's indisputable center of power. "And Denver is not going to be the exclusive club that runs its own goddamn show in its own goddamn way without any interference," Dominy warned Bloodgood.

⁵⁷ Floyd E. Dominy to Ralph Dominy, 25 January 1960, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, Personal 1960; and FED-OH, 48-49.

For too long, Denver had been arbitrarily redoing the work of the district offices, causing headaches for the Washington office and discord in the West.⁵⁸

On the surface, Dominy's demand was designed to eliminate the inefficiency that had troubled him since he joined the Bureau. But the new commissioner also had a personal score to settle. When Ed Nielsen left Washington under a cloud, he had become Bloodgood's associate chief engineer. With Bloodgood was nearing retirement, Dominy promoted California regional director Barney Bellport to Nielsen's position and ordered Bloodgood to move Nielsen into a make-work hydropower job. Bloodgood, not used to having the commissioner or anyone else challenge his authority, balked at the request. He tried to stall but Dominy grew impatient. Nielsen argued that civil service rules prevented the arbitrary reassignment. To fire Nielsen, Dominy would have to prove incompetence. Dominy cited Nielsen's repeated failures in Washington and the inability of the two men to work together. When Nielsen refused to accept reassignment, Dominy fired him. Nielsen's appeals to congressional allies and the Civil Service Commission went nowhere. "So that kind of let the Denver crowd know who was running the show," Dominy concluded. He then made a point to introduce himself to the lower echelon in the Denver office, a common practice whenever he travelled. "I was very much impressed with the way he operated, the way he got around the building, the way he got things done," one secretary recalled after Dominy's visit to the Bureau's Sacramento office. "No dilly, dallying around with that one, and I like it that way."⁵⁹

With the major task of centralizing power in Washington underway, Dominy set to work restructuring the Bureau's seven regional offices. Organized generally around the West's largest river basins, the regional office arrangement was a compromise between the organization of the

⁵⁸ FED-OH, 50.

⁵⁹ Frances George to William Palmer, 15 July 1959, WIP-USU, box 1, folder 6.

federal water bureaucracy, state borders, and the West's natural hydrographic geography. Like his predecessors, Dominy moved quickly to install his own people in each office, elevating many of his old co-workers from the repayment and irrigation divisions. This immediately put the Bureau back on the track of social planning, away from Dexheimer's emphasis on civil engineering. Within the reorganized Washington power structure, Dominy promoted his old associates, Newcomb Bennett and Bill Palmer, to assistant commissioner positions. He also shuffled responsibility between branches to streamline the Bureau and make his subordinates more responsive to his needs. By the end of the summer, Dominy had remade the Bureau's entire power structure in his own image.⁶⁰

Some western politicians, like Wyoming Senator Joseph O'Mahoney, hailed Dominy's promotion. O'Mahoney, who had first met Dominy as a county agent in the 1930s, said "I am sure that I speak for the entire West when I say he will make an excellent commissioner."⁶¹ But Dominy's promotion and rapid reorganization—which abruptly altered power networks between the Bureau, Congress, and local interest groups—as well as the heavy-handed manner of its execution also raised the ire of many, especially those who had frequent and intimate contact with the Bureau machinery. One detractor was Clair Engle. He believed the firing of Ed Nielsen, who had been with the Bureau since 1934, marked "the loss of the last Bureau liberal."⁶² Dominy's lack of engineering qualifications also raised concern. An Army Corps colonel wrote an anonymous letter to the White House asking if "the Administration [has] forgotten how the Republican Congress castigated Mike Strauss [*sic*] about ten years ago because he was

⁶⁰ FED-OH, 55 n. 25; no author, "Commissioner's Staff Meeting Notes" 29 May 1959, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1958-1961 Staff Meetings; and no author, "Commissioner's Staff Meeting," 7 August 1959, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1958-1961 Staff Meetings.

⁶¹ "Senator Lauds New Bureau Chief," (*Rock Springs, WY Daily Rocket*, 11 April 1959.

⁶² Philip P. Dickinson to E. G. Nielsen 24 August 1959, CE-CSUC, box 166, folder 3.

Commissioner of Reclamation and NOT an engineer?” More to the point, the colonel declared, Dominy’s New Deal employment history made him suspect as a Republican.⁶³

But Dominy wasted little time addressing the controversy. His primary concern was still appropriations. The 1958 election had not been kind to Republicans and western observers pointed to the administration’s poor support of reclamation projects on the upper Colorado. For months Fred Seaton had worked behind the scenes to restore funding for dams and other infrastructure improvement. The key to Dominy’s success in making his case before the appropriations committee the previous year had been meticulous preparation, as well as a healthy number of reliable and poised Bureau witnesses. Statements from the regional directors were to be standardized across the Bureau according to Dominy’s template. Bureau witnesses also used mockup “skull sessions” to refine their testimony.⁶⁴ No more would the Bureau be embarrassed before Congress. The fiscal 1960 budget doubled appropriations for the upper Colorado and generally promised to be one of the best reclamation budgets in recent years.⁶⁵

Except for lingering embarrassment over Dexheimer’s improprieties, the Bureau performed without incident before the House appropriations subcommittee in April. The committee members commended Dominy and the Bureau for requesting nearly fifteen million dollars less than the year before.⁶⁶ However, Dominy and the Bureau faced a problem when the House reported its bill. The normally conservative appropriations committee chose to make a stand against the administration’s no-new-starts policy. Not only was the nation’s entire water program supposedly threatened, the committee argued, but the administration had intentionally

⁶³ “C. E.” to W. B. Persons, received 23 April 1959, WHCF-DDE, General File, GF17-C, Bureau of Land Management, box 312.

⁶⁴ Floyd E. Dominy to Assistant Commissioner and Chief Engineer, 16 January 1959, FED-AHC, box 10, folder: 1959 Budget – Appropriations.

⁶⁵ “West Benefitting from Smart Politics by Interior’s Seaton,” *The (Grand Junction, CO) Daily Sentinel*, 8 February 1959.

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress, *Public Works Appropriations for 1960*, 4-5.

placed Congress in the position of having to exceed the budget. They cited the Army Corp's "worshipful allegiance" to the no-new-starts policy when the agency failed to budget for channel dredging work in Pascagoula Harbor in Mississippi, a move that would have stranded four nuclear submarines then under construction. Most of the House's extra appropriations went to forty-four Corps projects but the committee also recommended funding seven of the Bureau's new construction starts. The move shared wide bipartisan and cross-sectional support, and the Bureau clearly benefited from greater national interest in Corps projects.⁶⁷

Reclamation boosters hailed the move but Dominy and top Interior officials were concerned.⁶⁸ The administration's claim that too many new starts would strain future budgets and endanger the entire program had more than a grain of truth to it. As it turned out, funds for new starts largely came from cancelled or deferred project funds, not from new appropriations. The appropriations committee had remained true to its fiscal conservatism. In the end, they granted a little more than two million dollars over the administration's original figure.⁶⁹ Reversing the no-new-starts policy may have been a political victory but it only placed the water agencies in dire financial straits. "How will Congress find the \$70 million to continue this program next year?" one Interior official asked. "If this year's action is any indication of what it will do next year, we will find the new starts were actually false starts."⁷⁰ When the bill finally

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶⁸ Floyd E. Dominy and Alfred R. Golzé, "Public Works Appropriation Bill, 1960," 3 June 1959, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 8, folder: Budget-Interior 1959-60 (6); and no author, "Commissioner's Staff Meeting" 10 July 1959, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1958-1961 Staff Meetings.

⁶⁹ U.S. Congress, House. Report No. 424. *Public Works Appropriation Bill, 1960*. 86th Cong., 1st sess., 19-25.

⁷⁰ George Abbott and Ted F. Stevens, "New Starts," June 1959, FAS-DDE, Subject Series, box 8, folder: Budget-Interior-New Starts, Yearly Requirements FY '60 thru FY '65 (1).

cleared the House-Senate conference committee in August, the Bureau's appropriation was \$256.7 million dollars, \$5.5 million more than the Budget Bureau's recommendation.⁷¹

The president publically denounced the maneuver.⁷² John Taber, the ranking Republican on the appropriations committee, refused to sign the committee report.⁷³ On the last day of August, Eisenhower vetoed the public works appropriation bill. Even without new starts, the administration had recommended a record-high outlay of 1.1 billion dollars for the Bureau and the Army Corps. The president singled out the Bureau's Trinity River Project's power facilities in California as an example of wasteful government spending that might be better left to private industry.⁷⁴ But his argument failed to win many converts. Several key Republican members opposed the veto, including Thomas Kuchel of California and Iowan Ben Jensen, the ranking minority member of appropriation's public works subcommittee.⁷⁵ Seaton dutifully backed the president's actions even as he called for a strong reclamation program for the next two fiscal years that included new starts.⁷⁶ In September, a revised public works appropriations bill passed over the president's veto, the first override in his presidency. It directed an across-the-board reduction of 2.5 percent in spending, but the new starts remained. Congress had committed the government to an expansive and expensive program of water development.⁷⁷

⁷¹ No author, "Reclamation in Congress," 14 August 1959, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: Professional File, 1958-1961.

⁷² "President Asks Caution in Water Project Spending," *Sacramento Bee*, 20 July 1959.

⁷³ Associated Press, "Water Projects" telegrams, FED-AHC, box 10, folder: 1960 Budget Appropriations.

⁷⁴ U.S. Congress, House. "Message of the President of the United States," Doc. no. 222, 86th Congress, 1st sess., 1959, 1-2.

⁷⁵ "President Vetoes Civil Works Bill; Faces Overriding," *New York Times*, 29 August 1959.

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Statement by Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton on the President's Veto of the Public Works Bill," 1 September 1959, FED-AHC, box 10, folder: 1960 Budget Appropriations; and Fred A. Seaton, "Press Conference," 1 September 1959, FAS-DDE, Interior Series, Press Conference Briefing Books Subseries, box 5, folder Press Conference September 1, 1959, 3-15.

⁷⁷ No author, "Reclamation in Congress," 11 September 1959, FED-AHC, box 10, folder: Professional File, 1960 Budget Appropriations.

While Congress tackled the appropriations bill that summer, long-festering problems in the Inland Northwest threatened to erupt. Congress and the Bureau had already addressed the issue of Columbia Basin farm size in 1957. But the project was still beset by financial problems and irrigators and the Bureau were at loggerheads. The terms of the 1945 repayment contract dictated a repayment charge of eighty-five dollars per acre, an amount many thought unreasonable in light of vague promises of “free” water in the project’s earliest development stages. Since then, total project costs had ballooned from \$487 million to \$779 million due to inflation and higher construction costs. Unless a new contract was negotiated, the project would stall out at 479,000 acres sometime in the early 1960s, well under half the planned development. Moreover, farmers faced serious drainage problems requiring expensive reengineering. In all, the Bureau hoped to maintain the irrigators’ level of repayment at roughly one-quarter of the project’s total cost, as adjusted for inflation and new charges.⁷⁸

Farmers, many of whom were beginning to realize that life on the project would not be as easy as the Bureau’s propaganda pamphlets prophesized, balked at paying more. They charged the Bureau—ever the empire builder at the expense of the small farmer—with intentionally misleading Basin irrigators. The federal government, they argued, should be financially liable for any engineering miscalculations. After months of negotiations, the three districts agreed to vote on a Bureau proposal calling for a cap on drainage costs and a \$125 per-acre repayment charge spread out over 50 years. Both Dominy and Interior officials agreed that irrigators should pay to their maximum ability, regardless of the project’s total price. A Bureau study found that farmers

⁷⁸ No author, “Columbia Basin Repayment Contract,” 5 August 1959, FAS-DDE, Interior Series, Press Conference Briefing Books Subseries, box 4, folder: Press Conference August 6, 1959; U.S. Department of the Interior, “Amendatory Repayment Contract Approved for Columbia Basin Water Project Users,” 2 July 1959, FAS-DDE, Interior Series, Press Conference Briefing Books Subseries, box 4, folder: Press Conference August 6, 1959; No author, “Information for the Secretary’s Press Conference,” 11 February 1959, FAS-DDE, Interior Series, Press Conference Briefing Books Subseries, box 3, folder: Press Conference February 17, 1959; and Columbia Basin Commission, “The New Repayment Contract for the Columbia Basin Project,” July 1959, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1960 Columbia Basin Project.

could pay perhaps three more dollars more per-acre annually, a figured the farmers refuted in light of the past year's decreased crop returns. When the East District voted overwhelmingly against the new contract in late July, the Bureau canceled the vote in the other two districts. Hoping to bring the irrigators to heel, Dominy announced an increase of \$1.65 per acre in annual operation and maintenance charges for 1960 to cover additional drainage works construction.⁷⁹ Outraged water users vowed not to pay, a stance their senator, Warren Magnuson, encouraged.

At the National Reclamation Association meeting in October, Dominy and other Interior officials met with representatives from the three Columbia Basin districts. Dominy reiterated that irrigators should not expect a better deal from the Bureau but that he was open to compromise. Board members voiced general approval of the new contract and indicated a willingness to educate irrigators on its merits. However, the sentiment around the Basin was that most irrigators did not believe the district board members represented the general consensus and that it was improperly allied with the Bureau. Farmers were voting as much to register protest against the Bureau as they were with the specific details of the new contracts. To ease concerns, Dominy agreed to travel to the region early in 1960.⁸⁰

In the meantime, he informed Basin irrigators that unless they agreed to pay the additional \$1.65 operation and maintenance fee, the Bureau would not deliver water. Predictably, this set off howls of protest. The Columbia Basin Landowner's Association fired off telegrams to Eisenhower, Seaton, and senators Magnuson and Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson urging Dominy's ouster. The problem, association director Walter LePage said, was Dominy's "lack of

⁷⁹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Statement by Commissioner of Reclamation on the Action of the East Irrigation District...", 29 July 1959, NARA-RG48, General Subject Files of the Under Secretary 1957-1961, box 3, folder: Bureau of Reclamation.

⁸⁰ No author, "Columbia Basin Repayment Contract" 29 October 1959, NARA-RG48, General Subject Files of the Under Secretary 1957-1961, box 3, folder: Bureau of Reclamation; and John R. Lewis to Elmer F. Bennett, 28 September 1959, EFB-DDE, box 21, folder: Personal Book VI [May-Nov 1959] (2).

understanding of the plight of the Columbia Basin farmer and because of his dictatorial policies.”⁸¹ “He’ll go to Afghanistan and try to work out a program where our government pays everything and the people are indifferent in it,” LePage said. “But he won’t go for a fair deal for American farmers in the Basin.”⁸² On the crown jewel of American reclamation projects, the stage was set for a high-intensity showdown between the Bureau and irrigators.

Relations between the Bureau and Columbia Basin irrigators were a disturbing sign that federal reclamation had forever departed from its mission of building rural communities. As the 1960s dawned, there were also signs that the very meaning of conservation would become widely contested. Much as in 1952, the election year of 1960 promised a partial referendum on national use of natural resources. As yet, little widespread consciousness about ecological issues could be found among the electorate, and environmental concerns that did exist were largely limited to aesthetic preservation issues. Notwithstanding the wilderness movement and a growing number of environmental groups, Dominy and the Bureau could still claim to be on the right side of the conservation issue. More importantly, Dominy had restored the Bureau’s damaged reputation in Congress. In the future, the Bureau generally found itself before sympathetic committees in the House and Senate. With the Bureau’s most serious problem thus corrected, Dominy began to devote more time to formulating policy and strengthening connections with clientele groups outside Washington. Massive multipurpose reclamation projects like the Colorado River Storage Project were clearly the way of the future. But they also had the potential to turn the West against itself.

⁸¹ “Farmers Seek Resignation of Dominy” undated news clipping, FED-AHC, 2005 accretion, box 4, scrapbook: 1959.

⁸² “Farmers Demand Dominy Resign,” *Tri-City (WA) Herald*, 23 December 1959.

Seven: White Elephants on the New Frontier

The Colorado River Storage Project opened up a Pandora's Box of political problems for Floyd Dominy and the Bureau of Reclamation. Old political alliances in the West were beginning to show signs of serious strain. An eleventh-hour scramble from environmentalists to block the dam at Glen Canyon was unsuccessful, but indicated the Bureau would face similar challenges ahead. But the Bureau's strongest opposition came from unexpected corners. Some westerners, many with solid pro-reclamation credentials, began to push back against the Bureau's plans for western development. The agency was conditioned to expect conflict over shared water resources but increasingly western conservatives began to align with their eastern counterparts to oppose expanded federal reach. At the height of the Cold War, the Bureau's reliance on public hydropower facilities as the paying partner of irrigation all but guaranteed a fight. And indeed, the backlash against the Bureau's plans to build a small hydroelectric dam high in the Snake River Basin soured Dominy's relationship with reclamation's principle lobbying organization, the National Reclamation Association.

With the West's population in the process of doubling between 1950 and 1970, Bureau officials believed it was crucial to maintain a steady pace of development, especially for power and municipal water needs for cities and industry. The general election of 1960 promised some uncertainty for Commissioner Dominy. After eight fairly stable years under Dwight Eisenhower, Dominy knew well where he stood with political allies and foes alike. But no matter how the election played out, a new cast of characters would likely be roaming the halls of the Interior Building shortly after the inauguration. As it turned out, reclamationists found a champion in John F. Kennedy. But in the first two years of Kennedy's administration, internal strife in the department under incoming secretary Stewart Udall threatened to limit the program's gains.

Once Dominy was secure in his position, he became increasingly outspoken and publically challenged anyone who dared disagree with the Bureau's designs. His chief advantage as a career bureaucrat was longevity. When the Interior department's power elite departed with Eisenhower in early 1961, Dominy remained. While his new superiors struggled to find their footing in Washington, DC's complex political terrain, Dominy carried on as before. Like many agency chiefs, his power rested in Congress, and little would change there for the next decade.

In February 1960, Dominy made good on his promise to meet with Columbia Basin farmers to discuss drainage problem and an amendatory repayment contract. Bitterness and distrust continued to linger at the grassroots. He sat patiently through meetings with each irrigation district, listening as irate and misinformed farmers charged the Bureau with a variety of real and imagined crimes. Beyond the expected vitriol against the Bureau, the meetings revealed significant divisions within and between irrigation districts. Dominy proposed a new repayment contract to cover higher drainage charges, increasing total per-acre cost from \$85 to \$133.50, to be paid out over fifty years. Alternately, the farmers could take their complaints to Congress. They agreed to do so, believing apparently, "that power revenues can pay the difference and...that Congress will give them the world on a silver platter." In truth, Dominy supported congressional intervention even if it appeared to strip the Bureau of its authority since "it would force everybody to lay their cards on the table at a hearing."¹ As one of the architects of the Bureau's ability-to-pay theory, Dominy believed that irrigators were simply not paying

¹ No author, "Commissioner's Staff Meeting," 19 February 1960, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1958-1961 Staff Meetings.

their fair share. The meetings had done nothing to sway opinions on either side, but Dominy's downhome charm and herculean patience won him a few some converts.²

The irrigators' underlying, unrealistic expectation was that power consumers should shoulder the project's financial burden. Many basin farmers neither expected nor desired such a subsidy. But a vocal minority pleaded their case anyway.³ They found support from Washington senators Henry M. Jackson and Warren Magnuson. The two cosponsored a bill calling for a halt in drainage payments, later amended to guarantee water delivery in 1960 and 1961. The bill passed the Senate but stalled in the House interior committee. When Wayne Aspinall finally decided to hold hearings, the Columbia Basin delegation learned the hard lesson that a congressional hearing was a world away from a community meeting in the local school gymnasium.

After the February meetings with Dominy, the Bureau-friendly *Wenatchee Daily World* warned irrigators testifying before Congress that they "had best load their guns with the ammunition of facts" since the Bureau was bound to rely on extensive studies from the USDA and Washington State University.⁴ Bureau officials testified strongly in opposition to the Jackson-Magnuson bill. The irrigators' unfocused anger toward the government did not play well before the House Interior committee. Even John Saylor had little patience, perceiving the irrigators' dissatisfaction with the contract negotiation process as a slight on his committee's competence. The Jackson-Magnuson bill evaporated in the House and the irrigators were left to renegotiate with an emboldened Bureau of Reclamation. When Washington governor Albert

² Ray A. Whitlow to James Murray, 26 January 1960, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1960 Columbia Basin Project; Ray A. Whitlow to Floyd E. Dominy, 12 February 1960, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1960 Columbia Basin Project; John R. Ulrich to Fred Seaton 11 February 1960, box 12, folder: 1960 Columbia Basin Project.

³ Paul C. Pitzer, *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994), xi; and Ulrich to Seaton, 11 February 1960.

⁴ "Basin Protest Group to Bump Heads with Congressmen?," *Wenatchee Daily World*, 19 February 1960.

Rosellini publically denounced the Bureau for its “stiff-necked, bureaucratic, high-handed and arbitrary” actions, Dominy reminded the governor that both men had a duty to uphold the law.⁵

The raw economic statistics of 1960 belie the popular memory of the 1950s as a time of widespread prosperity and material abundance. Two recessions occurred under the Eisenhower administration and unemployment levels crept up during another economic slowdown in 1960. Even more troubling, the national economic engine had seemed to stall at a relatively paltry 2.4 percent growth rate even as inflation increased. With both ends of the political spectrum firmly gripped by the Cold War, Kennedy managed to out-hawk the Republicans on the issue of defense spending.⁶ Without as yet a major environmental lobby, conservation-minded Democrats also pounced on his Republican opponent, Vice President Richard Nixon, for the administration’s no-new-starts policy and tepid support for western water development. For Democrats, natural resource policy and economic policy were intertwined.

During the campaign, the Western States Democratic Conference called for expanded hydropower and reclamation spending and sought the “elimination of the present multiplicity of agencies through which all western problems are carried piecemeal to the east for solution.”⁷ In a stump speech in Colorado, Kennedy chided the Eisenhower administration for reversing its no-new-starts stand just as the election loomed. The Eisenhower-Nixon administration, Kennedy said, “has so little faith in the future of the West that it...has virtually abandoned its development.”⁸ Candidate Kennedy proposed a vision of western resource development that harkened back to the time of Theodore Roosevelt, whom Kennedy liked to quote if for no other

⁵ Floyd E. Dominy to Albert D. Rosellini, 13 May 1960, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1960 Columbia Basin Project.

⁶ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 287-289

⁷ Totton J. Anderson, “The Political West in 1960,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 14, no. 1, part 2 (March 1961): 290-291.

⁸ “Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Durango, Colorado,” undated, SLU-UA, box 90, folder 4.

reason than to demonstrate how far the Republicans had regressed on the conservation issue. The eastern-bred Roosevelt—unlike the Kansan and the Californian in the White House—understood the importance of a developed West to *national* greatness. He also cited the conservation legacy of Franklin Roosevelt and called for a return to New Deal planning visions that, Kennedy believed, saw conservation as a package addressing both natural resources and human needs.⁹

One of Kennedy's other recurrent campaign themes was that the Soviet Union would soon surpass the United States in hydropower production, perhaps as soon as 1975. He alluded to a Cold War "kilowatt gap."¹⁰ Like most vice-presidents running for the presidency, Nixon was in the delicate situation of having to support the unpopular decisions of his own administration. Every newspaper editor in the West wanted to know his position on Eisenhower's no-new-starts policy and Nixon could do little to evade the question. The best he could offer in the face of the Democrats' criticism was that he would "put greater emphasis" on reclamation.¹¹ But he failed to address specifics and generally subscribed to Eisenhower's view that ill-timed new project starts would unbalance future budgets.

Interior secretary Fred Seaton tried to burnish the Eisenhower-Nixon administration's conservation credentials during the campaign. Judged by the standards of mainstream 1950s conservation, the contours of which both parties generally agreed to, the administration had done significant work expanding the national parks and protecting wildlife. Interior supported domestic oil and mineral industries and the president had encouraged statehood for Hawaii and Alaska, which symbolized the administration's belief in "equal representation nationally and full

⁹ "Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy., Western Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico," 7 February 1960, SLU-UA, box 90, folder 4.

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Debate with Richard Nixon in Chicago," 26 September 1960, Miller Center, University of Virginia, available at: <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/5728>, accessed August 2012.

¹¹ "Nixon Pledges More Reclamation, Power Aid; Shows Break with President's Policy," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 1960.

self-government locally.” The department had also created the “Mission 66” program to rehabilitate overused and underfunded national parks. Since 1953, Seaton told audiences, fifty-one new water projects had received authorization and fully one-third of reclamation spending since 1902 had occurred under Eisenhower’s watch. The massive Colorado River Storage Project was a particular source of pride. His comments did not consider, of course, that authorizing and appropriating projects were not the same thing, nor that the Democrats had controlled the congressional purse strings for all but two years of the Eisenhower administration.¹²

Alaska was a key ideological battleground in 1960, less for the votes it could generate than as a 375-million-acre talking point to outline the parties’ positions on natural resources. In September, Kennedy warned a crowd at the Alaska state fair that two decades hence an expanding American population would consume vastly greater resources. Unfortunately, he said, the Eisenhower administration had done little to prepare. Kennedy cited Eisenhower’s “timid” reclamation policy for the failure to build on the best sites and “substituted for a positive program an empty policy labeled ‘no new starts.’” The Soviets knew the value of massive hydropower projects, and would soon surpass the United States in the most important “race” of all, that of material production. “The tragic fact of the matter,” he said, “is that if Alaska still belonged to the Russians, Rampart Canyon Dam would be underway.”¹³ Rampart was a \$1.5 billion project on the Yukon River that would have created a reservoir the size of Lake Erie, flooding critical migratory wild fowl habitat. Predictably, Kennedy’s mock approval of Soviet hydropower policy set the Republican machinery buzzing. “Let us never forget that we have achieved...progress through freedom,” Nixon responded. “We could never have achieved it the

¹² Republican National Committee, “Conservation and Development of Natural Resources: Achievements of the Eisenhower-Nixon Republican Administration 1953-1960,” 2 April 1960, FAS-DDE, Interior Department Series, Reclamation Subseries, box 5, folder: Reclamation (2).

¹³ John F. Kennedy, “Re: Rampart Dam,” 4 September 1960, JSB-DDE, box 3, folder Alaska Rampart Dam.

Soviet way—at the cost of freedom.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, Nixon had also noted the Soviets’ stunning achievements in hydropower development during his well-publicized visit the previous summer.

Floyd Dominy had done little to endear the Eisenhower administration to Alaskans. The Bureau’s presence in the state dated back to the late 1940s when it had surveyed the Rampart Canyon site. Along with most of the wartime West, Alaska had bloomed with federal dollars, especially with the expansion of military facilities near Anchorage. While Rampart’s engineering merits were beyond question, the Bureau concluded that Alaska had an insufficient market for power distribution and promises of an expanded industrial base were unlikely to materialize. Instead, the Bureau built the Eklutna Project, a relatively small hydropower facility to augment Anchorage’s power supply. The Bureau had also identified two other potential sites at Snettisham near Juneau and at Devils Canyon along the Anchorage-Fairbanks railbelt. Dominy believed these two smaller plants, meeting actual need and realistic growth expectations, were better alternatives to Rampart. Democratic senator Ernest Gruening did not share Dominy’s pessimism about Alaska’s future. Like a good nineteenth-century booster, Gruening promoted Rampart “intensively and extensively.” When he received no satisfaction from the Bureau, he resorted to the time-honored tradition of turning to the Army Corps, pushing through a small appropriation in the fiscal year 1960 budget for investigation.¹⁵

Just days after Kennedy’s state fair speech linking the New Frontier to the Last Frontier, Dominy traveled to Alaska with Gruening to conduct hearings on the state’s hydropower potential. Civic leaders, business interests, and local representatives from the Army Corps called for more power generation. Supporters believed building dams would attract large industries, especially power-hungry aluminum facilities. As one Alaska industrial consultant remarked, “it’s

¹⁴ “Nixon Pledges More Reclamation, Power Aid; Shows Break with President’s Policy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 1960.

¹⁵ Floyd E. Dominy to Fred Seaton, 25 February 1960, FED-AHC box 8, folder: Alaska.

not a chicken and egg in this one. Provide the power and I think it will be consumed.”¹⁶ The goal for Alaska boosters was not so much to keep up with normal population growth but rather to accelerate that trend and industrialize the state.¹⁷ Dominy acknowledged Alaska’s spectacular growth and pressing need for more power. But, he said, a dam at Rampart built to maximum capacity would produce perhaps five million kilowatts, or roughly fifty times the consumption of the entire Kenai Peninsula-Anchorage-Fairbanks corridor. When Alaskan industry matured at some later date, Dominy argued, the Rampart site should be developed to its fullest capacity. But in the near term, Alaskans should aggressively pursue small, single-purpose dams closely tied to the municipal and industrial needs of nearby communities. Irrigation was never a consideration.¹⁸

The Bureau of the Budget, reflecting the administration’s partnership philosophy, was reluctant to recommend projects like Snettisham unless state and local interests in Alaska were willing to pick up the bulk of the cost, a reality Dominy recognized was not possible.¹⁹ Using the chicken-egg metaphor, Dominy noted the federal government was unlikely to finance major hydropower projects without firm corporate commitments.²⁰ Gruening thought this was discriminatory against Alaska and he cited Franklin Roosevelt’s decision to begin construction of Grand Coulee Dam in the 1930s without congressional approval and in spite of the inland Northwest’s meager power needs. When Dominy argued that the Bureau and the Department of the Interior merely conducted economic and engineering analyses, Gruening would not let him off the hook. “Well, of course,” he said, “the recommendation of the department concerned is

¹⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Hydroelectric Requirements and Resources in Alaska*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 1960, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ Floyd E. Dominy, “Statement...at Fairbanks, Alaska,” 13 September 1960, FED-AHC box 8, folder: Alaska; Floyd E. Dominy, “Statement...Anchorage, Alaska,” 7 September 1960, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: Alaska; Floyd E. Dominy, “Statement...at Juneau, Alaska,” 15 September 1960, FED-AHC box 8, folder: Alaska.

¹⁹ U.S. Congress, *Hydroelectric Requirements and Resources in Alaska*, 99-103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103-107.

always a vital factor as you know.”²¹ Showing the appearance of accommodation that kept him in the good graces of Congress, Dominy offered to try to persuade the appropriations committees to shift funds from approved projects to begin site investigations in Alaska, something Congress had expressly forbidden in light of the Bureau’s loose accounting procedures under Mike Straus and Wilbur Dexheimer.²² But Dominy stood firm against Rampart and argued that building the dam now with Alaska’s underdeveloped economy would be same as having built Grand Coulee “when the Oregon Trail was still being traveled by covered wagon.”²³ The Rampart issue would appear again in the 1960s, and eventually attract environmentalist opposition. For the time being, at least, Floyd Dominy and the Bureau of Reclamation were adamantly opposed to the structure.

In Congress, the 1960 election had little effect on the key members of the western water policy bloc. In the House, Wayne Aspinall retained chairmanship of the Interior and Insular Affairs committee as did Clinton Anderson in the Senate. Westerners waited to see whether Kennedy would be true to his word about reversing the no-new-starts policy, especially since it was the keystone issue of his otherwise lackluster campaign performance in the West.

Nationally, Kennedy won the election by a narrow margin. In the West he carried only Texas, Nevada, and New Mexico plus the new state of Hawaii. Although the popular election was relatively close and Nixon underperformed Eisenhower’s 1952 and 1956 margins, Kennedy’s significant electoral losses in the West meant he had few favors to repay.

Stewart Udall would go on to become perhaps the prolific and influential interior secretary in history. But he was not an obvious candidate for the job. The son of a prominent Arizona pioneer family, Udall was finishing his third term as a liberal congressman in 1960, where he served on the House interior committee. There he dutifully worked to advance the

²¹ Ibid., 106-107.

²² Ibid., 130-131.

²³ Ibid., 154.

cause of western natural resource development but did little to distinguish himself. Nor was he well-connected to power brokers. He was, however, part of the insurgent group of liberals who founded the Democratic Study Group in an era when the conservative “solid South” controlled the party’s direction. Udall had long been a supporter of two-time presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson and believed Kennedy had little substance beneath his polished, Hollywood exterior. But Udall warmed to the Massachusetts senator when the two worked on the contentious Labor Reform Act of 1959, and he promised to campaign for Kennedy in Arizona.

This was a risky strategy for the young congressman, since formidable House speaker Sam Rayburn backed Lyndon Johnson’s candidacy. Udall also had to prevail over old-line Arizona Democrats who leaned toward Johnson. But Udall stayed true to Kennedy and quietly worked to deliver the state’s delegation at the Democratic National Convention in July. Although he did not campaign actively for Kennedy in the general election, Udall made solid political connections with Edward (Ted) Kennedy.²⁴ (Nixon eventually carried Arizona by better than twenty-two percent.) With an eye on a cabinet post, Udall arranged a meeting with the president-elect in December 1960 through Washington lobbyist Maurice Rosenblatt. Kennedy met briefly with Udall, but suggested he first discuss the matter with Clinton Anderson. The New Mexico senator gave his blessing and, importantly, did not try to grab the position himself.

Six weeks after the election, Dominy and Udall both spoke at a meeting of the Upper Colorado River Commission in Denver. In the afternoon, Udall called Dominy up to his hotel room to discuss the commissioner’s future. As a former member of the House Interior committee, Udall knew Dominy was well-received in the House, but what about the Senate? The list of Dominy’s detractors was, in fact, long and distinguished. The Columbia Basin situation

²⁴ Stewart L. Udall, Oral History Interview I by Joe B. Frantz, 18 April 1969, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 3-9.

had made powerful enemies of Scoop Jackson and Warren Magnuson. Jackson had close ties to Kennedy and Magnuson was the number two Democrat on the appropriations committee. Clint Anderson was piqued at Dominy's seeming disregard for New Mexico water development. Dominy's hardline stance on Rampart Dam had run him crosswise to Ernest Gruening. And Clair Engle and Dominy shared a long-running and mutual dislike stretching back to Dominy's days as chief of the irrigation division. Both Engle and Gruening were the only Democratic senators from their states. "Good God, Floyd!" Dominy recalled Udall exclaiming.²⁵

Dominy argued personal bias motivated his congressional enemies, and only because he had carried out the Bureau's mandate without favoritism for any one politician or project. Udall sent his longtime administrative assistant Orren Beaty to interview the senators. Each vowed to oppose Dominy's reappointment. Beaty suggested Dominy call Udall to discuss the matter. Dominy refused, arguing that it was up to Udall and Kennedy, not a few senators, to appoint a commissioner. Instead, Udall asked Carl Hayden, then the senior senator, to broker a compromise. Hayden put his reluctant colleagues on the spot. So confronted, each backed down. But Jackson vowed that the next reclamation commissioner would require a Senate confirmation.²⁶ The price for Magnuson's compliance was Dominy's removal from Columbia Basin contract negotiations. This was a minor concession from Dominy's point of view since, thanks to his efforts, all parties had at least agreed to the fact that the contracts needed to be amended. Moreover, any Bureau official overseeing contract negotiations was essentially acting as Dominy's proxy. "So I was in it all the way, but behind the scenes," he said later.²⁷

A week before John F. Kennedy took the oath of office in January 1961, Stewart Udall sat in the witness chair before the Senate Interior committee for a confirmation hearing. Udall

²⁵ FED-OH, 60.

²⁶ Ibid., 61-63.

²⁷ Ibid., 89-190.

told the committee his western background and House interior committee experience had given him “something of a running start” for the secretaryship. Carl Hayden dropped in to give Udall his endorsement. Udall had the right background for the job—not just that of a westerner, but of the desert Southwest—to make him agreeable to all except perhaps the Californians whose state was forever locked in combat with Arizona over the Colorado River. But as was typical of many congressional hearings, the matter at hand was somewhat less important than the opportunity for members to put into the public record their various grievances. Right away the conversation turned to Dominy. Chairman Anderson read a telegram from Gus Norwood of the Northwest Public Power Association protesting Dominy’s continued appointment. Norwood complained that Dominy was biased against public power, claiming the Bureau’s practice of subsidizing irrigation raised power rates unfairly. Norwood’s comment touched on an important issue, one that would come to be at least as important as irrigation in conflicts over reclamation’s future. With the CRSP, the Bureau had plunged headlong into a policy of massive, hydropower-dependent irrigation projects. The liberal Norwood’s complaints notwithstanding, the Bureau would find itself increasingly under fire from fiscal conservatives for this practice.

The committee next questioned Udall about power distribution from Glen Canyon Dam, which was still at least two years away from completion. Would this be a partnership venture with private power companies or would the federal government build the transmission system? Would Dominy or Udall make the final determination? Udall assured the committee that although Dominy had made the recommendation for an all-federal transmission system, and that such a recommendation was already on the president’s desk, he, and not Dominy would be the one making the call. Who, then, would determine the filling procedure for Glen Canyon, a potentially explosive political issue since it threatened power operations downstream at Hoover

Dam? Again, Udall assured the committee that he would set the guidelines. Anderson reiterated his view that Dominy was not concerned with New Mexico's reclamation problems, including the San Juan-Chama and Navajo Indian Irrigation projects that were slowly working their way through the congressional machine. The hearing moved on to discussions of wilderness protection, mining, and ideological questions about the role of the federal government in basin-wide river coordination. Udall shrewdly deferred to the wisdom of Congress in these matters, assuring the committee he would not exercise the heavy hand of executive power.²⁸

Ernest Gruening referred Udall to a Kennedy campaign speech calling for "the proper development of the new American continent, the State of Alaska."²⁹ Gruening claimed that the federal government wielded autocratic powers, arbitrarily dictating natural resource policies without consulting state officials or local communities. He was especially distraught over Fred Seaton's withdrawal of nine million acres for the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. Citing Dominy's past testimony on Rampart Dam, Gruening warned Udall that he could easily lose control of decision making: "The Department of the Interior is of great importance to the lives of Alaskans, for good or ill. In the matter of Commissioner Dominy...I am willing to accept your view that that it is you who will make power policy. But I think you should not overlook the fact—and my experience in government confirms this—that very frequently men not on the highest level initiate and do, in fact, make policy. They prevent certain policies from reaching their superiors. Their reports to their superiors may be slanted. Those people who wield the pencil originally in a department have great influence in shaping policy."³⁰ Udall assured Gruening he would retain a

²⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Interior Nomination*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 2-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

firm hand on the department's tiller. When he left the job, he told the senator, "it will be said by...people like you that Udall was a beneficent bureaucrat."³¹

Anderson used Gruening's commentary to launch another attack on Dominy for the Bureau's slow progress on Navajo Dam. With tight budgets in the late 1950s, Utah senator Arthur Watkins had requested the Bureau shift funds from Navajo to advance work on Flaming Gorge Dam. Dominy had executed the transfer, noting "we are closing down this unit" since Navajo's associated irrigation projects had yet to be approved.³² But Anderson believed the irrigation projects stood little chance of authorization until the storage reservoir behind Navajo was in place. For the record, the incensed chairman wanted to remind Dominy that once Congress had granted an appropriation for a project "it is not the function of the Commissioner of Reclamation to say, 'What is the Congress? I will close it down,' and proceed to do so."³³ At this point in the testimony Anderson also apparently called Dominy a "double dealer." When Dominy read the transcripts he rushed over Anderson's office, waiting more than three hours before the senator would see him. "You're the only man on either side of the House...on either side of the Congress, that's ever called me a double dealer!" Dominy accused Anderson. "And by god, that's not the way I operate, and you know it!" Anderson retracted his statement.³⁴

Only one senator on the Interior committee publically supported Dominy during Udall's confirmation hearing. Wyoming Democrat John J. Hickey reflected on his long association with the commissioner and assured the committee that Dominy was only carrying out the will of Congress.³⁵ This inexact statement pointed to some of the difficulty in Dominy's job. Congress

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Floyd E. Dominy to Arthur Watkins, 16 January 1958, FED-AHC, box 20, folder: 1957-1966 CRSP-Glen Canyon Unit.

³³ U.S. Congress, *Interior Nomination*, 20.

³⁴ FED-OH, 146-48.

³⁵ Ibid., 25.

as a body passed legislation approving projects, appropriating funds, and restricted spending both in total dollars available and the amount Dominy could shift between projects. But beyond that, individual members could use their influence, as Arthur Watkins did, to gain slight advantage for their own pet projects. The House and Senate also had points of disagreement, especially between corresponding committees. Dominy's position as a deal broker gave him some power in shaping water policy but made him a good straw man. In the collegial atmosphere of the Senate it was much easier to make public attacks on a bureaucrat than on another senator.

Kennedy may have had few western debts to repay after the 1960 election but he did have one promise to keep. A few days before the election Kennedy had sent Washington governor Albert Rosellini vague assurance that "it would be the goal of my administration...to seek an equitable solution to the drainage and repayment problem, in line with the project history of the legislation under which it has been established." Kennedy understood little of the Columbia Basin's long and complicated history. But once Candidate Kennedy became President Kennedy his hollow promise became a policy problem for the Department of the Interior. Although the basin went for Nixon in 1960, Columbia Basin farmers reached out to Kennedy soon after the election. The Interior solicitor ruled that Kennedy had no authority to grant a moratorium or alter the repayment terms. Instead, Interior under secretary James Carr recommended a scheme that added a second, ten-year repayment plan for the drainage charges after the original forty-year contract was complete. In the interim, Kennedy approved another Jackson-Magnuson drainage moratorium bill in August. Northwest irrigation interests had gained some breathing room but a permanent solution was still elusive.³⁶

³⁶ James Carr to Stewart L. Udall, 13 February 1961, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1960-1961 Columbia Basin Project.

Through the late 1950s and early 1960s a quiet but pivotal contest occurred over the Bureau's role in developing the modern West. The contest over a proposed dam at Burns Creek in Idaho exposed serious divisions among westerners and showed the Bureau's relative powerlessness to force legislation despite strong support throughout the executive bureaucracy. But because the opposition came largely from conservatives and not environmental groups, the story has received far less attention in environmental and western history. Burns Creek forced westerners to reassess the very meaning of the words "reclamation" and "conservation." The project's emphasis on power generation troubled fiscal conservatives. Unlike Hells Canyon, which involved a private power company in direct competition with the federal government over development of a contested stretch of river, the motives of Burns Creek opponents were less distinct and amounted to a rejection of unchecked federal expansion in the West. Nor was it simply a matter of public and private power interests but rather a contest between hydropower and fossil-fuel development. By the early 1960s opponents had mustered considerable support in opposition to the Bureau.

Burns Creek was quite unremarkable compared with much of the Bureau's other handiwork in the 1950s and 1960s. The project's centerpiece was a 175-foot-high earthen dam on the Snake River in eastern Idaho. Three turbines would supply 90,000 kilowatts of hydroelectric power. The Bureau planned to integrate the dam's output with the Palisade Project thirty miles upstream as well as to the Utah Power and Light Company, a private utility. Less than three percent of the project's \$45 million cost was earmarked for irrigation. The rest was allocated to power.³⁷ Burns Creek's design also gave it the ability to recapture flow that would otherwise be "wasted" down the river during periods of high power demand at Palisades Dam.

³⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, "Statement...on Burns Creek Dam, Reservoir, and Powerplant," undated, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1962, 1963 Burns Creek Project-Idaho.

The Bureau had allowed upstream irrigators to oversubscribe water deliveries from Palisades Reservoir and Burns Creek would provide an additional 100,000 acre-feet to make up the shortfall. But the project would bring no new land under the ditch.³⁸ In effect, the Bureau was attempting a small-scale comprehensive river development plan on the upper Snake River using the principles of the CRSP. But unlike the CRSP, piecemeal development of poorly designed irrigation projects and single-purpose power dams on the upper Snake drew heavy scrutiny.

Like most reclamation projects, Burns Creek had a long political history. The Bureau's first favorable endorsement went to Congress in 1957 after Idaho senators Henry Dworshak and Frank Church sponsored the project.³⁹ That year and again in 1959, the Senate approved a Burns Creek bill and the House even went so far as to appropriate \$500,000 for the project, contingent on authorization. But the House failed to hold its first hearings on Burns Creek until August 1959, where it ran into opposition from John Saylor. In the interim, Congress shifted Burns Creek funds to Bureau work elsewhere.⁴⁰ Despite extensive criticism from the coal industry and private power companies in Idaho and Wyoming, both Dwight Eisenhower and the Bureau of the Budget supported the project. With the exception of the private utilities in the region, most other irrigation and business interests in Idaho displayed an unusual degree of solidarity in favor of the project.⁴¹ After Dominy recommended authorizing Burns Creek in advance of other projects in the region, the Idaho Reclamation Association passed a resolution to that effect in 1959.⁴²

³⁸ No author, "Statement by Bureau of Reclamation, Hearings on S. 66 to Authorize Burns Creek Dam, Reservoir, and Powerplant," undated, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 1, folder: Burns Creek Project.

³⁹ Dominy, "Statement...on Burns Creek Dam, Reservoir, and Powerplant," undated.

⁴⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Burns Creek Project*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 106

⁴² No author, "Commissioner's Staff Meeting," 2 October 1959, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1958-1961 Staff Meetings.

A serious drought the following year brought a sense of urgency. In dramatic fashion the 1.7 million acre-foot American Falls Reservoir drew down to a mere 3,000 acre-feet and exposed the ghostly old town site beneath. Speaking before a meeting of soil conservation districts in Idaho, Dominy noted that despite the drought, the Snake River basin's coordinated reservoir system allowed a successful irrigation season. The dam at Palisades had been critical to easing the irrigators' pain. A new reservoir behind Burns Creek Dam would only enhance the system's carryover storage potential. But, he warned, "status quo" conservationists "who preach economy at any price and have their own special interests to protect" were obstructing further western water development. Westerners needed to make a better case to the American people and "point out the loss in national wealth and consequent tax revenue which result from crop failures when the water fails in times of drouth."⁴³ Reclamation had too long been a "whipping boy" for fiscal conservatives who chose only to see the program's costs and not its social benefits.

But many ordinary westerners were also skeptical of Burns Creek. Constituent letters to Congress on the subject complained of unconstitutional acts, government fraud, and creeping socialism.⁴⁴ As a Californian explained to Clair Engle, one only needed to look at the example of the Tennessee Valley Authority to see the danger. "To me now," he wrote, "eleemosynary T.V.A. is like a kept woman, and its beneficiaries, hillbilly mendicants to be treated with scorn. (I except, of course, the delightfully entertaining television star, Tennessee Ernie Ford.)"⁴⁵ Beyond the tiny minority of citizens who bothered to concern themselves with the grave threat a remote dam in Idaho posed to the Republic and private enterprise, the project had two organized opponents. The first was the Utah Power and Light Company. In a 1957 appearance before the

⁴³ Floyd E. Dominy, "Address...Before the Annual Meeting of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts," 14 November 1960, FED-AHC, box 23, folder: 1960 Nov-Travel.

⁴⁴ Jack M. Beardsley to Clair Engle, 15 May 1961, CE-CSUC, box 141, folder 2.

⁴⁵ Kuno Doerr to Clair Engle, 14 March 1961, CE-CSUS, box 141, folder 2.

committee, the utility's primary objection was the loss of potential customers in the region. The company estimated that growth would triple in the next two decades. A glut of federal power from the Burns Creek-Palisades complex would effectively price them out of the market. Moreover, they feared losing a lucrative contract at the Atomic Energy Commission's National Reactor Testing Station outside Idaho Falls.⁴⁶ By 1959, the company began general attacks on the project's financial feasibility.⁴⁷ Just as the pro-reclamation lobby was concerned with propagandizing the national benefits of reclamation, anti-dam advocates wanted taxpayers in Ohio and Georgia to understand how the Bureau's plans affected them.

The other major opposition camp came from nearby mining interests in Wyoming. They were concerned with Burns Creek's potential threat to "thermal" fossil-fuel plants. Southwestern Wyoming contains significant subbituminous coal deposits. The coal's high-moisture content and tendency to disintegrate precludes long-distance shipping. The solution was to bring the power plant to the coal.⁴⁸ The United Mine Workers of America opposed Burns Creek on the grounds that it would increase unemployment in an already stressed sector of the economy.⁴⁹ Glenn Sorenson, president of the Kemmerer Coal Company, argued that surplus hydropower from the Idaho Power company at Hells Canyon had already delayed completion of the thermal plant by two years.⁵⁰ Here as elsewhere in the West, the Bureau maintained the position that thermal power and hydropower were complimentary. Thermal plants, they argued, were most efficient when operated at a steady base level. Hydroelectricity could supply additional

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Burns Creek Dam and Powerplant, Upper Snake River, Idaho*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 1957, 46-47.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-47; and U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Burns Creek Project*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, 19-21.

⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, *Burns Creek Project*, 68-71.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁵⁰ "Dominy Speech Sparks Row on Burns Project," *Kemmerer [WY] Gazette*, 4 May 1961.

“peaking” power during periods of high demand.⁵¹ The Interior department refuted the coal industry’s claims, arguing that the 23,000 kilowatts slated to go to preference customers (rural cooperatives and municipal-owned utilities) from Burns Creek was but a fraction of the 500,000 kilowatts planned for the new thermal plant.⁵²

In their concern for the future of the western coal industry, Wyoming miners found a sympathetic ally in John Saylor, who hailed from coal country in rural southwest Pennsylvania. Over the course of his career on the House interior committee, Saylor became an increasingly vocal advocate for the protection of parks and wilderness areas. But he was equally passionate about more conventional Republican principles. As his biographer has pointed out, Saylor reasoned that “the movement toward publically funded electrical power affected the livelihood of his constituents and, if left unchecked, might endanger capitalism itself.”⁵³ Burns Creek was an obvious symbol of that threat. The miners also had the steadfast support of Wyoming’s Democratic governor Jack Gage.⁵⁴

Senate hearings in March 1961 broke little new ideological ground. In general, the Senate maintained the same gentle treatment of administration officials and a hard edge with the mining and private power interests. House hearings were more combative. Burns Creek’s stigma as an unadulterated public power project was hard to shake. So too was the Bureau’s insistence that project costs be absorbed into the system rather than having the dam stand alone as an independent power producer. Interior officials anticipated the toughest criticism would come from Saylor, who offered to support the project if it was designed strictly as a regulating

⁵¹ Kenneth Holum, “Statement...on Burns Creek Dam,” undated, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 1, folder: Burns Creek Project.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Thomas G. Smith, *Green Republican: John Saylor and the Preservation of America’s Wilderness* (Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 142.

⁵⁴ “Dominy Speech Sparks Row on Burns Project,” *Kemmerer [WY] Gazette*, 4 May 1961.

reservoir for Palisades, i.e. a small reservoir with no power capability. Interior countered that “it would be criminal to despoil this reach of the river without obtaining maximum development.”⁵⁵ This was a common refrain within the department during Udall’s early tenure. Both Dominy and Udall were fond of citing Kennedy’s February 1961 special message to Congress calling for full development of the nation’s resource potential. Burns Creek had strong support throughout the Interior bureaucracy. Its relatively straight-forward nature and small footprint left little room for regional or political factionalism within Interior’s ranks. Even the Fish and Wildlife Service, which had on occasion opposed reservoir construction, believed the dam would improve native animal habitat and improve opportunities.⁵⁶

True to form, Saylor badgered the Interior department witnesses without mercy. He and Florida Democrat James Haley raised two critical points. The first was whether the Bureau had changed its mission, a not-so-subtle dig at public power but a fair critique in light of the Bureau’s new direction. Haley argued that if the Bureau was interested in building pure power projects, they should “come back here and say: ‘We have finished the job of irrigation and reclamation in the West. We want to get into the power business.’” Saylor noted the glaring lack of coordination within the Interior Department. At the same time the Bureau was dealing a potential death blow to coal development in the Rocky Mountain West, Interior’s Bureau of Mines was working to shore up the nation’s ailing coal industry. Saylor angrily warned Ken Holum, assistant secretary for water and power, “if you take one kilowatt out of there that a coal miner is producing, it is going to further affect their economy.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ No Author, “Points which Congressman Saylor Will Make on Burns Creek Project,” undated, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 1, folder: Burns Creek Project.

⁵⁶ No Author, “Statement by the Fish and Wildlife Service on H. R. 36 and H. R. 378,” 17 April 1961, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 1, folder: Burns Creek Project.

⁵⁷ U. S. Congress, House. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Burns Creek Project, Idaho*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 115-117.

Circulating in congressional mailbags and western mailboxes was an anti-Burns Creek pamphlet from Utah Power and Light with the provocative title “\$50 million White Elephant.” It attacked the Bureau along two general lines. The first appealed to widespread grassroots fears of creeping socialism and bureaucratic empire building. The company argued that increased federal power generation from Burns Creek would supply only the region’s preference customers with below-cost power. American citizens and local irrigators would shoulder the burden of this cost deficiency for a “favored few” in the form of higher taxes and higher long-term costs to irrigators. The second line of attack concerned the future of reclamation itself. Western opponents to Burns Creek claimed with some justification that Bureau projects with minimal irrigation aspects threatened the entire reclamation program. The pamphlet cited four eastern congressmen, including a warning from Republican senator Hugh Scott, that “if the Bureau is so hard up for work that it is going to propose such things as this Burns Creek project, which is a detriment instead of an asset to reclamation, then we people in the east...had better start taking a long, hard look at all of its future proposals.”⁵⁸ The pamphlet’s selective quoting of numerous Interior officials highlighted the project’s overwhelming lack of traditional reclamation benefits.

Senator Frank Church gave Dominy the chance for a public rebuttal in the *Congressional Record*. This was a common practice for members to print carefully staged policy letters from executive agencies or constituents. In his letter, Dominy dismissed charges that Burns Creek was simply a power project. The need for additional irrigation water in the region was so great, he wrote, the Bureau already had more applications on file for water than would become available. Utah Power and Light’s condemnation of favored preference customers was also misleading. True, municipal customers and rural electric cooperatives received a first-call preference from

⁵⁸ Utah Power and Light Company, “Burns Creek: \$50,000,000 White Elephant,” 1961, FED-AHC, box 22, folder: 1961 CRSP Transmission (Power) Panel Discussion.

federal power projects. However, in the year prior, private utilities were still able to purchase forty-four percent of the region's federal output. Moreover, forty-seven percent of the increased power capacity would go to irrigation pumps right off the top. Only then would preference customers receive power. Dominy compared the unremarkable structure to be built at Burns Creek to the monumental Hoover Dam, also labeled a white elephant in its time. Hoover had no associated irrigation costs either but the "lifeblood of many thousands of acres of irrigated land and the drinking water of thousands of people in Arizona, California, and Nevada" depended on the structure. In the end, Dominy made an effective rebuttal countering the pamphlet's specific charges with data on interest rates, cost-benefit ratios, and kilowatts. But he failed to address the pamphlet's most significant claim, that white elephants like Burns Creek would eventually set back the cause of reclamation.⁵⁹

In April, Dominy and Udall used the Fremont Canyon Dam dedication ceremony in Wyoming to address opposition to Burns Creek. After perfunctory remarks about the dam just completed, Dominy turned to the dam yet to be built. He said he regretted that "obstructionism exists right here in the Rocky Mountain country which is truly the last frontier of expansion and utilization of our natural resources." He accused the private power industry, "which has long cried gloom and doom concerning Federal hydropower development," of using falsehoods to spread discontent throughout the region. Dominy reassured the crowd that hydropower would always be a mere adjunct to thermal power. At the ceremony and in a speech the night before, Udall reiterated the Kennedy administration's commitment to full resource development and plans to reverse Eisenhower's no-new-starts policy.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ "Burns Creek Dam and Reservoir," *Congressional Record* vol 107, no 49, 21 March 1961.

⁶⁰ Floyd E. Dominy, "Remarks...at Fremont Canyon Powerplant Dedication," 28 April 1961, FED-AHC, box 22, folder: 1960-1967 CRSP-Rainbow Bridge; "Platte River is New Model for 'New Frontier,' Udall Says,"

Predictably, the Udall and Dominy speeches at Fremont Canyon received strong rebuttals. Western newspapers generally dismissed the preservationist campaigns of the Sierra Club and other environmental groups as the sad efforts of the lunatic fringe. But both sides in the Burns Creek debate claimed to speak for the soul of the West. More was at stake than a relatively small dam. In utility executive Glenn Sorenson's view, the Bureau of Reclamation had no basis for the "maliciously derisive and wholly uncalled for" charges of obstructionism. Since mineral royalties made up a large percentage of the reclamation fund, Sorenson reasoned that Wyoming had already paid its fair share for western reclamation projects. Wyoming miners were not asking for relief subsidies, only the chance to develop their own resources and reduce rampant unemployment. He warned that Burns Creek "poses a serious threat to other areas in the nation which will receive the same treatment that we in southwestern Wyoming still suffer."⁶¹ For westerners who still believed that the region was little more than a colonial outpost for eastern capital and federal bureaucrats, Burns Creek had powerful symbolic value.

The Wyoming political machinery was also livid with Dominy. Republicans noted that his Fremont Canyon speech had singled out the utility industry for obstructionism yet failed to mention the equally strident opposition of liberal mine workers' unions. The *Wyoming State Tribune* editorialized that voters had made their bipartisan opposition to Burns Creek plainly evident in recent elections but Dominy had apparently chosen not to listen to the will of the people. His rhetoric, the paper charged, tried to create partisan issue where there was not one. This angered Wyoming Republicans who believed the Democrat Dominy owed his very livelihood to the western Republicans who had protected him during the Eisenhower transition of

Casper [WY] Herald Tribune, 28 April 1961; and "Dominy Dedication Talk Hits Private Power," *Casper [WY] Morning Star* 29 April 1961.

⁶¹ "Kemmerer Coal Chief Hits Dominy Stand on Burns Creek Plan," *Wyoming State Tribune*, 4 May 1961.

1952. Dominy, the editor concluded, “kicked a lot of Republicans in the teeth” with his speech.⁶² In reply, Dominy chided the editor for needlessly creating a partisan issue, citing the state’s historic bipartisan support for reclamation and Eisenhower’s approval of Burns Creek in 1957. Congressional appropriations committees, which “are not noted for freehanded largesse toward unnecessary or unjustified projects,” had even granted Burns Creek a rare appropriation before it was authorized. Since regional development typically followed reclamation development, Dominy believed Burns Creek would only create additional demand for thermal power. Dominy made sure to send copies of his rebuttal to the state’s entire congressional delegation.⁶³

The House interior committee’s reclamation subcommittee reported up the Burns Creek bill in January 1962. Supporters were cautiously optimistic.⁶⁴ But they had not reckoned with the depth of John Saylor’s opposition, which rallied committee Republicans against the bill. As was his habit when debating measures he disliked, Saylor overloaded the bill with more than two dozen “crippling” amendments. Idaho representative Gracie Pfof was able to kill each one, but she failed to garner enough support for the original measure. In the end, four Democrats joined the Republicans to keep the bill from reaching the full House for a vote. The bill’s dejected sponsor, Idaho Democrat Ralph Harding, blamed the defeat on “the unholy alliance of the private power companies, the United Mine Workers and partisan Republicans.”⁶⁵ In a newsletter home to his constituents, he called Saylor a “power company stooge” and observed that the Democratic defectors were southerners who had caved to pressure from the power lobby.⁶⁶

⁶² “Chickens Come Home to Roost,” *Wyoming State Tribune*, 4 May 1961.

⁶³ Floyd E. Dominy to Lewis H. Bates, 12 May 1961, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1962, 1963 Burns Creek Project-Idaho.

⁶⁴ “Burns Creek Approved,” undated clipping from *The Rural Electric Minuteman*, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1962, 1963 Burns Creek Project-Idaho.

⁶⁵ “House Body Blocks Burns Creek Start,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 February 1962.

⁶⁶ “Harding Lays Burns Creek Defeat to Rep. Saylor” undated news clipping, JPS-IUP, box 45, folder 3.

But a glimmer of hope remained for Burns Creek. In April, the Department of the Interior and the Army Corps of Engineers issued a joint report on upper Snake River development. Showing their ability to “go along to get along” despite a reputation for fierce rivalry, the two agencies identified thirty-four potential projects in the basin. Citing recent floods, the report recommended immediate authorization of four dams. The Bureau was to build and operate the dam at Burns Creek and another one on the Teton River.⁶⁷ The report paved the way for the Bureau to take the project through the public works committee, the normal authorization channel for Army Corps flood control projects. Appropriations would be bundled with the Omnibus Rivers and Harbors Bill for 1963. Wyomingites were especially upset with the underhanded maneuver. Governor Gage complained the Corps had not sent the report to the state for review and Republican representative William Henry Harrison accused Interior of deliberately bypassing normal congressional channels.⁶⁸ But the bill’s opponents would have the last laugh, at least for 1962. With Saylor’s encouragement and support from southern Democrats, the House deleted Burns Creek from the public works bill in early October. The congressman went so far as to insert into the *Congressional Record* a letter from an Idaho high school student thanking Saylor for his effort “to curb socialism in our government.”⁶⁹ “Mr. Speaker,” Saylor concluded, “so long as young people of our country are cognizant of the socialistic attitude of the present Members of Congress, there is still hope to keep this Republic alive.”⁷⁰

The muted war of words over Burns Creek simmered in the press through the summer and fall of 1962 before exploding at the annual National Reclamation Association (NRA)

⁶⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Interior Releases Comprehensive Report on Development of Upper Snake River Basin,” 24 April 1962, FED-AHC, box 13, folder: 1961-1966 Corps of Engineers-Reclamation.

⁶⁸ “Burns Creek Bypass Tactic Charged,” *The Wyoming Eagle*, 27 April 1962; and “Governor Wires Protest on Burns Creek Project” *The Wyoming Eagle*, 27 April 1962.

⁶⁹ Bill Byrne to John Saylor, 1 October 1962, JPS-IUP, box 45, folder 1.

⁷⁰ John Saylor, “Burns Creek,” *Congressional Record*, 8 October 1962, A7465-66.

convention in mid-October. Normally, the convention was a self-congratulatory affair where key players in the irrigation, construction, and power communities came to glad hand with bureaucrats from state and federal water agencies. The spotlight was always on the Bureau of Reclamation and as commissioner, Dominy could expect star treatment. In truth, he had long had doubts about the NRA's practical utility. In his first address to the group as commissioner in 1959, Dominy wondered if the association had not lost its bearings as a *national* organization and become mired in local self-interest. He urged the delegates to focus on a positive program for reclamation development rather than their growing tendency to imagine non-existent federal threats to state water rights.⁷¹

One of the featured speakers at the convention was Utah governor George D. Clyde. Unlike many western politicians who understood only that water was a very important issue for constituents and thus worthy of unqualified support, Clyde had an extensive technical background in the field. Trained as an engineer, Clyde had worked as an irrigation expert for the U.S. Soil Conservation Service and served as director of the Utah Water and Power Board before becoming governor in 1957. In April 1958 he penned "The Case for Reclamation" for *Nation's Business*, a strident defense of the federal program against attacks from easterners.⁷² As governor, he balanced an activist approach to public works development while maintaining his credentials as a fiscal conservative. Like many conservatives, he sincerely believed the federal government should only build up to the point where private industry could take up the job. The theme of Clyde's NRA speech was western unity. Whereas Dominy preached unity to prevent squabbling over shared water and limited financial resources, Clyde attacked selfish local interests that perverted the meaning of reclamation by dressing up power projects in the sheep's

⁷¹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Address...Before the National Reclamation Association," 28 October 1959, FED-AHC, box 23, folder: October 1959.

⁷² George D. Clyde, "The Case for Federal Reclamation," (Washington, DC: GPO, 1958).

clothing of irrigation. “The timing is indeed at hand to unite—or rather re-unite—the west behind our traditional program of reclamation before the cause is lost,” he said. While Clyde never mentioned Burns Creek by name, no one in the audience could have had any doubt as to what he was alluding to. Dominy was livid and spent the rest of the day writing a fiery addendum to his own speech.⁷³

Dominy’s remarks the next day began with the standard recitation of the Bureau’s recent successes. In 1962, the agency had spent a record \$347 million and completed more construction work than ever before despite having the smallest workforce in decades. He gave credit to Wayne Aspinall and Clinton Anderson for authorizing nine new projects and congratulated the association for putting regional differences aside to win congressional approval for the Fryingpan-Arkansas and San Juan-Chama projects. (These two controversial projects transferred water from one river basin to another, always a politically troublesome venture.) The importance of hydropower revenues to multipurpose river basin development also figured prominently in Dominy’s speech. Notably, however, his prepared remarks did not make a single mention of irrigation or farmers. He no longer felt the need, as he had in 1959, to declare “I am a farmer, as are most of you” to the crowd. The Bureau was clearly successful and efficient at building dams, that much was clear from the commissioner’s remarks. But an unschooled observer would have had a difficult time deciphering the Bureau’s moral *raison d’être*. This was the basis of Clyde’s criticism, even if the governor’s own principles regarding reclamation were somewhat slippery.⁷⁴

⁷³ “Speaker Provides Comprehensive View of Water Resources,” *Reclamation News*, Nov-Dec 1962. For an account of Dominy’s reaction to Clyde’s speech, see Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 232-33.

⁷⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, “Address...before the National Reclamation Association,” 28 October 1959, FED-AHC, box 23, folder: October 1959; Floyd E. Dominy, “Address...at the National Reclamation Association Convention,” 19 October 1962, FED-AHC, box 31, folder: Speech File 1962. The latter document is the most complete of several versions of this speech in Dominy’s records.

With his formal prepared remarks out of the way, Dominy launched into a personal attack on Clyde. The commissioner facetiously agreed that Clyde's clarion call for unity was warranted, "but apparently," he said, "the Governor's warning fell on some deaf ears. Among those deaf ears, I regret to say, were those of Governor George D. Clyde." Reciting arguments that had now become rote, Dominy pointed to Burn's Creeks bipartisan, two-administration support. It was a feasible project, even by the standards of the "discredited" Budget Circular A-47. "Is it any wonder that Reclamation's position in Congress is threatened?" Dominy asked a stunned audience, if a sitting governor would attack a broadly supported reclamation project in another state? Again calling on the NRA to renew its dedication, Dominy summed up the new direction for reclamation. "No longer does our dominant interest lie in the reclaiming of arid lands," he told the crowd. "*Today's meaning of Reclamation is the reclaiming and expansion of the economy of the West and of the nation.*"⁷⁵ Western farm economies simply had to consider "a balance with business and industrial economy." As if to emphasize the Bureau's new prioritization, Dominy concluded "our program must—put water to work in the cities—put water to work in the factories—put water to work in hydroelectric plants—put water to work in agriculture."⁷⁶ The Bureau was still very much in the business of developing the West through conservation. But the West's needs had changed.

Clyde tried to be conciliatory. He wrote Dominy and reiterated the technical arguments against Burns Creek using, as the project's opponents often did, the Bureau's own data and testimony. No matter how much the Bureau wished otherwise, Clyde argued, Burns Creek was not a multipurpose project by any standard. He challenged the Bureau's repeated assertion that the oversubscription of available project water was proof of its necessity to irrigators, observing

⁷⁵ Dominy, "Address...at the National Reclamation Association Convention," 19 October 1962. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

the Bureau would charge just nineteen cents per acre-foot for Burns Creek water. “At such a price I think we could sell any amount of available water in any district, no matter how well supplied, in the western states,” he speculated. He closed by asking Dominy to reconsider how a project like Burns Creek might tarnish reclamation’s reputation among its detractors, especially in the East.⁷⁷

Alex Coleman, one of the NRA’s directors, also penned Dominy a letter chiding him for his attack on the governor and personal politicking at a supposedly non-political convention. “This didn’t sound like the Floyd I thought I knew,” Coleman wrote. “Have the pressures of your position really become such that you are forced into so violent a display?” Coleman reminded Dominy of the NRA’s unusual measure of openly supporting the commissioner’s retention after Kennedy’s election in 1960. Coleman further expressed the other directors’ concern about Dominy’s overbearing attempt to influence the NRA to adopt a resolution “supporting hydropower development as a source of financial support for the Reclamation program.” That and the attack on Clyde signaled “the idea that the federal government is all-powerful.”⁷⁸ Dominy refused to back down, all but dismissing the NRA’s continued relevance in advancing the cause of reclamation.⁷⁹

The failed attempt to bundle the Burns Creek project into the Rivers and Harbors bill in 1962 and again in 1963 killed any real hope of getting the project passed. The project resurfaced periodically for the next few years and supporters clung to the idea that the project was best

⁷⁷ George Clyde to Floyd E. Dominy, 5 November 1962, FED-AHC, box 9, folder: 1960-1963 Articles, Statements, Papers.

⁷⁸ Alex Coleman to Floyd E. Dominy, 19 December 1962, FED-AHC, box 9, folder: 1960-1963 Articles, Statements, Papers.

⁷⁹ Floyd E. Dominy to Alex Coleman, 15 January 1963, FED-AHC, box 9, folder: 1960-1963 Articles, Statements, Papers; Floyd E. Dominy to George Clyde, 15 January 1963, FED-AHC, box 9, folder: 1960-1963 Articles, Statements, Papers.; and Floyd E. Dominy “Remarks...Before the National Reclamation Association,” 13 November 1964, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1964.

packaged as a flood control measure with the public works committee.⁸⁰ The Burns Creek debate followed a familiar pattern for controversial projects. Both sides could marshal an impressive array of facts as they talked past each other. Shrewd political maneuvering and a keen sense of timing were critical. In this case, Burns Creek supporters had little leverage. Potential political supporters from outside the region were not eager to associate themselves with a project that appeared to threaten the nation's beleaguered coal miners. Instead, Burns Creek became a rallying cry for both sides in the reclamation debate. Eventually, concerns and critiques of the growing environmental movement would eclipse the cries of fiscal conservatives. Perhaps more than any other project of the Dominy era, Burns Creek gave credence to the popular charge that the Bureau desired only to build dams for their own sake. While it would have performed the functions the Bureau described, it has proven unnecessary.

The first two years of Kennedy's administration brought mixed result for Dominy and the Bureau. The support he received during the presidential transition in late 1960 no doubt emboldened and encouraged him. By early 1963, he was secure enough in his position to turn his back on the most powerful arm of the irrigation lobby. He was beginning to develop a reputation among the Interior brass as being unmanageable, an independent operator and a potential political liability. But he could get things done in Congress when political appointees like Udall could not and his voice carried greater weight in the West. Dominy's strong power network in Congress ensured that any attempt to remove him would invite considerable protest. But Burns Creek had dealt a serious blow to the Bureau, more so than the environmentalists' opposition had over Echo Park. No longer could the Bureau expect general endorsement of its plans. As it

⁸⁰ H. T. Nelson to Floyd E. Dominy 10 January 1963, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: Correspondence, 1963 Blue Envelope Letters.

turned out, Burns Creek was merely the opening skirmish in a protracted war over hydropower development in the West.

Eight: Power Struggles

Lost amid the environmentalist furor during the Colorado River Storage Project authorization process in the mid-1950s was the politically contentious problem of building an integrated electrical power transmission network in the upper Colorado Basin. Since the genesis of the Rural Electrification Administration during the New Deal era, public power projects had generally enjoyed wide support among westerners. But in the years since, the demographic shift from rural to urban areas and the region's industrialization gave rise to a number of powerful private utility companies. During CRSP hearings the private utilities had been as vocal as the environmentalists in their demands. To maintain political consensus over the already controversial project, Congress had been deliberately vague about transmission infrastructure and power marketing in the legislation.

When Floyd Dominy attacked Burns Creek opponents at the Fremont Dam dedication he also referenced an article in *The New York Times* with warnings from private power executives urging the industry to begin interconnecting the Southwest power grid before the federal government did so. "That, I think sums up the attitude of these obstructionists much better than I can—don't do anything until you have to but take such steps as necessary to retain your monopoly," Dominy said.¹ This renewed contest between private and public power promised to be altogether different from the Hells Canyon controversy a decade earlier. Most westerners now agreed that hydropower revenues from Bureau dams were essential to continued irrigation development. For Dominy and other Interior officials, failure here meant more than simply being muscled out of a river valley by the Army Corps or a private power company; ultimately the Bureau's survival was at stake.

¹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Remarks...at Fremont Canyon Powerplant Dedication," 28 April 1961, FED-AHC, box 23, folder: 1961 April-Travel.

Over the three years of Kennedy's administration, Interior experienced deep internal divisions and showed the limits of its power. In part this disorganization can be attributed to simple office politics, made worse because so many players were professional politicians. But it also indicated a critical divergence of opinions as the federal government and the public were reassessing the meaning of conservation in the United States. Interior secretary Stewart Udall would never entirely break free of the mold of a development-minded westerner. Floyd Dominy certainly never did. Although the Bureau of Reclamation still continued to spend enormous sums of money and built dams at a record pace, it was slowly losing pride of place among the Department of the Interior's many competing agencies.

During CRSP hearings in 1954, five major investor-owned utility companies from the upper basin proposed an arrangement for the federal government to build the major transmission "backbone" between federal dams except in cases where "existing or projected transmission systems of companies could do the job." Private utilities would also have the right to "wheel" the power at corporate rates provided preference customers (local utilities and non-profits) retained protected rates. Both the House and Senate agreed Interior should give the utilities' proposals due consideration in future planning. But all parties recognized the paramount importance of power revenues to the CRSP's long-term viability. When Congress authorized the CRSP in 1956, it directed the Secretary of the Interior to begin building dams, power plants, and associated transmission lines. Project cost estimates included sufficient funds to build an all-federal transmission backbone.²

² No Author, "Appendix I and Appendix II to Memorandum to Secretary Udall," 17 March 1961, OB-JFK, box 23, folder: Memo: Colorado River Storage Project Transmission Division 1961-1962.

The next year, John Saylor took to the House floor to attack the “ill-starred” project’s “real purpose”: hydropower production. He argued that small thermal plants were more than capable of meeting the region’s slowly growing power needs. Bureau price rates of 6 mills per kilowatt-hour were half again as high as private power rates. Why the high federal rates? Saylor correctly pointed out that most of the CRSP’s planned irrigation developments in the upper basin were at high altitudes with short growing seasons. Without subsidies approaching eighty-five percent of cost they were simply not feasible. Saylor accused the Bureau of misleading both Congress and the Eisenhower administration about the CRSP’s financial viability and asked the appropriations committees to reexamine the project in light of the Bureau’s supposedly inaccurate estimates.³ But even as Saylor made his plea, private power supporters were losing another battle to build transmission lines from the Trinity unit of California’s Central Valley Project. In February 1957, Secretary Seaton had recommended a bill for partnership development of Trinity power. The bill had failed in the House, largely due to the opposition of Democratic congressman (and later senator) Clair Engle. In 1960, the Budget Bureau requested funds for Bureau of Reclamation construction of the Trinity network.⁴

Chastened by the Trinity debacle, Seaton took a more flexible approach to CRSP transmission. With the Bureau’s guidance, Seaton called for private utility proposals meeting strict criteria. Not only must service to preference customers be protected, the utility companies also had to ensure power rates were sufficient to pay off the project without interrupting the planned irrigation development schedule.⁵ Seaton tasked Dominy with reviewing the proposals. The utilities offered to build approximately two-thirds of the 3,000 miles of transmission lines,

³ John Saylor, untitled speech draft, 18 January 1957, JPS-IUP, box 31, folder 18.

⁴ “Fact Sheet: On Public vs. Private Power,” *Congressional Quarterly*, 10 November 1961, 4-5.

⁵ Ottis Peterson, “Information for the Secretary’s Press Conference,” 8 February 1960, FAS-DDE, Interior Series, Press Conference Briefing Books Series, box 5, folder: Press Conference, February 9, 1960 (7).

leaving the Bureau to supply the upper basin's least populated (and least profitable) areas. To that point, the private utilities had been silent on power rates. But contrary to Saylor's assumptions, when the Bureau demanded specific figures the utilities also estimated a six-mill rate. While the proposals were under federal review, a pro-public power study in 1960 estimated the utilities' version of a combined federal-private system would have increased the CRSP's cost to taxpayers by \$637 million over its century-long payout period.⁶

Dominy found that the private utility companies could meet the department's criteria except in the crucial area of ensuring timely development of planned irrigation projects. Using the proposed all-federal plan as a "yardstick" by which to measure the utilities' proposals, Dominy calculated the utilities would have to charge 6.57 mills per-kilowatt-hour to ensure continued irrigation development past 2015. However, this seemingly insignificant rate increase would have increased total charges to preference customers by nearly \$3 million a year. Although the government would have saved construction and maintenance costs and gained increased tax revenue under the private proposals, the project payout period would have been extended and irrigation development delayed.

Dominy also recognized potential political difficulties. Private construction of the transmission backbone would have gone against the long-standing principles of most congressional Democrats, who as a rule supported public power. In a policy memo to Seaton in November 1960, Dominy concluded that the government should reject the utilities' proposals.⁷ Seaton concurred and announced the administration's support for an all-federal plan just three days before Kennedy's inauguration. The decision came in the waning hours of Eisenhower's

⁶ No Author, "Appendix I and Appendix II to Memorandum to Secretary Udall," 17 March 1961, OB-JFK, box 23, folder: Memo: Colorado River Storage Project Transmission Division 1961-1962.

⁷ Floyd E. Dominy to Fred Seaton, 30 November 1960, FED-AHC, box 22, folder: Professional File, 1961 CRSP Transmission n(Power) Panel Discussion.

presidency and under the watchful eye of congressional Democrats, but the Republican administration's last-minute endorsement gave the Bureau significant political cover from its conservative detractors.

As a candidate, Kennedy had explained away his “nay” vote on the upper Colorado bill in 1955 as a stand against the bill's weak protections for public power.⁸ No one was surprised, then, when Stewart Udall immediately reaffirmed plans for an all-federal system. Rebuffed, the private utilities began a public relations offensive in advance of the annual appropriations process.⁹ As with the cost-benefit analyses that guided debate over irrigation projects, both sides manipulated the same data to justify ideological positions and argued over semantics. Dominy and Bureau officials took to the stump to counter the utilities' specific technical and economic charges as well as the specious charge that the CRSP was merely the first step in a resurgent Fair Deal conspiracy to seize control of the power grid from Los Angeles to New England. In June, Dominy publically debated E. M. Naughton of the Utah Power and Light Company in Salt Lake City. Naughton downplayed Seaton's and Udall's support for the federal system, arguing that neither knew much about the power industry and were acting instead on the recommendation of Dominy and the “Bureau of Power.” Responding to the utilities' strongest argument—that a federal system would mean lost tax revenue—Dominy countered that irrigation development was ultimately more import to the regional economy and would bring in its own tax revenue. Each man accused the other of hiding his true plans from Congress and the public.¹⁰

The Bureau had powerful support in Congress. On the Senate floor, Utah Democrat Frank Moss parroted Dominy's argument that an all-federal system was vital to the timely

⁸ John F. Kennedy to Helene Monberg, 06 July 1960, HM-CSS, series 6, box 6, folder 8.

⁹ No author, “Commissioner's Staff Meeting,” 10 May 1961, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1958-1961 Staff Meetings.

¹⁰ “Power Line Debate Stirs Hot Denials,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3 June 1961.

development of the upper basin's irrigation projects, no doubt concerned for the future of the CRSP's extensive subsidiary, the Central Utah Project. Tennessee Democrat Estes Kefauver found Moss "most persuasive" and warned his colleagues of the dangers of a private monopoly. The government might own the dams and hydroelectric turbines, but the utilities needed only to control the distribution network to "create a completely effective bottleneck through which enormous profits can be diverted."¹¹ But floor speeches for the record did not usually translate into action. By mid-July Dominy had grown increasingly frustrated with the House appropriations committee for delaying Bureau testimony on the issue, complaining to a friend, "I'm practically chained to my desk with the future most uncertain." The delay also frustrated the Senate, which broke protocol and scheduled hearings before the House reported a bill.¹² Witnesses for the western utility companies had already testified before the House in June. When House appropriations committee chairman Clarence Cannon released their testimony nearly six weeks later, he questioned their dogged determination. "This would appear to indicate a large financial gain is at stake, a vast amount of money," Cannon told reporters. "If this is good for the private utilities, why is it not good for the federal government?"¹³

Dominy also responded to attacks from Robert Person of the Public Service Company of Colorado. Person had assured Congress in June that the utilities "want honestly and sincerely to do our part in making these projects more feasible, and we do not expect the nonreclamation areas to continue to put money in western reclamation where it can be shown that there is outright waste of taxpayers' funds."¹⁴ At a public banquet in Denver in July, Person accused the

¹¹ "Senate Power Lines Debate Centers on State's Project," *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 July 1961.

¹² Floyd E. Dominy to John Delphia, 14 July 1961, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1961 Personal.

¹³ "Solon Claims 5 Utilities Stall U.S. Power Plan," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 15 July 1961.

¹⁴ US Congress, House. Committee on Appropriations, *Public Works Appropriations for 1962*, part 4, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 427.

Bureau of surreptitiously adding new infrastructure to the plan, raising costs \$11.5 million above the initial yardstick estimate.¹⁵ Dominy called Person's claim "a lot of poppycock" and claimed the Bureau's revisions were minor and contingent on future interconnection between systems. He reiterated the Bureau's belief that reclamation and future development of the West would suffer under the private utility scheme, warning "rapid population growth would soon place this country in a position of farmland shortage unless timely offsetting actions are taken."¹⁶ Unconvinced, Person wrote to Wayne Aspinall and accused the Bureau of operating in secrecy. The financial commitment was "of sufficient magnitude that it should not be brushed aside or explained with quips and meaningless phrases." But there was little the interior committee chairman could do in any case.¹⁷ The immediate problem at hand was the \$13.6 million dollars Interior had requested for initial construction. Although this was a bare fraction of the final cost, once the Bureau began work, the utilities were effectively locked out forever.

The Bureau generally enjoyed support in the western press. Yet Ottis Peterson, Dominy's assistant for information and frequent public surrogate, was concerned that public power advocates were not getting support from compatriots outside the upper Colorado River Basin. He argued for a "snow job in support of the Federal transmission system" to counter the perception that the issue was simply a "showdown fight between industry and socialism."¹⁸ Peterson also drafted a letter for Dominy's signature to the editor of *The New York Times* complaining about a reporter's misquotation of the commissioner and simplification of the Bureau's position. Selling power cheaply to the public was indeed important, as the reporter quoted, but Dominy's "primary concern" was to ensure adequate financing for the CRSP's associated irrigation

¹⁵ "\$11.5 Million Boost for Project Charged," *Denver Post*, 19 July 1961

¹⁶ "U.S. Reclamation Chief Blasts Private Utilities," *Gazette Telegraph [Colorado Springs, CO]*, 30 July 1961.

¹⁷ Robert T. Person to Wayne Aspinall, 1 August 1961, WNS-UD, box 68, folder 9.

¹⁸ Ottis Peterson to Floyd E. Dominy, 18 July 1961, FED-AHC, box 19, folder: 1961 CRSP-General.

projects. “To present an objective picture,” Peterson wrote, “you would be well advised to order a story on the affirmative side of the all-Federal transmission proposal.”¹⁹ Dominy also wrote an op-ed for the *Denver Post*, perhaps the Bureau’s staunchest media ally in the West, emphasizing past bipartisan support and congratulating *Post* staff for their “fair-minded coverage.” The *Post* included a photo of Dominy with the caption “out of the political arena.”²⁰

The decision to provide appropriations for the transmission lines was anything but apolitical. By late August, Cannon still had not brought the public works bill to the House floor, working instead with Aspinall and other Democrats to gather votes. Also lending support was Ohio Democrat Michael Kirwan, who Dominy had cultivated as an ally during appearances before the appropriations committee. Udall was concerned enough to warn Kennedy that the president’s personal endorsement might be necessary.²¹ An attempt to block the transmission appropriation failed in the public works subcommittee on August 31 and again in the full appropriations committee a week later. Iowa Republican Ben Jensen then attempted a “teller vote” on the House floor to strike the transmission lines from the legislation and recommit the appropriations bill, which failed 224 to 182.

Jensen’s support came from Republicans and a handful of southern Democrats. The House Republican Policy Committee, concerned as always with any perceived threat to free enterprise, made the Jensen vote a party issue. However, fourteen western Republicans broke ranks on the symbolic measure and the House overwhelmingly approved the public works appropriation with only thirty-one negative votes. The appropriations bill, a mixture of vital infrastructure funding and pure pork, touched nearly every congressional district in the nation.

¹⁹ Floyd E. Dominy to Editor, 14 July 1961, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1961 Personal.

²⁰ “Power from Colorado River Project,” *Denver Post*, 20 August 1961

²¹ Stewart L. Udall, “Report to the President,” 22 August 1961, SLU-UA, box 88, folder 6.

Few members could risk upsetting the hometown electorate.²² In the Senate, Arkansas Democrat John McClellan fought to restrict the Bureau from building the entire transmission package, although this measure was dispensed with in conference committee between the two houses with support from western Democrats. The final bill allowed the Secretary of the Interior to build an all-federal system unless “practicable and in the national interest to enter into wheeling arrangements with private power interests.”²³

Private power supporters across the West were dismayed, but the utilities did not go away empty-handed. Almost immediately, Udall directed Dominy to begin negotiations with the five companies for a mixed system. “Now the basic decision has been made by Congress,” the secretary told reporters, “the compromises are up to the technicians, not the politicians.”²⁴ The Bureau stood to benefit as long as the government was not left building only the scraps the utilities deemed unprofitable. With a congressional mandate for an all-federal system, Dominy could negotiate from a position of strength, cutting federal costs while ensuring orderly irrigation development. Within months all but the Arizona Public Service Company entered into wheeling and construction agreements with the Bureau. The compromise saved the Bureau \$27 million in construction costs and promised to add \$77 million to the CRSP basin fund over eighty years. Most importantly for reclamation interests, the agreements would “finance all major dams and participating reclamation projects in the Basin.”²⁵ Ever the optimist, Udall also hoped for “a new form of government-industry cooperation” to resolve the public-versus-private power controversy and allow for regional power inter-ties modeled after Western Europe.²⁶

²² “Fact Sheet: On Public vs. Private Power,” *Congressional Quarterly*, 10 November 1961, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “Udall Says Dispute up to Technicians,” *Deseret News*, 16 October 1961

²⁵ United States Department of the Interior, “Interior Department Makes Decision on Colorado River Storage Project Transmission System,” 20 February 1962, FED-AHC, box 19, folder: Professional File, 1961 CRSP-General.

²⁶ Stewart L. Udall, “Report to the President,” 19 September 1961, SLU-UA, box 88, folder 6.

Like Udall, some observers hailed the compromise as a model for future disputes.²⁷ But public power advocates believed Udall had betrayed their efforts. The government had publically agreed to the utilities' proposals on simple letters of intent rather than binding contracts, a move that threatened to weaken public power's hand in further negotiations.²⁸ Clyde Ellis, general manager of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association—an organization as inflexible in its own ideology as any private utility—called the agreements “bewildering and seemingly naive.” Ellis and his colleagues were concerned that the Interior department had allowed the private utilities a toehold from which to construct “tollgate” sections of the transmission system, effectively granting them control over power distribution.²⁹ Clarence Cannon was surprised at the department's apparent about-face. “This is a critical period in protecting the consumer from the encroachment of the predators,” he wrote Udall. The power lobby had never been “so active and aggressive and uncompromising.”³⁰ Udall assured Cannon that western Democrats were in accord with the decision. He agreed the private power lobby had been ruthless, but asked Cannon not to regard the agreements as a private power victory. “The truth of the matter is we dictated the terms!”³¹

At the July 1962 groundbreaking for Blue Mesa Dam in Colorado, Dominy asked the audience to consider why so many “urgently needed” irrigation projects in the region had yet to be built. He conceded that most were not feasible without massive power subsidies. As always, water users were to repay to their maximum ability. But that would only cover fifteen to twenty percent of total cost. The Bureau, he said, could not take these projects before Congress for

²⁷ “Cooperative Power Policy,” *Washington Post*, 26 February 1962

²⁸ “Public Power Leader Charges Gains Were Traded,” *The Sacramento Bee*, 9 March 1962

²⁹ Clyde T. Ellis, “Statement,” 20 February 1962, FED-AHC, box 20, folder: 1961-1963 CRSP-General.

³⁰ Clarence Cannon to Stewart L. Udall, 24 February 1962, FED-AHC, box 19, folder: Professional File, 1961 CRSP-General.

³¹ Stewart L. Udall to Clarence Cannon, 28 February 1962, FED-AHC, box 19, folder: Professional File, 1961 CRSP-General.

authorization without assurances they were self-liquidating. Reflecting on the transmission situation, Dominy noted how the nation had moved beyond the old private-versus-public power dispute about *who* would generate and market power. Instead it was a simple matter of cost. The federal government could not continue to develop the West without a steady and dependable revenue stream from hydropower. Although the public and many conservative members of Congress still sounded the refrain of creeping socialism, private power interests could no longer rely on simple ideological arguments. Instead, they had to prove they could meet the costs of developing western irrigation. The utilities' first proposals for marketing CRSP power in early 1961, Dominy said, "so far exceeded these costs as to make the project infeasible." As the follow-on agreements with the utilities showed, the federal government was willing to work with private industry. But a handful of corporate investors could never be allowed to slow the pace of western settlement.³²

Although unpopular with public power advocates and many reclamation boosters, Eisenhower's emphasis on partnership with private industry and local governments gave Interior officials a general set of guidelines to follow when developing federal conservation policy. Kennedy had no such overriding philosophy, nor did he appear to have much of a personal interest in western development or the growing environmental movement. At times, this had the effect of leaving the department rudderless. The upper echelon was a talented roster, from Udall down to agency chiefs like Dominy and even regional field personnel. But the lack of a coherent mission among the seemingly random collection of strong-willed political appointees was troubling for a department with so many conflicting responsibilities and mandates. The major

³² Floyd E. Dominy, "Address...at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for Blue Mesa Dam on the Gunnison River in Colorado," 7 July 1962, FED-AHC, box 31, folder: Speech File, 1962.

players frequently cultivated support from rival factions among industry, Congress, and the states. This allowed short-term gain for personal agendas but did little to advance conservation's cause in the long run.

Like most cabinet appointees, Stewart Udall had surprisingly little input in selecting his immediate subordinates. Some, like the assistant secretary for water and power development, Kenneth Holum, were generally supportive of their boss and the administration. But like Holum, they often lacked the political clout and management experience needed to rein in the career civil servant cadre. Others, like Under Secretary James K. Carr, were political opportunists of the first order. Carr's main qualification for the job seemed to be his California roots. Many westerners outside Arizona had protested when Kennedy selected Udall. The Secretary of the Interior has the power to make decisions that could potentially privilege one state over another. This authority became especially controversial after the landmark 1963 Supreme Court decision in *Arizona v. California*, which allowed the secretary to apportion the Colorado River in times of shortage. With the support of California governor Pat Brown and Senator Clair Engle (who also tried to engineer Dominy's ouster at the same time) Carr became the department's number two man.³³ The appointment troubled some California Democrats who feared that Carr, like Brown and Engle, would pay only lip service to the liberal ideals of acreage limits and coordinated federal development of the West's water.³⁴ In the end, Carr's prickly personality and unabashed allegiance to California interests caused friction throughout the Interior department hierarchy.

Of all Dominy's rancorous professional relationships, few were as troublesome as his running feud with Carr. One of Carr's favorite targets was Dominy's travel schedule. Typically,

³³ Helene Monberg to Bill Nelson, 9 December 1960, HM-CSS, series 8, box 7, folder 11.

³⁴ Paul S. Taylor to John F. Kennedy, 12 December 1960, OB-JFK, box 9, folder: Correspondence Regarding Appointment; and Walter E. Packard to John F. Kennedy, 5 December 1960, OB-JFK, box 9, folder: Correspondence Regarding Appointment.

the commissioner spent as much as one-third of his time outside Washington at project sites and speaking engagements. Carr often held up Dominy's travel authorizations, picking apart the commissioners' speech drafts and threatening to embarrass the department with last-minute cancellations at major industry gatherings.³⁵ The two also sparred over Bureau promotions. Dominy habitually chose candidates for politically sensitive positions without consulting the secretary or his assistants. This practice angered both Carr and Ken Holum, who often as not sided with the under secretary. Dominy clearly understood that even trivial personnel matters could have significant political repercussions but claimed his decisions were apolitical and in the interest of efficiency.

Matters came to a head in late 1962 when Carr insisted—against Dominy's wishes—that Robert Pafford, a Bureau outsider from the Army Corps of Engineers, take charge of the Bureau's regional office in California. In a long memo to Udall, Dominy affirmed his support for the Kennedy administration's "daring" vision of effective and efficient government operation. The Bureau was on the cusp of a record-breaking year of construction progress despite petty bickering among senior department officials. The problem was not limited to promotions. Dominy claimed Carr (and to a lesser extent Holum) carried out a passive-aggressive campaign against the Bureau, choosing to sit on even routine paperwork. "Where frank discussion is obviously demanded," Dominy wrote, "we encounter innuendo, oblique reference, [and] corridor asides." Dominy appealed to the secretary to arbitrate the dispute. Instead, Udall tasked his administrative assistant, Orren Beaty, with running interference between Carr, Dominy, and the

³⁵ See, for example, Floyd E. Dominy to Stewart L. Udall, 8 May 1962, SLU-UA, box 99, folder 2; and James K. Carr to Kenneth Holum, 7 May 1962, SLU-UA, box 99, folder 2.

rest of the Interior brass.³⁶ Beaty issued a torrent of daily memos, both to the secretary and “for the files,” blending gossip with hard information. Having been with Udall since the secretary’s days in Congress, Beaty was loyal to a fault and had a talent for conjuring up conspiracies against his boss.

The western press kept a sharp eye on discontent within the Interior ranks. In September 1962, a false rumor circulated that Carr had frozen Dominy off the official plane during President Kennedy’s inspection of western water projects. According to a Helene Monberg article in *The Pueblo [CO] Star-Journal and Chieftain*, Wayne Aspinall warned Udall against future bad treatment of Dominy.³⁷ (“That girl is a headhunter,” one Bureau official wrote of Monberg’s role in fomenting dissent in the department.) The paper later retracted the story but still claimed that “there is no doubt [Aspinall] would go to bat for Dominy.”³⁸ Despite nominal authority over both Carr and Dominy, Udall found his hands were largely tied. Without the political support of Carr’s California patrons, the secretary had little hope for a regional water development program in the Southwest. Dominy had mildly damaged his standing in Congress during the CRSP transmission fight but he still enjoyed wide support among rank-and-file reclamationists in the West. He was probably the only Interior official who could bridge the gap between the congressional Republicans who disliked Udall’s liberalism and the Democrats who were unwilling to support projects anywhere near Arizona, home state of controversial conservative senator, Barry Goldwater.³⁹

³⁶ Oren Beaty, “Memo Re Conversation with Commissioner Dominy,” undated, OB-JFK, box 46, folder: Memos to SLU, 1962 (9 of 9); and Floyd E. Dominy to Stewart Lee Udall, “Reclamation faces a crisis,” undated, FED-AHC, box 17, folder: Professional File, 1964-1967 Pollution.

³⁷ “Warning to Interior,” *Pueblo [CO] Star-Journal and Chieftain*, 23 September 1963.

³⁸ “Conservationists Dislike Aspinall Wilderness Bill,” *Pueblo [CO] Star-Journal and Chieftain*, 16 September 1962; and Bill Davoren to Orren Beaty, 15 January 1963, OB-JFK, box 45, folder: Interior Department Activity, 1961-1963 (4 of 5).

³⁹ “Udall Effects Troubled Truce in Two-Year Carr-Dominy Feud,” *Pueblo [CO] Star-Journal and Chieftain*, 25 February 1963.

Carr created other problems for Udall. The under secretary believed his first loyalty was to California, arguing that his appointment had been to ensure westerners (and Californians in particular) that Udall would not unduly favor Arizona's needs. "I have not been able to do this job," Carr told Orren Beaty bluntly. The under secretary insisted California's concerns were slighted in department policy discussions.⁴⁰ Dismayed at Interior solicitor Frank Barry's efforts to protect acreage limitation restrictions in California, Carr became isolated and resistant to direction. Beaty repeatedly cautioned Udall that he was losing his grip on the department. Each assistant secretary and agency chief was operating independently and Udall's failure to take a principled stand on policy matters or personnel disagreements was weakening not only the secretary's leadership but that of his subordinates.⁴¹ "The time is coming when of necessity you are going to have to say [to Carr] in plain language that you are the Secretary, and that you have to have his support and co-operation or at least his assenting silence."⁴² But Udall did little to rein in Carr or anyone else, undermining efforts to enact policy in the West. When Udall began promoting a regional water plan for the Southwest in 1963, Carr leaked information to Clair Engle's staff and suggested ways to slow Udall's progress.⁴³ As Dominy knew, maintaining western unity was always tricky. It was even more so when the department appeared to hold more than one opinion on a subject. As time went on, Carr became openly critical of Udall's "lack of interest in administrative matters" and the secretary's emphasis on recreation and parks instead of water development, a sentiment echoed in the West.⁴⁴ Despite Udall's efforts at

⁴⁰ Orren Beaty to Stewart Lee Udall, 24 April 1962, OB-JFK box 46, folder: Memos to SLU, 1962 (3 of 9).

⁴¹ Orren Beaty, "Memo to SLU," 12 February 1962, SLU-UA, box 98, folder 12.

⁴² Orren Beaty, "Notes to SLU," 16 December 1963, OB-JFK, box 40, folder: SLU as Secretary, 1963 (8 of 12).

⁴³ James K. Carr to Clair Engle, 12 June 1963, CE-CSUC, box 142, folder 1.

⁴⁴ Orren Beaty, "Notes to SLU," 16 December 1963, OB-JFK box 40, folder: SLU as Secretary, 1963 (8 of 12); and "Powell Fuss is Symbolic of Reclamation's Troubles," *Daily Sentinel*, 8 April 1964.

damage control in the press, Carr's barely concealed insubordination only added to the perception among many westerners, and Dominy, that Udall was failing at his job.⁴⁵

In August 1962, Dominy accompanied Udall to the Soviet Union to inspect hydropower projects. The trip resulted in a minor scandal for the administration just weeks before the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although Udall had not anticipated meeting with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier sought out the secretary and the delegation's unofficial cultural ambassador, Robert Frost. The poet, eighty-eight-years-old and suffering a high fever, had an amicable conversation with Khrushchev as the Soviet leader tried to sound out Kennedy's potential response to the impending crisis. On the return trip, a weary Frost blurted out to journalists his personal belief that the United States was "too liberal to fight," disingenuously attributing the comment to Khrushchev. Frost's indiscretion destroyed his relationship with Kennedy. As head of the American delegation, Udall assumed responsibility for the gaffe.⁴⁶ The secretary's mild praise for Soviet accomplishments also provided conservatives in Congress and the media with ammunition for later attacks on Interior policies. Dominy was only slightly less suspect. The commissioner, who revisited the Soviet Union a year later to examine irrigation works, lauded the Soviets' prioritization of natural resource development over personal material gain.⁴⁷

For all his troubles with subordinates, Udall found even less comfort in his boss. On the surface, John Kennedy seemed to share Udall's vision of balanced natural resource development and had even written a polite introduction to Udall's book, *The Quite Crisis*. Kennedy's weak personal support for Interior programs during the administration's first year had been a deep disappointment to the secretary. Unlike Theodore Roosevelt, who "was part of the frontier and

⁴⁵ "Udall Voices High Praise for Carr's Work," *The Fresno Bee*, 11 February 1963.

⁴⁶ Stewart L. Udall, "Robert Frost's Last Adventure," *The New York Times*, 11 June 1972.

⁴⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, "Speech...at Associated General Contractors Conference," 20 September 1962, FED-AHC, box 5, folder: Correspondence, 1962 Aug Sept Oct. Dominy would make a similar assessment of the Chinese government after a visit to the Three Gorges Dam near the end of his life.

saw despoilment and misuse,” Kennedy was simply unconcerned about conservation. Udall urged a reluctant Kennedy to visit western conservation sites in September 1962, partly to expose the president to the beauty of the West and partly to shore up Democratic support before the midterm elections. No matter how hard Udall had tried to make Interior a department with national relevance, the Interior secretary was also Kennedy’s de facto director of western political operations.

Assessing Kennedy’s disinterest in the region, Udall wondered if he could “expect a young President who has never known the West to have a deep interest in its problems—particularly at this time.”⁴⁸ Kennedy’s speeches at western dam sites in 1962 (drafted with Udall’s input) sounded all the right notes. But the political calculations were never far from the president’s mind. “How do we put over the idea to these westerners,” Kennedy asked Udall, “that they are getting something and should support the rest of my program?” The answer was “national interdependence,” a theme Kennedy expanded on to enthusiastic western audiences. Udall conceded Kennedy’s ability to win over a crowd and the president’s obvious delight on a visit to Yosemite National Park. But Kennedy had little interest in western conservation. “He’s too city,” Udall wrote, “and the sea’s the only outdoor area where he’s really at home.”⁴⁹ Udall was hopeful the tour would make conservation a household word. But Kennedy’s inner circle expressed doubts the subject had sufficient weight to make for good political press.⁵⁰

The following summer, Udall planned another administration tour of conservation sites. Although advertised as a “non-political” trip, Udall steered the president toward anticipated

⁴⁸ Stewart L. Udall, “JFK,” undated, SLU-UA, box 100, folder 2.

⁴⁹ Stewart L. Udall, “JFK’s Western Trip,” 14 September 1962, SLU-UA, box 103, folder 13.

⁵⁰ No author, “Tentative Plans for Visit of the President to Pueblo, Colorado,” undated, WHCF-JFK, box 981, folder: TR 45 8-29-62 to 9-10-62.

western battleground areas for the 1964 election.⁵¹ Few observers were fooled. “The true ‘conservation’ objective is not so much to conserve as to expand the President’s own acceptability,” columnist William S. White wrote. “The true ‘natural resources’ objective is to keep in the Senate, after 1964, the resources of such men as Mike Mansfield of Montana, the Senate Democratic leader; Gale McGee of Wyoming; Clair Engle of California; Howard Cannon of Nevada; Frank Moss of Utah; Henry Jackson of Washington; Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota; and Quentin Burdick of North Dakota.” A pro-Kennedy bloc of western senators would have been critical to advancing the president’s second-term legislative agenda.⁵²

After a symbolic visit to the Pinchot family estate in Pennsylvania in late September, Kennedy sprinted across the West, travelling more than 8,000 miles in four days. As he had the year before, Kennedy appeared committed to conservation. But again Udall questioned the depth of the president’s commitment. The emotionally detached Kennedy was completely disinterested in the western landscape. “I can hardly, with fairness, complain that my man does not have a streak of Thoreau or Robert Frost in his New England makeup,” Udall wrote shortly after the trip, “but I long for a flicker of emotion, a response to the out of doors and the overwhelming majesty of our land.” As always, Udall looked to the two presidents Roosevelt for examples. “Imagine a conservation trip where the leader never gets out of his suit or steps off the asphalt. How TR would have hooted at us—he who slept in the snow with Muir and had the time of his life at 45.”⁵³

⁵¹ Stewart L. Udall, “Memorandum to Kenneth O’Donnell,” 12 July 1963, SLU-UA, box 107, folder 9.

⁵² William S. White, “Reclamation Project,” 6 September 1963, United Feature Syndicate clipping, OB-JFK, box 23, folder: JFK and Water Issues.

⁵³ Stewart L. Udall, “Some Impressions of the President on the Conservation Trip of Sept. 24-29/63,” 8 October 1963, SLU-UA, box 112, folder 4.

Stewart Udall was on a plane bound for Japan high over the Pacific when he received word of Kennedy's assassination in November, 1963. As Udall well knew, Kennedy did not have strong connections to the West and treated the region's concerns as merely another political problem to be solved. But as far as the western public understood, Kennedy shared their conservation vision and the Bureau of Reclamation had benefited with record construction budgets. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, was from the tradition of the soil-conserving, dam-building New Deal liberals who had cut their political teeth under Franklin Roosevelt. But he was also attuned to the nation's growing appreciation for natural beauty and increasingly preoccupied with urban issues, civil rights, and the plight of the poor. Floyd Dominy and the Bureau struggled to adapt their rhetoric to Johnson's Great Society vision. With construction underway on the CRSP's various sub-projects, the Interior department turned to the seemingly intractable problem of solving the lower Colorado River basin's water problems. The political situation here was made all the more acute because the region, and California especially, had already run up against the limits of the river's natural water supply. And almost daily, the Bureau encountered new voices of opposition.

Nine: Reclamation's High Water Mark

In January 1964, Dominy travelled to Denver to congratulate his engineers for a record-setting year. The Bureau had completed nearly \$360 million worth of construction and had managed to do so with 6,000 fewer employees than in the equally well-funded years of Mike Straus's reign. Dominy spoke with pride about the Bureau's overseas work in the upper Nile Valley of Ethiopia, in Afghanistan, and on Thailand's Pa Mong Project. In addition, he had wrestled funds from Congress to build a new, state-of-the-art office complex to replace the drafty, ramshackle storage facility that had long housed the Bureau's engineering talent.¹ Good times were still ahead for Dominy and the Bureau. Through the mid-1960s, appropriations remained at record highs. The days of "no-new-starts" were long in the past.

But the numbers were misleading. Increasingly, Dominy and his allies found opposition at every turn. The most obvious signs of trouble were deepening divisions among western politicians and between sub-regions. The Colorado River Basin was finally coming to terms with the river's finite water supply. As the Southwest squabbled over limited water supplies, the Pacific Northwest and northern California were drawn into the conflict. Formerly sympathetic newspaper editors became increasingly vocal critics of the Bureau's plans. And at that critical moment, just as the always-unstable base of western political support was fast eroding, the modern environmental movement broke away from old-line conservationism. Buoyed by the victory at Dinosaur National Monument in the mid-1950s and passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, groups like the Sierra Club made their presence felt on the national stage. Environmentalists were no longer willing to trade away one special place for another, as they had during CRSP deliberations, and grew increasingly inflexible in their opposition to the Bureau. Added to the

¹ Floyd E. Dominy, "Remarks...Before the Construction Engineers' Conference," 29 January 1964, FED-AHC, box 25, folder: 1964 Travel-January.

mix were millions of blue-collar and middle class campers, boaters, and fishers who made up the largest but least vocal participants in the conservation debate.

In late August 1963, Stewart Udall announced a new regional water development scheme aimed at solving the Southwest's water problems. On the surface, the Pacific Southwest Water Plan (PSWP) was simply the lower Colorado Basin's counterpart to the CRSP. But it was much more ambitious. Significantly, the PSWP acknowledged—for the first time, out loud and without reservation or qualification—that the region had run up against the Colorado's natural limits. While the plan included a number of hydroelectric facilities and irrigation projects, Arizona native Udall also called for a wide range of water-saving measures, from the eradication of unnecessary vegetation near irrigation works to the wholesale reuse of 2.7 million acre-feet of municipal wastewater and sewage. He proposed two other measures destined to become controversial: massive water imports from outside the region and development of nuclear-powered desalination plants to convert seawater and wastewater to freshwater.² Despite the plan's visionary outline, the PSWP was largely a grab bag of old projects packaged under a new plan. It offered a little something for everyone in the Southwest. As always, politics were at least as important as engineering feasibility. Indeed, water managers found much to fault about the plan's wildly optimistic technical assumptions. But in the end, it was political stubbornness and fierce parochialism that would kill the plan, and with it the last best hope of coordinated and rational water development in the Southwest.

At the center of the PSWP controversy was octogenarian Arizona senator Carl Hayden. Over his fifty-six-year congressional career, Hayden worked tirelessly to develop Arizona and

² U.S. Department of the Interior, *Pacific Southwest Water Plan*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1963), 5-6.

the American West. Water, of course, was always a concern. But so too were labor shortages, insufficient transportation infrastructure, and urbanization. No issue, however, was as dear to Hayden as the Central Arizona Project, an ambitious plan to transfer water from the Colorado River at Lake Havasu across 336 miles of desert to the Phoenix-Tucson greenbelt. Hayden had advocated a version of CAP since joining Congress as Arizona's first state representative in 1912. After several false starts in the late 1940s, and over the strident opposition of California senator Sheridan Downey and Nevada senator Pat McCarran, Hayden shepherded CAP bills to approval in 1950 and 1951. But the measures died in the House under the full weight of California's opposition. John Saylor, working at the behest of the California delegation, played a key role in opposing the project, arguing that no decision should be made on further development until the question of apportionment between the states could be adjudicated in court. And there the matter sat for more than a decade as the Supreme Court case between Arizona and California lumbered on. With some reluctance, Hayden ran for a seventh Senate term in 1962, largely to see CAP to fruition. After decades of delay and disappointment, he was not about to let Stewart Udall dismantle or ignore the most critical water project in Arizona's history.³

Having emerged victorious from more than a decade of legal wrangling, Hayden believed Arizonans could claim the moral high ground and pursue CAP as a standalone project. A comprehensive basin bill like the PSWP would inevitably invite delays and political opposition. "I do not need to remind you," Hayden wrote CAP supporters, "that our last and only chance... is at hand and that we must not fail in our efforts."⁴ Arizona's urban areas were expanding rapidly and groundwater reservoirs were fast running dry. Municipal needs grew more important than

³ Jack L. August, Jr., *Vision in the Desert: Carl Hayden and Hydropolitics in the American Southwest* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1999), 153-174.

⁴ Carl Hayden, memorandum, 10 May 1963, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1961-1963 Central Arizona Project.

irrigation. All five members of the state's congressional delegation, including Republicans Barry Goldwater and John Rhodes, submitted similar CAP bills in 1963. But appearances of unity were deceiving. Political observers recognized that while Hayden's senatorial colleagues would generally support CAP, a much tougher fight lay ahead in the House. Hayden's "go-it-alone" measure offered nothing for other Colorado Basin states. Interior officials questioned Hayden's seeming naiveté in claiming that CAP's true failure a decade earlier was merely a question of title to Colorado River water rather than California's well-financed opposition campaign.⁵ Officially, Udall endorsed Hayden's spare five-page bill. But in his report to Congress, the secretary left no doubt about Interior's future intentions, writing that CAP was merely a first step that would "fit admirably" into a larger, integrated Southwest water plan.⁶ In the meantime, Dominy worked to retain Hayden's support for future federal development of a dam at Marble Canyon, a building site the state of Arizona coveted and a key piece of the PSWP.⁷

Udall and Kennedy manipulated the PSWP and CAP to partisan advantage, working through the press to point out "Senator Goldwater's sponsorship—exclusively for the benefit of his own state—of the largest federal water project in history."⁸ But Udall underestimated the potential for political opposition to the PSWP within western state capitals. Writing to the governors of the lower basin states, he outlined his regional development plan and noted "the hour for statesmanship in the Pacific Southwest has arrived."⁹ True to form, California politicians were eager to protect their water rights and ensure the state retained seniority. Clair Engle warned Governor Edmund "Pat" Brown not to entangle the State Water Project with any

⁵ Orren Beaty, "Thoughts While Reading the Sunday Edition of *The Arizona Republic*," 2 June 1963, SLU-UA, box 166, folder 8.

⁶ Stuart L. Udall to Henry M. Jackson, undated, FED-AHC, box 12, folder 1963 Central Arizona Project.

⁷ Orren Beaty, "Colorado River and Related Matters," 7 June 1963, SLU-UA, box 166, folder 6.

⁸ Stewart L. Udall to John F. Kennedy, 3 September 1963, OB-JFK, box 23, folder: JFK and Water Issues.

⁹ Stewart L. Udall to Governor, 12 June 1963, OB-JFK, box 15, folder: General/Current Pacific Southwest Water Plan (Governors.)

federal designs.¹⁰ Arizona governor Paul Fannin assured Udall that Arizona's politicians were in accord insofar as support for CAP, although he sidestepped the secretary's larger concern that the arid West remain united.¹¹ Hayden, as always, was sensitive to potential threats to CAP. He reiterated to Udall that no matter how Interior tried to package a comprehensive water program, CAP must not become a mere adjunct.¹² He even requested an audience with the president, and urged to Kennedy to compel Udall to support CAP before pursuing a regional plan. But Udall was still pursuing the PSWP as planned at the time of Kennedy's death in November.

While the Bureau conducted paper studies, bureaucrats and politicians in the Southwest squabbled how over best to solve the region's water development problem. Roy Elson, Hayden's ambitious assistant and presumed heir to the senator's seat, publically denounced the PSWP in January. California's inability to reconcile water interests within the state threatened CAP and projects like it, he argued.¹³ Elson played to a receptive audience. Arizonans were piqued at Udall's apparent duplicity and some even accused the secretary of slighting CAP in an effort to concentrate power in Washington, DC.¹⁴ Even New Mexico and Nevada, heretofore bit players in the historic drama over Colorado River waters, began flexing legislative muscle. Nevada was unwilling to include the Southern Nevada Water Project in the PSWP since the former project was vital to Las Vegas's continued expansion. Like Hayden, Nevada governor Grant Sawyer recognized the low probability of PSWP authorization and did not want the state's most

¹⁰ Clair Engle to Edmund G. Brown, 9 July 1963, OB-JFK, box 15, folder: General/Current Pacific Southwest Water Plan (Governors.)

¹¹ Paul Fannin to Stewart L. Udall, 20 June 1963, OB-JFK, box 15, folder: General/Current Pacific Southwest Water Plan (Governors.)

¹² Carl Hayden to Stewart L. Udall, 13 July 1963, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1961-1963 Central Arizona Project.

¹³ "Udall's Water Plan Shaky, Elson Says," *The Arizona Republic*, 24 January 1964.

¹⁴ "Udall, Where are You?" *The Arizona Republic*, 14 August 1963.

important water project bogged down in a stillborn regional plan.¹⁵ In October, New Mexico State Engineer Steve Reynolds presented a thinly veiled threat that the state's continued support for CAP was contingent on receiving 30,000 to 40,000 acre-feet of Colorado River beyond its existing entitlement.

Echoing Hayden, Arizona politicians demanded "unqualified support" for CAP as payback for the state's unfailing assistance for other western projects. Just a year earlier, John Rhodes had acted as New Mexico's surrogate (since the state had no Republican representatives in the House) and gathered GOP support for the long delayed San Juan-Chama project.¹⁶ Udall warned Governor Fannin he was "ready to have a big brawl if that is what the people of Arizona want" but hoped the parties could reach an accommodation.¹⁷ The upper basin states, which were developing much more slowly than the Sunbelt Southwest, were also wary of the PSWP. The state delegations clung to the protection of the 1922 Colorado River Compact. Practically speaking, upper basin interests knew that if the lower basin began using water earmarked for future upper basin development, it would be practically impossible to turn off the taps of millions of metropolitan users in Los Angeles or Phoenix.

Having managed to mollify Arizona's concerns temporarily, Udall turned to California. The state, assisted by longtime water lawyer Northcutt Ely (whom Dominy nicknamed "Oily" for the lawyer's underhanded ways) demanded California receive a guaranteed 4.4 million acre-foot priority in times of shortage.¹⁸ Ely feigned support for the PSWP but noted that California would bear the burden of future shortfalls. According to some projections, by the year 2000

¹⁵ A. B. West to Floyd E. Dominy, 4 November 1963, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: 1963 Blue Envelope Letters; and Grant Sawyer to Stewart L. Udall, 1 November 1963, FED-AHC, box 16, folder: Pacific Southwest Water Plan.

¹⁶ No author, Memorandum, 1 November 1963, OB-JFK, box 15, folder: General/Current Pacific Southwest Water Plan (Governors.)

¹⁷ Orren Beaty, Memorandum for the Files, 11 February 1964, OB-JFK, box 15, folder: Memos for the Files, 63-64.

¹⁸ FED-OH, 178.

perhaps only 2.9 million acre-feet would be available to the Golden State if Arizona and Nevada developed their full share of the river. This, of course, was unacceptable to California's large congressional bloc and would practically assure defeat of any major regional water plan.¹⁹ But Dominy and the department's legal staff convinced Udall that Arizona had to stand firm against any such guarantee and went so far as to draft a statement to that effect for Hayden.²⁰ For several months, Dominy's eyes and ears in the field had been informing him that California would never go along with the PSWP without major revisions to the plan, including firm commitments on water importation. With the increasing unlikelihood of a comprehensive regional plan clearing Congress in the near term, giving in to California's demand for the "4.4 guarantee" would have set a dangerous precedent and given the state an unfair advantage against other western states in future negotiations.²¹

As all the paper studies showed, any southwestern regional plan's success rested on transbasin water diversion. The Bureau already had a successful history of such projects. The sprawling, Depression-era Colorado-Big Thompson Project still brings 310,000 acre-feet of Colorado River water over and under the Continental Divide to the East Slope. After a decade of congressional maneuvering, Wayne Aspinall had guided the smaller but no less contentious Fryingpan-Arkansas Project to authorization in 1962. Meeting the needs of the Southwest's exploding population—Arizona gained more than a million residents between 1950 and 1970—would dwarf anything the Bureau had yet built. Professional and amateur transbasin schemes abounded. Initially, water would likely come from the short coastal rivers of northern California

¹⁹ Orren Beaty, Memorandum for the Files, 29 January 1964, OB-JFK, box 14, folder: General/Current (Hayden/Udall exchange) 1963-1964.

²⁰ Orren Beaty, Memorandum for the Files, 5 February 1964, OB-JFK, box 15, folder: Memos for the Files, 63-64.

²¹ A. B. West to Floyd E. Dominy, 4 November 1963, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: 1963 Blue Envelope Letters; and Ken Holum to Stewart L. Udall, 1 November 1963, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 8, folder: Pacific Southwest Water Plan – 1962-1963.

or the Snake-Columbia drainage. No less than a million acre-feet would be needed to supplement the Southwest's demands. The most grandiose visions saw a massive network of reservoirs and canals transporting water from Alaska and Canada into the West's major river basins.

Although Dominy was never more than a lukewarm supporter of transbasin diversion schemes, he often hinted obliquely at the possibility. Western water developers at all levels were largely content to continue dreaming up new Colorado River projects, kicking the can down the road to a day when water might be piped down from the Yukon. Dominy was ambitious but he was also a realist who recognized that if the PSWP could not bring together a handful of states sharing the same river, then a transnational network of basin-to-basin transfers was probably impossible. The ecological absurdity and high costs of transporting water hundreds of miles between river basins attracted many enemies, ranging from environmentalists to fiscal conservatives. Most vocal, however, were bitter westerners who saw "their" water disappear over the mountains, never to return. In the Pacific Northwest, especially, politicians and the public cast a nervous eye at their southern neighbors.

While Udall struggled to reconcile competing political interests in Washington, Dominy took the department's case to the grassroots. As always, his theme was unity. In Las Vegas he warned members of the Colorado River Water Users Association "there is danger in further procrastination, in furthering debate while Rome burns; for the situation in the Southwest is approaching the critical stage." At their peril, each of the five lower basin states could continue to pursue selfish interests and try to "go it alone," Dominy said. But some projects, like Utah's Dixie, were unfeasible by themselves. In any case, Congress was unlikely to authorize more piecemeal development in the region. Nor was the federal government willing to part with key

dam sites on the Colorado River.²² He reassured Arizona audiences that the PSWP gave priority to CAP development. But CAP was only a partial solution to the state's needs. "Additional water must come to the State before the faucets in Tucson and other cities dribble dust instead of water," he said. Only a regional development plan like the PSWP could import water from the north and provide additional power revenue to subsidize future growth.²³

In all his speeches, Dominy also called for greater water conservation measures. The lower reaches of the Colorado River would need to be artificially straightened and concrete lining of canals was essential. In addition to the eradication of water-sucking phreatophyte vegetation, he also looked ahead to full-scale nuclear desalinization. He was especially optimistic about the Bureau's Project Skywater, which aimed to wring more moisture from the clouds over the Sierras and Rockies.²⁴ Privately, however, he was skeptical of the PSWP. Udall's assistant, Orren Beaty, voiced concern that Dominy's chief loyalty was to Hayden. Invariably, CAP received top billing in the commissioner's speeches.²⁵

Nor was Dominy the only one of Udall's subordinates to have misgivings or an alternate agenda. In fact, the secretary's staff was nearly as disunited as was the Southwest. In late December, James Carr inexplicably informed the press that the department planned to revise the PSWP, threatening to scuttle months of negotiations and the state review process. Carr indicated that Udall had realized the original plan was flawed and simply floated the PSWP as a trial balloon.²⁶ John Carver, the assistant secretary for public land management, complained that the

²² Floyd E. Dominy, "The Challenge of the Colorado," 5 December 1963, FED-AHC, box 31, folder: Speech File, 1963-1964.

²³ Floyd E. Dominy, "Tucson's Stake in Arizona's Reclamation Future," 11 December 1963, FED-AHC, box 31 folder: Speech File, 1963-1964.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Orren Beaty, undated memo slip, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Floyd Dominy, 1964-1966 (1 of 2.)

²⁶ "Water Plan to Arizona is Dropped," *The Sacramento Bee*, 26 December 1963.

department had done little to protect Native Americans from the PSWP's land condemnation process.

Carver also vehemently protested the department's plan to build a "high" dam at Bridge Canyon which would have backed slack reservoir water about thirteen miles into Grand Canyon National Park. From the outset, National Park Service leadership had balked at the PSWP and warned of a potential showdown with park supporters.²⁷ Inundating a natural wonder of the world might have been justifiable in a national crisis, but developing the Southwest was not such a crisis. "If the lower structure means a brake on the growth of the region," Carver wrote Ken Holum, "that is a price that must be weighed in the balance."²⁸ Udall would eventually accept the idea of an undeveloped Grand Canyon. Dominy never would. But for the moment, the two dams at Bridge and Marble canyons were non-negotiable revenue sources for the PSWP.

In February the department submitted a revised version of the \$3.1 billion PSWP for Budget Bureau and presidential review. The major changes included a set of three explicit guarantees, all of which benefitted California. The first promised, through reservoir storage, a permanent annual allotment of 4.4 million acre-feet to California, 2.8 million acre-feet to Arizona, and 300,000 acre-feet to Nevada. This effectively eliminated the Secretary of the Interior's arbitration responsibilities during times of river shortfall. The revised PSWP also guaranteed water users would pay the same price for delivery whether the water was naturally available or simply held over in storage, a subsidy of tens of millions of dollars. The last guarantee protected California's future economic position in water exports from the north.²⁹

²⁷ Hillory A. Tolson to Kenneth Holum, 6 June 1963, SLU-UA, box 166, folder 9; and John A. Carver to Kenneth Holum, 17 January 1964, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 8, folder: Pacific Southwest Plan – 1964.

²⁸ John A. Carver to Kenneth Holum, 6 January 1964, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 8, folder: Pacific Southwest Plan – 1964.

²⁹ Walter I. Pozen to Lee White, 24 February 1964, FED-AHC, box 16, folder: Pacific Southwest Water Plan.

Because Arizona had yet to develop its full capacity, California was already using 700,000 acre-feet more than its entitlement. The guarantees meant California would not be penalized for the overdraft and might actually benefit depending on how the massive shell game with the Southwest's water resources developed. The state only stood to benefit as Arizona's share of the Colorado River continued to pour into southern California.³⁰

Even if the states agreed on the overall framework, Udall and his lieutenants still had to clear the Budget Bureau, which acted as a check on bottom-up policy formation in the executive branch. Lyndon Johnson, who desperately wanted to win the presidency in his own right after replacing Kennedy, was reluctant to endorse the politically contentious venture so close to the general election. The PSWP's unprecedented guarantee provisions troubled Budget director Kermit Gordon and his deputy Elmer Staats.³¹ As March turned to April, Budget forwarded a negative appraisal of the PSWP to Scoop Jackson's Senate Interior committee.³² By the end of the month, Staats and the Budget Bureau decided to punt, calling for a task force to study the problem further. Staats recommended that four cabinet-level departments (and several "observer" agencies) review the region's water needs. This was troubling for the Bureau since two rival agencies, the USDA and the Army Corps, were on the proposed committee. Both were already on record against the PSWP.³³ "Staats is not just dragging his feet but has set his heels," Orren Beaty concluded.³⁴ Six weeks after Udall submitted his proposal (and after Johnson met with California governor Pat Brown) both Budget and Interior were still in the dark.

³⁰ Henry P. Caulfield, Jr., to Stewart L. Udall, 21 January 1964, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 8, folder: Pacific Southwest Plan – 1964.

³¹ No author, untitled meeting notes, undated (probably 30 March 1964), SLU-UA, box 167, folder 6.

³² Philip S. Hughes to Henry M. Jackson, 9 April 1964, NARA-RG48, box 8, folder: Pacific Southwest Plan – 1964.

³³ Elmer Staats to Stewart L. Udall, 25 April 1964, FED-AHC, box 16, folder: Pacific Southwest Plan.

³⁴ Orren Beaty, "Memo to SLU," 30 April 1964, OB-JFK, box 47, folder: Memos to SLU, 1964 (2 of 7).

Even with firm support from Budget, Carl Hayden would still have posed a formidable challenge to the department's plans. Udall was convinced that Roy Elson was working to sabotage the comprehensive plan (and thus Udall's reputation) in favor of CAP. In February, Hayden announced he would oppose action on a bill for the Auburn-Folsom Unit of the Central Valley Project. While he claimed to support California's overall reclamation program, "I shall insist...that proposed California reclamation projects be considered in proper order relative to the long-delayed and urgently needed Central Arizona Project authorization." Hayden refused to allow a delay on the CAP because it was part of the PSWP. If that were the case, Auburn-Folsom was equally subject to delays, as it was the critical linkage for transporting surplus northern California to the south.³⁵

Privately, Staats had already suggested that Johnson shelve the matter for a year as long as Hayden could be appeased in the meantime.³⁶ During testimony before the Senate, Hayden agreed in principle with Budget that delay was probably necessary for all of the PSWP's ancillary projects except CAP and the associated dams at Bridge and Marble canyons.³⁷ Hayden began working with California Republican Thomas Kuchel to draft compromise legislation for immediate authorization of the two dams and CAP. In exchange, California would receive the "4.4 guarantee" for twenty-five years and northern California would retain ultimate rights over any water transferred south. But the Budget Bureau remained skeptical and declined to endorse the compromise outright.³⁸

³⁵ Carl Hayden to Henry M. Jackson, 20 February 1964, SLU-UA, box 167, folder 6.

³⁶ Elmer Staats to Lyndon B. Johnson, 7 February 1964, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 8, folder: Pacific Southwest Plan – 1964.

³⁷ Stewart Udall and Carl Hayden, Senate testimony transcript, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1963-1966 Central Arizona Project.

³⁸ Resources and Civil Works Division to Elmer Staats, 1 May 1964, WHCF-LBJ, Subject Files, box 142, folder: LE/NR 7 11/22-63-10/24/64.

With a compromise at hand in early May, Johnson's White House staff and the Bureau of the Budget advised the president to back the agreement. But the president's support came at a price. At that moment, the Senate was midway through a ten-week southern filibuster against the legislation that became the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In exchange for administration support for the Hayden-Kuchel compromise, Johnson wanted Hayden's yeas vote for cloture, a move that would also have rewarded the moderate Kuchel, an ardent supporter of civil rights legislation.³⁹ In perhaps the firmest sign that the PSWP was ultimately doomed, Udall concurred with the president's maneuver. He suggested only that Johnson wait until the cloture vote was successful before giving Hayden a full-throated endorsement.⁴⁰ Hayden was not opposed to civil rights legislation but he was a firm believer in the Senate's right to unlimited debate. He would not have voted for cloture under ordinary circumstances. When the vote came on June 10, he waited in the cloakroom, having given majority whip Hubert Humphrey assurance he would vote for cloture if absolutely necessary. In the end, Hayden's support was unnecessary.⁴¹ He was the only Democrat outside the old Confederacy to vote against cloture.

So far, the Bureau of Reclamation had been surprisingly absent from the debates over the PSWP, a sign that perhaps the new vision of integrated, basin-wide water plans was beyond the political capabilities even of the well-connected Floyd Dominy. (By the end of the year, Carr was working to edge out entirely the Bureau from department discussions on PSWP strategy.)⁴² Through the summer and fall of 1964, action on all major water legislation stalled ahead of the general election. Just as Kennedy had been reluctant to support the CAP before the election,

³⁹ Mike Manatos to Larry O'Brien, 11 May 1964, WHCF-LBJ, Name Files, box 175, folder: Hayden, Carl.

⁴⁰ Stewart L. Udall to Lyndon B. Johnson, 7 May 1964, WHCF-LBJ, Subject Files, box 203, folder: FG 145 Department of Interior 4/1/64-6/30/64.

⁴¹ Ross R. Rice, *Carl Hayden: Builder of the American West* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 59.

⁴² Orren Beaty, "Note to SLU," 6 December 1964, OB-JFK, box 41, folder: SLU as Secretary, 1964 (6 of 7).

Johnson similarly distanced himself from Hayden and the Arizona political contingent. The Phoenix press reported that Johnson was wary of Barry Goldwater's strength in California.⁴³ Perhaps too, Johnson had followed Budget's counsel to study the problem further.

Despite the delay, Dominy still preached western unity to southwestern crowds and sounded optimistic that the Eighty-ninth Congress would authorize a variation of the PSWP in "the year of decision" in 1965. He also expanded the standard Bureau of Reclamation boilerplate to address two new issues. The first was an admission that transbasin diversions should not occur until the region of origin had been fully developed, a nod to concerns in the Pacific Northwest. As he told a Los Angeles audience, "a man thirsting on the desert does not pass up the first waterhole to go after other waterholes on the horizon." The second was the admission, for the first time, really, of the threat from "an entirely sincere but misguided group of conservationists" who were beginning to gather in in opposition to building dams anywhere near Grand Canyon National Park.⁴⁴ Up to that point, acrimony over the PSWP had been limited to old hands in the western debate: state water engineers, governors, and Interior planners. But a new challenge to the very soul of the conservation movement was just over the horizon.

While bureaucrats, politicians and lawyers thrashed out the technical details of further development of the West's rivers, a growing public debate was underway over the direction of American conservation. In large part this was due to the leadership change in the White House. Stewart Udall, who oversaw 55,000 employees in 17 very different agencies, believed he was just beginning to master "the best job in the country" at the time of Kennedy's assassination. The

⁴³ "Mo and the CAP," *The Arizona Republic*, 1 July 1964.

⁴⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, "Boulder City Draft," 23 November 1964, FED-AHC, box 25, folder: 1964 December; and Floyd E. Dominy, "Speech...before the Southern California Water Conference," 14 December 1964, FED-AHC, box 25, folder: 1964 December.

secretary wasted no time sketching out a conservation vision for Lyndon Johnson. But Johnson had not forgotten Udall's support for Kennedy during the 1960 election. Although Johnson retained nearly all Kennedy's staff, Udall was the last Cabinet secretary to receive an audience with the new president. "And boy, don't think he didn't haze me to show that he remembered," Udall recalled.⁴⁵

Just two days after Kennedy's funeral, Udall outlined for Johnson the Interior department's conservation priorities. In addition to support for wilderness legislation and new national parks and seashores, Udall asked for new starts for the Garrison Diversion and Auburn-Folsom South projects, as well as the umbrella legislation for the lower Colorado. He urged Johnson send to Congress a special message on conservation and follow Kennedy's footsteps on with western conservation trip.⁴⁶ Udall believed Republicans had "missed the boat on conservation" in their 1964 platform and he wanted Democrats to capitalize on the oversight.⁴⁷ As for Dominy, the commissioner repeatedly sounded the Udall-Johnson refrain of beautification of the American landscape and recreation for the masses, mindful of the need to associate the president with popular conservation measures and associate reclamation with the president's popular programs.

For the first time, Udall believed Interior's concerns were also the president's concerns. At a meeting on Johnson's Texas ranch in November 1964, Udall was amazed and gratified at Johnson's unfeigned interest in conservation. Udall expressed a hope that he and Johnson could develop a relationship similar to Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot or Franklin Roosevelt

⁴⁵ Stewart Udall, *Monumental: David Brower's Fight for Wild America*, DVD, directed by Kelly Duane (Berkeley, CA: Loteria Films, 2004).

⁴⁶ Stewart Udall to Lyndon Johnson, 27 November 1963, SLU-UA, box 107, folder 9.

⁴⁷ Stewart Udall to Bill Moyers, 24 July 1964, SLU-UA, box 115, folder 9.

and Harold Ickes.⁴⁸ Johnson's "New Conservation" included highway and urban beautification projects, pollution control, and an expanded system of national and local parks. "This is the conservation that protects, and creates, and opens up parts of America to the people," Johnson told an audience in 1966. "It says: 'Here is the beauty and the recreation you need to refresh and enrich your spirit.'"⁴⁹ The most striking difference between the Kennedy and Johnson conservation philosophies was apparent where it really mattered: funding. Johnson's enthusiasm for conservation early in his administration took the Budget Bureau by surprise. "Budget's trouble," one White House staffer wrote Udall, "is that they consistently underestimate the way this man loves this land."⁵⁰

In time, Johnson's conservation agenda would run hard into the realities of expanding financial commitments to domestic social welfare programs and the ballooning costs of fighting in Vietnam. But for the first years of Johnson's presidency, at least, conservation was a national priority. It did not hurt, either, that Lady Bird Johnson was an avid supporter of conservation and national beautification. The First Lady even accompanied Udall on nearly a dozen conservation-themed trips in the 1960s. Udall believed their strong relationship was critical to advancing his agenda, and perhaps even saved his job in the administration.⁵¹

Dominy had spent most of his career promoting the cause of reclamation in front of Congress and water users groups. He now found himself in the midst of a growing public controversy, one that solidified his status as a villain among many westerners. Before ecology became a central consideration for wilderness preservation and environmentalists gained the

⁴⁸ Stewart Udall, "Notes on a Visit to the Ranch," 20 November 1964, SLU-UA, box 117, folder 2.

⁴⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, "The President's Remarks to the Members [of the National Recreation and Park Association] at the Washington Hilton Hotel, October 13, 1966," SLU-UA, box 158, folder 6.

⁵⁰ Stewart Udall, memorandum, 18 December 1965, SLU-UA, box 123, folder 2.

⁵¹ Stewart L. Udall, Oral History Interview II by Joe B. Frantz, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX, 7-12.

muscle of legislation like the National Environmental Policy and Endangered Species acts, aesthetics and a desire to preserve specific types of recreation drove arguments to keep wild places wild. The 1964 Wilderness Act was an early, critical legal foundation for defending these areas. Dominy first encountered the legislation in the summer of 1964 in the aftermath of a devastating spring flood in the upper Missouri River drainage in Montana. Floodwaters had overwhelmed the region's hydraulic infrastructure, killing thirty-one and destroying the Swift and Two Medicine dams.⁵² Even before the flood crested and the scale of the damage was clear, one of his subordinates warned: "We should try to keep the [Army] Corps away from moving in on this, since the flooding in the upstream tributary is our 'baby' and we should stick with it."⁵³ Dominy flew immediately to Great Falls to survey the damage. But his greatest challenge would not come from another federal bureaucracy.

In August, the House public works committee summoned Dominy to discuss the disaster. Most observers agreed that more robust and coordinated flood control measures were needed. From an engineering standpoint, a dam at Sun Butte on the Sun River was the best solution. But the reservoir behind the dam would have inundated some 2,500 acres of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Just a week before the hearing, the House version of the wilderness bill was approved on its way to eventual passage in the Senate. Montana representative James Battin dismissed the potential legislative conflict between wilderness areas and dams as a mere "mechanical problem." Dominy ventured a rare personal opinion on the witness stand to say it would be "a terrible mistake to set aside for all time wilderness areas on the grounds they never can be utilized for anything...Our needs change as our population increases and the nature of our

⁵² The best recent account of the 1964 Montana floods is Aaron Parrett, "Montana's Worst Natural Disaster: The 1964 Flood on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 20-31.

⁵³ Wilbur Kane to Floyd E. Dominy, 9 June 1964, FED-AHC, box 13, folder: 1964 Disasters.

citizenry changes.”⁵⁴ Montanans were sharply divided over the proposals. With the destruction still fresh in their minds, many called for immediate federal spending on dikes and dams. But a sizable minority, including hunters and other outdoor recreationists, urged restraint. They cautioned against hasty decisions that would inundate vital wildlife habitat or wilderness areas.

Floyd Dominy’s unapologetic defense of reclamation earned him the enmity of a whole generation of environmentalists and made him an infamous figure. But he shared many of the preservationists’ concerns. Like his opponents in the Sierra Club, he saw urbanization, sprawl, and population growth as serious threats to the national welfare. But rather than seek out wilderness, Dominy saw salvation in the rural agricultural landscapes he knew so well. He decried the “haphazard encroachment of urban endeavors onto our best farmland.”⁵⁵ Looking ahead at western expansion from the vantage point of the 1960s, and presaging the modern bumper sticker sentiment that “pavement is forever,” he envisioned more people, more automobiles, more businesses, and “more acres of concrete covering earth that once grew crops.”⁵⁶ In a 1965 speech, he observed with amusement “that some entrepreneur was planning a Disneyland-type establishment in an eastern city and that one of the features would be a real live cow.” Turning serious, he continued: “a child who has never seen a cow—or a waterfall, or a mountain, or a lovely valley—has indeed been severely deprived.”⁵⁷ Dominy was primarily concerned with the preservation of rural life and the manipulated lands of the family farm. But like wilderness advocates, he saw the loss of green space and the nation’s growing disconnect from nature as problematic.

⁵⁴ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Public Works, *Montana Flood Damage* 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1964, 3-12.

⁵⁵ Floyd E. Dominy, “Let’s Protect Our Good Farmlands,” FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1964.

⁵⁶ Floyd E. Dominy, “Western Irrigation 20 Years From Now,” FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1963.

⁵⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, “Remarks...Before the Outdoor Recreation Congress for the Greater Pacific Northwest,” 1 April 1965, FED-AHC, box 26, folder: Professional File, 1965 Travel – April.

Even by the late 1950s, government planners also recognized the acute shortage of recreational opportunities for an expanding and restless population of suburbanites and city dwellers. The nation's increased motorization and mobility offered an escape from the cities and access to the outdoors. However, motorization could be a cause of blight. In 1957, two Wellesley College professors reported on the "growing excrescence" of "hot dog stands, frostee-wostee freeze dispensaries, juke joints, and reptile gardens" along the nation's highways and back roads. A year later, Congress established the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission. Composed of congressional members, federal bureaucrats, and representatives from companies like timber giant Weyerhaeuser, the commission's core would become the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in the Department of the Interior. This growing recognition of the public's need escape to the outdoors encouraged water managers at the federal and local levels to make recreation an integral part of their reclamation plans.⁵⁸

In 1965, Congress passed legislation placing recreation on equal footing with irrigation, navigation, flood control, and other traditional aspects of reclamation. Although the Bureau had long recognized the public's interest in the artificial oases at project reservoirs, recreation had almost always been an afterthought. By the 1960s, however, the Bureau operated more than 200 recreation facilities in cooperation with state governments and federal agencies like the National Park Service. Visitation at reservoirs exceeded twenty-five million visitor-days annually throughout the 1960s, and reclamation planners and local boosters recognized the enormous potential both for selling water projects to the public and enhancing local economies. With the new law, planners within the Bureau and Army Corps could charge up to fifty percent of costs to "non-reimbursable" recreation uses. This was a significant departure from the days when the

⁵⁸ Owen Stratton and Phillip Sirotkin, "The Crisis in Outdoor Recreation," 1957, SC-BANC, carton 88, folder 11. See also Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 115-117.

public had to “beat a path through the wilderness to the rim” of project reservoirs.⁵⁹ A newspaper editor in Washington State applauded the fact “that recreation is taking its place beside electricity, irrigation, and navigation as one of the necessities of modern life.”⁶⁰ Some conservationists remained wary of a closer relationship between their cause and recreation, however. As one advisor to the National Wildlife Federation remarked, “it seems that those interested in making money from recreation almost equal those who wish to recreate. Anything that can fly, walk, or swim has a tourist price tag.”⁶¹

As environmentalist opposition to the Bureau grew, recreation became an increasingly important selling point. Dominy was a late convert to the importance of recreation but he, too, had an affinity for national parks and outdoor activities. In a radio debate with the Sierra Club’s David Brower, Dominy argued that reservoirs near Grand Canyon might actually preserve the park’s spectacular scenery. “I used to love to go to Yellowstone,” he said, “but I don’t go there anymore. The impact of the number of people in Yellowstone makes it a very undesirable place to go during the summer months as far as I’m concerned.” A dam and a “lovely lake” at Bridge Canyon would “help divert some people from overpopulated places in the park. This,” Dominy argued, “is an advantage to the overall well-being and preservation of our natural beauty in our recreational opportunities.” Brower countered that Lake Powell could “provide all the reservoir recreation needed for a long time to come.” Rafting down the unimpaired river was “a special kind of adventure,” one that the reservoirs and Marble Canyon Dam would destroy forever.⁶²

⁵⁹ Dominy, “Remarks...Before the Outdoor Recreation Congress for the Greater Pacific Northwest,” 1 April 1965.

⁶⁰ “New Law Makes Recreation Equal Navigation, Irrigation,” *The Wenatchee Daily World*, July 13, 1965.

⁶¹ “Wildlife Group Questions Big Push on Conservation,” 11 April 1965, newspaper clipping, SLU-UA, box 153-94.

⁶² “Transcript of Discussion on Grand Canyon with Floyd Dominy, J. A. Ted Riggins, T. L. Kimball, and David Brower Circa 1960s,” DRB-BANC, carton 18, folder 1.

The explosion of motorized travel in the first half of the twentieth century encouraged wilderness advocates to advocate for undeveloped natural areas free of roads.⁶³ In the postwar era, the availability of relatively cheap motor boats coincided with the explosion of waterborne recreation opportunities at Bureau reservoirs, prompting similar questions about the relationship between nature, humans, and machines. Dominy saw ease of access and the convenience of motorized transport as a way of spreading both the Bureau's mission and a love of the outdoors to the masses. As Dominy told writer John McPhee, at reservoirs like Lake Powell "people can fish, swim, water-ski, sun-bathe. Can't you imagine going in there with your family for a weekend, getting away from everybody? But Mr. Brower says we destroyed it."⁶⁴ Like Dominy, Brower also believed "you can't go on a picnic anymore and get away from people." But making national parks too accessible was not the answer. Parks were for the people, he said, "but that doesn't mean the people who demand convenience. As soon as you move convenience in, you lose the park idea. You don't have to turn the Merced River into a Jones Beach to enjoy Yosemite Valley."⁶⁵

Since 1963, slack water backing up behind Glen Canyon dam had inched its way upriver, threatening the spectacular sandstone formation of Rainbow Bridge. The CRSP legislation had charged the Bureau of Reclamation with keeping Lake Powell's waters out of Rainbow Bridge National Monument. In September 1959, Dominy took a pack trip out to inspect Rainbow Bridge and evaluate plans for placing protective dams around the site. Although an avid outdoorsman, he later joked that "after four days on that horse I was so saddle sore that I walked out and

⁶³ Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), passim.

⁶⁴ John McPhee, *Encounters With the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, 1977), 171.

⁶⁵ "A Private Army Flexes Muscles For Conservation," undated news clipping (probably 1967), FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1966-1967 Sierra Club.

carried the horse.”⁶⁶ He came away from trip convinced “the violence to that scenic grandeur to perform this kind of construction would be so goddamn much more horrendous than to let a little water back in under that bridge.”⁶⁷ Despite vigorous protests from conservation groups, Stewart Udall agreed with Dominy’s assessment and the Bureau did not build the dams, diversion tunnel, and pumping systems that would have protected the site from the lake.

Udall’s decision was just one of many bitter disappointments conservationists experienced as development of the Colorado River continued along in fits and starts. One person complained to California Senator Clair Engle that if the Bureau did not build a protective dam at Rainbow Bridge, “it would then be possible for most any citizen, along with his other boating brethren, to roar under the Rainbow Bridge, full bore, eat hot dogs on Beer Bottle Beach, and paint his boat’s name across the canyon walls.” Only by making the trip to Rainbow Bridge difficult, the writer argued, could the visitor be suitably impressed by it. “The appreciation of many things,” he wrote, “is somewhat in proportion to the difficulty of access.”⁶⁸ Another man wrote Dominy, Stewart Udall, and Carl Hayden explaining that the “‘national recreation area’ created by the [Glen Canyon] Dam is well suited for people of stunted intelligence.”⁶⁹

For many working-class advocates of reservoir recreation, comments like these smacked of undemocratic elitism. One critic said of Sierra Club members that “from their favored education and social plateau, they are unable to hear and understand the plea of the blue collar and middle class white collar citizen for week-end and holiday recreation, which due to time,

⁶⁶ Ken Verdoia, “Interview: Floyd Dominy,” Glen Canyon: A Dam, Water, and the West, available at <http://www.kued.org/productions/glencanyon/interviews/dominy.html>. Accessed February 2013.

⁶⁷ FED-OH, 198.

⁶⁸ Russel L. Stockwell to Clair Engle, October 14, 1962, CE-CSUC, box 134, folder 2.

⁶⁹ John R. Goetz to Floyd Dominy, June 2, 1965, FED-AHC, box 21, folder: Professional File, 1965 CRSP-Lake Powell-Jewel of the Co.

distance and expense involved, will always be motor oriented.”⁷⁰ Hayden believed preservationists were hypocritical in their attacks on boaters, noting “paths and highways are now built to make our national parks and monuments accessible. Why not a waterway?”⁷¹ In an article titled “Trip Down Colorado Not for Average Guy,” journalist Ben Avery complained that, contrary to Sierra Club pronouncements, the Colorado River was not “‘a wild, free-flowing river’ to be enjoyed at will,” at least as far as the National Park Service was concerned. Sierra Club members frequently challenged the reclamationists’ claim that rafting the Colorado was a dangerous undertaking, citing the number of school children and elderly that made the trip. Avery discovered, however, that the park service maintained a tight grip on who floated the river. Permit regulations practically ensured that only commercial outfits could make the trip. Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, who had made the trip down the Grand Canyon twice (including one illegal extraction by helicopter), supported the restrictions but remarked that “the average citizen has neither the time nor the money for this trip; it is just for the rich.”⁷²

Historian Jared Farmer has argued of Lake Powell that “although the Bureau of Reclamation introduced the new Glen Canyon as ‘the place everyone will know,’ in practice, ‘everyone’ has been an exclusive category. Owning a boat and a vehicle capable of towing it (not to mention the time to get away) is generally a privilege of the upper classes. Even renting a boat requires a deep pocket.”⁷³ While a journey to Lake Powell can still be an expensive undertaking, many smaller Bureau reservoirs throughout the West provide opportunities for people to relax on the cheap. In fact, many communities often took an entitled view of their local reservoir. Because

⁷⁰ Van Harris to A. B. West, March 7, 1967, FED-AHC, box 20, folder: Professional File, 1967-1969 Colorado River Storage Project—General.

⁷¹ “Draft of statement for Senator Hayden at press conference on Lower Colorado River Basin Project,” CTH-ASU, box 4, folder 30.

⁷² “Trip Down Colorado Not for Average Guy,” *The Arizona Republic*, June 27, 1966.

⁷³ Jared Farmer, *Glen Canyon Dammed: Inventing Lake Powell and the Canyon Country* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999), 160.

the Bureau was obligated to consider the needs of irrigation, flood control, and power production first, reservoir drawdown often drew the ire of local sportsmen and community business leaders.

With drought gripping much of the West in the early 1960s, Dominy cited “constant complaints from recreation seekers and fishermen. We fully recognize the importance of this,” he said, “but we should not forget that the primary purpose of our projects is to conserve water for useful consumptive purposes.”⁷⁴ In California’s San Bernadino County, officials noted that low levels on Lake Havasu usually occurred during “the most attractive and comfortable season of the year.” Fearing the loss of tourist revenue, they lobbied their senators in 1962 for “a revision of present operating policy concerning water level for Lake Havasu.”⁷⁵ When low water levels plagued the reservoir at Flaming Gorge in 1964, the mayor of Rock Springs, Wyoming, urged “the legislature [to] take into consideration the value of the tourist dollar.” His solution was to rewrite local reclamation laws to supersede any federal statutes or interstate agreements that impacted recreational use.⁷⁶ Other westerners had grown to appreciate even mundane irrigation infrastructure for its recreation potential. When the Bureau closed access roads along irrigation ditches in New Mexico to prevent vandalism, outraged residents wrote their representatives. “I feel that ‘nature lovers’ are being unjustly penalized by the Bureau’s action,” one Albuquerque resident wrote, “and feel that those who have abused the privilege of the out of doors, could have been handled more directly.”⁷⁷

In the wake of the Glen Canyon fight, and anticipating a battle over dams near Grand Canyon, both sides churned out propaganda with a recreation focus. In 1963 the Sierra Club published *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado*. Prose from the likes of

⁷⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, “Address...Conference of the American Society of Civil Engineers,” 17 May 1962, FED-AHC, box 5, folder: Correspondence 1962 May- June.

⁷⁵ Nancy E. Smith to Clair Engle, January 9, 1962, CE-CSUC, box 142, folder 7.

⁷⁶ “Furor Stirred on Lowering of Reservoir,” *Green River (WY) Star*, September 17, 1964.

⁷⁷ Faith E. Jensen to Dennis Chávez, 14 January 1962, DC=CSR, box 139, folder 49.

Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein, writer Wallace Stegner, and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas accompanied famed photographer Eliot Porter's visual eulogy for Glen Canyon and the wild Colorado River. Distressed that conservationists' efforts had been too little, too late to save Glen Canyon, Brower and the Sierra Club used poignant imagery of the pre-Lake Powell canyon to raise awareness of the threat downstream.⁷⁸

Two years later, the Bureau countered with *Lake Powell: Jewel of the Colorado*. While it did not have the eloquent voices of a Stegner or Einstein, it did contain many of Dominy's personal photographs, an introduction by Udall, and a prominent epigraph from John Wesley Powell. (This last item caused one critic to speculate that the intrepid explorer "would turn over in his grave if he knew that he were being quoted in such a publication.")⁷⁹ The government printed thousands of copies, which Dominy gave freely to politicians, newspaper editors, and unconvinced preservationists. In the stiff prose that characterizes much of the book, Dominy recounted "a campfire with old friends on Powell's shores at dusk." "The fire burns low," he mused, "reflected in the placid lake. There is peace. And a oneness with the world and God." A side bar read: "There are millions in cities/Who have never seen/Red sandstone soaring skyward/Like cathedral spires."⁸⁰ Read out of context, this last verse might have come from the pen of Henry David Thoreau or John Muir, the sort of conservationist who saw contact with the wild as an antidote to the corrosive effects of urban life, rather than Floyd Dominy.

Given Dominy's reputation (and his atheistic leanings), the purple prose seems disingenuous. But while he may have lacked the talents and outlook of a Thoreau or Muir, *Jewel of the Colorado* reflected his own longstanding views on nature and those of millions who

⁷⁸ Eliot Porter, *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1963).

⁷⁹ Alfred F. Miller to Carl Hayden, March 9, 1966, CTH-ASU, box 12, folder 2.

⁸⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, *Lake Powell: Jewel of the Colorado* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 16.

visited Lake Powell and other Bureau reservoirs. Dominy went so far as to cite the Sierra Club's "beautiful" and "aptly titled" *The Place No One Knew* as justification for the Bureau's work in Glen Canyon. He argued that an "improved" Glen Canyon could aid Americans "tired in mind and soul."⁸¹ Dominy's "first and greatest thrill is still the mountains, canyons, rivers, and lakes of the Rocky Mountains," he explained to Utah senator Frank Moss. "But before Lake Powell existed, it was so difficult to get to the Canyon and it was so baked out and hot during the summer that few people would take the time and effort to visit it."⁸² Glen Canyon Dam *had* altered the environment significantly. But now, the ordinary visitor could enjoy a healthy sport fishery and easy accessibility. Most of Dominy's photographs in *Jewel of the Colorado* depict happy families camping, boating, and fishing before picturesque red sandstone backdrops.

Reaction to *Jewel of the Colorado* was mixed and reflected sharply divided views of the new "recreational playground." While many Lake Powell visitors were effusive in their praise, those who missed the old river responded bitterly. One critic dismissed the book as "a travel agency-type propaganda brochure." She took offense at the cover image of the "majestic natural canyon monument, disfigured by the wake of a speedboat." Of the writing, she noted the pages were simply "decorated by bits of doggerel cast in a sickly, pseudo-religious paean here and there."⁸³ A reviewer chided Dominy for the booklet's religious overtones, arguing "it is man worshipping man, and, in particular, one man worshipping himself."⁸⁴ John Saylor, Dominy's tireless congressional critic, urged an investigation into the booklet's funding. Saylor charged the Bureau with illegal use of federal funds to pay for propaganda. Eventually, the Interior solicitor

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Floyd Dominy to Frank E. Moss, February 5, 1965, FED-AHC, box 21, folder: Professional File, 1965 CRSP – Lake Powell Jewel of Co.

⁸³ Mildred K. Heatwole to Floyd Dominy, August 6, 1966, FED-AHC, box 21, folder: Professional File, 1965-1968 Co River Lower Colorado River Basin Project I.

⁸⁴ Alfred G. Etter, "Jewels, Gold, and God," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 50, no. 7 (1965): 9-10.

cleared Dominy and the Bureau of wrongdoing. This did little to quell the preservationists' bile, however, especially since the Sierra Club had recently lost its own tax-exempt status for a series of high-profile advertisements in national newspapers protesting the Grand Canyons dams. Some even accused Dominy and the Bureau of engineering the maneuver.⁸⁵

Jewel of the Colorado was just one salvo in Dominy's relentless effort to see his own definition of conservation triumph. Clearly on the defensive by the mid-1960s, he rarely missed an opportunity to take his case to the public. This high-profile activism did not sit well within Interior's upper ranks. Under Secretary John Carver wrote to Udall in 1965 that "the proud name of 'conservationist' is being used...as an epithet, a synonym for the enemy." "The lines are being drawn, even within the Department," Carver observed, citing Dominy's strident advocacy for dams at Bridge and Marble canyons.⁸⁶ The contentious relationship between Dominy and Udall grew frostier as Udall drifted away from the utilitarian philosophy that had long guided federal conservation policy. But the secretary had little control over Dominy's public behavior. When the commissioner lashed out at preservationists in a February 1966 speech with the comment, "I've seen all the wild rivers I ever want to see," Udall reminded Dominy that flood control was just one aspect of the department's conservation philosophy "but it should not be overstated or distorted in such a way that our other policies are undercut."⁸⁷

At the same time, Udall had to respond to David Brower's criticism that department policies muzzled National Park Service employees opposed to dams. Although Udall's own commitment to dams near Grand Canyon National Park was beginning to waver, he reminded Brower "the orderly working of government" prevented subordinate employees from actively

⁸⁵ Hal Rorke to Ottis Peterson, 21 June 1966, FED-AHC, box 27, folder: 1966 Travel – June.

⁸⁶ John Carver to Stewart Udall, 13 March 1965, SLU-UA, box 122, folder 3.

⁸⁷ "State Project Will Sell Conservation," *Bismarck [ND]Tribune*, 14 February 1966; and Stewart Udall to Floyd E. Dominy, 26 February 1966, FED-AHC, box 4, folder: 1966 Blue Envelope Letters.

opposing official department or administration policy.⁸⁸ All the while, Dominy's information assistant, Ottis Peterson, and the Bureau's regional staff kept up a steady stream of correspondence with media outlets trying to ensure the Bureau's case was presented fairly. After the Denver Public Library announced plans to open a conservation center in 1966, Dominy ordered "a quiet investigation" of the collection's ideological position. He suspected preservationist views would prevail and wanted a "course of action to get the positive side of the conservation story included."⁸⁹

The preservationist and utilitarian camps of the conservation movement had coexisted uneasily under the umbrella of American conservation since John Muir first squared off against dam builders in Hetch Hetchy Valley. By late 1966, however, the movement was nearing a point of irrevocable fracture. But Dominy still hoped that conservationists could find a way to balance development and preservation. He took his cues not from a growing body of "nature lovers" but from the impersonal statistics of increasing western population and personal consumption. And statistics mattered a great deal to Dominy. He foresaw with uncanny accuracy the West's nearly three-fold population increase between 1950 and 2000.

Dominy rebuked David Brower for the Sierra Club's emotionally charged anti-dam propaganda campaign. "You are doing the whole conservation movement a disservice," he wrote.⁹⁰ But this accusation would not have troubled Brower. "I dislike the word conservation," he once claimed. "It's sort of dull and sounds a bit self-righteous. But it's the best we have. And

⁸⁸ Stewart L. Udall to David Brower, 9 May 1966, FED-AHC, box 21, folder: 1966 Lower Colorado Basin Project I.

⁸⁹ Floyd E. Dominy to Regional Director, Denver, 30 November 1966, FED-AHC, box 4, folder: 1966 Blue Envelope Letters.

⁹⁰ Floyd E. Dominy, "Draft – Dear Mr. Brower," undated, probably December 1966, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 19667-1967 Sierra Club.

it's strange with a word as poor as that, so many people fight to use it as a defense of what they are doing. You go to a meeting of almost any group that is using up resources and somewhere along the line they will say, 'We're conservationists too.' Usually they would like to conserve other things—not what they are exploiting.”⁹¹ What is clear was that the collection of organizations and lobbyists we today call the “environmental movement” was considerably stronger in the mid-1960s than it had been during the CRSP authorization process a decade before. More significantly, it was not going to retreat in the face of Dominy’s increasingly strident defense of utilitarian conservation.

In time, mainstream conservation fell out of favor as environmentalists and “wise use” advocates hardened in political opposition. But for millions of westerners living in the region’s growing cities and suburbs, recreation was still the most immediate and tangible aspect of conservation, one that touched their lives in a way that engineering studies and irrigation contracts did not. They were concerned about access to nature, whether on undeveloped rivers or at artificial reservoirs. Many blue-collar and middle-class westerners simply took for granted their access to Bureau reservoirs. Because they were gaining rather than losing access to natural areas, they were not prominent participants in the public debate. While Sierra Club members wrote their legislators by the tens of thousands to protest the Grand Canyon dams, for example, supporters of reclamation projects visited reclamation facilities by the tens of millions without further comment. As far as Dominy was concerned, they simply cast a silent vote for reclamation every time they cast a line for non-native trout in an artificial Bureau of Reclamation reservoir.

⁹¹ David Brower, “California’s David Brower, No. 1 Conservationist,” *Life*, 27 May 1966, 40.

Ten: The Last Great Battles

Barely halfway through 1966, the Bureau of Reclamation's regional director in Boise wrote Floyd Dominy to proclaim the year "Anno Dominy."¹ Dominy had recently received a Public Works Man of the Year Award and a Grand Cross of the Order of Isabel the Catholic of Spain for his efforts publicizing that nation's extensive hydraulic network. The commissioner had appeared in cover stories for *Constructor* ("A Man Who Gets Things Done") and *Engineering News-Record* ("Apostle of Water.") Dominy also knew his subordinates had nominated him for Interior's Distinguished Service Award and a Rockefeller Public Service Award. Even amid growing controversy over dams on the lower Colorado River, National Wildlife Federation director Thomas Kimball took the time to endorse Dominy for the latter honor. Despite their ideological differences, Kimball lauded Dominy's frank and open manner.² Reflecting on his achievements, Dominy joked to a friend, "It is lucky I have the preservationists beating a constant drum-fire against me...Otherwise, I would have trouble retaining my humble outlook on life."³ Humility had never been one of Dominy's strong suits—he once refused to attend a community meeting in Montana unless he could be the featured speaker instead of the governor—and by 1966 the commissioner had achieved celebrity status in his field, proud even of the slings and arrows of his opponents.⁴ For someone who had never completely overcome the insecurity of being a mere economist in one of the world's most prestigious engineering agencies, Dominy found the recognition gratifying.

In the latter half of the 1960s, Dominy and his colleagues faced a variety of challenges. The issue of acreage limits, long a polarizing factor within the reclamation community, remained

¹ Harold T. Nelson to Floyd E. Dominy, 2 July 1966, FED-AHC, box 1, folder: Awards File, 1966.

² Thomas L. Kimball to Stewart L. Udall, FED-AHC, box 1, folder: Awards File, 1969.

³ Floyd E. Dominy to Budd O. Stevenson, 16 June 1966, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information, 1966 *Constructor* Article.

⁴ Gilbert Stamm to Floyd E. Dominy, 28 April 1965, FED-AHC, box 26, folder: 1965 Travel May.

a contentious issue in California. The Bureau's lackadaisical enforcement efforts angered many western liberals. Stewart Udall, although much admired for fairness and integrity, seemed to lack the forcefulness required to manage the diverse agencies and strong personalities in his charge. The nation was growing increasingly restless with Vietnam and the Great Society's failure to live up to its promises. Dominy's relationship to, and understanding of, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society had always been complex and ambiguous. Johnson owed much of his early political success to the sort of rural uplift programs Dominy believed the Bureau could still offer the nation. But by the late 1960s, the president's interests lay elsewhere. At times Dominy tried to update nineteenth-century rhetoric of blooming deserts to address the needs of an urban consumer society. Elsewhere, he spoke contemptuously of the social welfare programs that siphoned funds from his beloved agency. Although none of the participants probably recognized it at the time, the looming battle over the lower Colorado River signaled the end of the era of massive water projects. Even as the Bureau continued to celebrate its engineering successes, the political coalitions that had built the modern West were barely holding together. And just over the horizon was a new kind of environmentalism, one that forever reshaped American politics and rendered old-line conservationists like Dominy irrelevant.

A bedrock principle of the 1902 Reclamation Act was a restriction on the size of irrigated farms. By law, a single irrigator receiving federal project water could receive water on only 160 acres (later changed to 320 acres for husband and wife.) The intent was to distribute the benefits as widely as possible and prevent speculation and concentration of wealth. For the public, the issue was also one of fairness. Farmers should not enrich themselves on a government subsidy. During Dominy's tenure, less than one percent of irrigators on federal projects were receiving

water on excess lands, although Mike Straus's policy of technical compliance probably hid a larger number of violations (see chapter three.) Reclamation opponents then and since have seized on the relative handful of violations as evidence of the Bureau's historical deference to agribusiness.⁵ John F. Kennedy's election renewed the hopes of acreage limitation supporters. But Paul Taylor, an agricultural activist and professor at the University of California-Berkeley, identified one major stumbling block: Californians' distaste for acreage limits crossed party lines. Aggressive pursuit of violators would surely have cost Kennedy political capital.⁶

The administration approached the problem from two directions. On *new* projects, the Interior department hewed to the 160-acre principle. In late 1961, for instance, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Interior solicitor Frank Barry had determined acreage limits would apply only on the federal portion of the Central Valley Project's San Luis Unit. State-served lands on the unit were to be exempt from federal reclamation laws.⁷ Robert Kennedy recognized the ideological importance of acreage limits and had only reluctantly excluded state-served lands from federal law. "Having arrived at this conclusion as a matter of law," the attorney general wrote Stewart Udall, "I would nonetheless urge you to seek a congressional reexamination of this question."⁸ Sensing the controversy could only harm the president, Udall distanced the White House from the issue.⁹ At the same time as the San Luis decision, Udall rejected proposed contracts with irrigators on the Kings River Project near Fresno. The contracts cited a 1947

⁵ Ellis Armstrong to Walter J. Hickel, 25 March 1970, ELA-AHC, box 46, Acreage Limitation Proposals Aug. 1967 – Nov. 1970.

⁶ Paul S. Taylor to John F. Kennedy, 12 December 1960, OB-JFK, box 9, folder: Correspondence Regarding Appointment 1960-1961.

⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Interior Approves Federal-State Agreement for \$433 Million San Luis Unit in California," 31 December 1961, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1957-64 Central Valley Project-San Luis Unit.

⁸ Robert F. Kennedy to Stewart L. Udall, 29 December 1961, OB-JFK, box 23, folder: Excess Lands: Kings & Kerns (CA) 1961-1962 (1 of 3).

⁹ James K. Carr to Pierre Salinger, 29 December 1961, JFK-WHCF, box 647, folder: NR 7-1/Central Valley 1/20/61-4/30/62.

Interior Department decision to lift acreage limits after early payment of capital costs. Solicitor Barry, Interior's staunchest defender of traditional reclamation law, reversed the opinion.

Interior's policy on new lands was undercut somewhat by the department's half-hearted pursuit of acreage violators on existing projects, many of whom had been in violation for decades. In 1961, the Senate interior committee requested a review of excess land issues in southern California's Imperial Valley, perhaps the West's largest concentration of violators. Most water rights in the valley antedated the 1902 Reclamation Act. Frank Barry knew overcoming decades of Interior's benign neglect would be difficult. As with Kings River, Barry had chosen to overturn an older precedent. In this case, it dated back to 1933 when Interior Secretary Ray Lyman Wilbur had informally exempted project lands from acreage limits. Barry found no legal grounds to uphold Wilbur's decision in the 1928 Boulder Canyon Project Act or anywhere else. Accordingly, Udall directed Dominy in December 1964 to begin discussions with Imperial Valley landholders for disposal of excess lands. Anticipating a quick resolution, Udall agreed to continue water deliveries in the interim.¹⁰

Dominy already had his eye on the Imperial Valley. In late 1961 he ordered regional director Arleigh B. West to conduct a quiet survey of the landholding situation. West found that perhaps sixty-five percent of the valley's nearly 1400 farms were in violation. Especially troubling was the growth of farms in excess of 1000 acres. Since the end of World War II, valley lands had become concentrated in fewer hands. "This is a fairly solid indication of corporate farming as distinguished from just a case of a good farmer picking up enough land to keep a large family of healthy boys busy," West concluded.¹¹

¹⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Interior Solicitor Holds that Imperial Irrigation District Lands in California are Subject to Reclamation's 160-Acre Limitation," 31 December 1964, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: 1961-1965 Acreage Limitation.

¹¹ A. B. West to Floyd E. Dominy, 25 October 1961, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: 1961 Blue Envelope Letter.

Barry argued that the government's past failure to enforce the law was no excuse for continued inaction. But untangling Imperial's morass of landholding claims would not occur as quickly as Udall hoped. In early 1965, Dominy met with irrigators for informal discussions. While recognizing the valley's economy was tightly linked to a pattern of large landholdings, Dominy put Imperial Irrigation District president Lom Thompson on notice that the department expected all landowners to be in compliance with reclamation law by the end of the year. To cushion the financial blow and prevent a massive land selloff, irrigators were required to sign "recordable contracts" giving them ten years to dispose of excess lands.¹² After that time, the Interior secretary had authority to dispose of whatever remained.

Imperial Valley landowners fought back and formed the Imperial Resources Association to protect "agriculture from the good intentions of poorly informed bureaucrats."¹³ In August, Representative John Tunney, Imperial irrigators, and a member of Senator Thomas Kuchel's staff met with Udall. Rancher Ed Rutherford argued acreage limits would bankrupt landowners and that no Imperial Valley bank would issue loans on a 160-acre farm. Udall agreed the economics of farming had changed and slyly suggested Imperial irrigators look north to the landholding patterns in the Central Valley for examples. Udall "added that those arrangements posed difficult questions of law. He did, however, add that any 'family' arrangement would put an excess landowner 'on third base.'" Perhaps unconsciously, he had just endorsed technical compliance. So long as irrigators maintained a fiction of legality, Interior would not look too hard for violators. Unsatisfied, the irrigators vowed to have their day in court.¹⁴

¹² Floyd E. Dominy to Lom Thompson, 25 March 1965, FED-AHC, box 8, folder: 1961-1965 Acreage Limitation.

¹³ "160-Acre Limit Rule Called 'Detrimental' To Valley Ag," *Imperial Valley Press*, 31 July 1965.

¹⁴ Harry J. Hogan to Frank Barry, 10 August 1965, SLU-UA, box 168, folder: 7.

Speaking to the southern California press in October 1965, Dominy lamented that the Bureau of Reclamation was the only federal agency with a legal mandate to reverse the historic trend toward larger, mechanized farming operations. He cited the poor economic state of his own 425-acre cattle ranch in humid Virginia, repeating the oft-heard statement that banks simply would not loan to small farmers and ranchers. Perhaps a specialty farmer of avocados or oranges might make a living off 160 acres but most could not. Only his salary as a government employee allowed his farm to stay afloat. He indicated that Interior welcomed a legal challenge to the acreage limitation laws. In the meantime, the department “had no intention of moving in” to enforce the law and the commissioner reminded Imperial Valley growers that spouses and children could each own 160 acres and lease an unlimited amount of additional land. The Imperial Valley “was essential to the health of the entire nation” and Dominy was not about to disrupt operations.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Dominy found his candid comments “were not completely endorsed by some prominent people” back in the Interior Department.¹⁶

After the conference, El Centro reporter Nettie Brown wrote to Dominy expressing her regret at the Imperial Resources Association’s efforts to block a public meeting and a visit from assistant secretary Ken Holum. Brown identified a significant social divide in the Imperial Valley. While many growers were indeed violating acreage limits, they were not all the same. Brown believed large operators like Rutherford (one of the Valley’s “big four”) were trying to strong-arm legitimate family farmers into supporting further consolidation, a move that would eventually push them off the land.

¹⁵ “160-Acre Issue Still ‘Clouded,’” *Imperial Valley Press*, 13 October 1965.

¹⁶ Floyd E. Dominy to Nettie Brown, 29 November 1965, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1965; Nettie Brown to Floyd E. Dominy, 14 October 1965, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1965; and Nettie Brown to Orren Beaty, 25 October 1965, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1965.

Imperial's "big four" no doubt found encouragement in Dominy's other admission regarding the Bureau's poor luck enforcing recordable contracts up in Kerns County. Interior was struggling to resolve a test case for excess lands disposal on the property of the Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation in the San Joaquin Valley. Di Giorgio had signed recordable contracts with the Bureau in April 1952 when it first began receiving Central Valley Project water. When the contracts expired ten years later, Di Giorgio still held 4400 acres of excess lands. As a prelude to disposal, the lands had to be painstakingly surveyed and divided based on location and water availability. Simply turning off the water might have granted the government a moral victory but would have been a financial problem. Most of the Di Giorgio land held vineyards that could not suffer an interruption of water. Nor was it in the Bureau's interest to lose revenue from water delivery payments. Only after thirty months was Udall ready to announce the department's intention to sell off thirty-one parcels of Di Giorgio land.¹⁷

The Bureau's detractors in California responded with glee when the agency received just one bid the day the parcels went up for auction. Locals balked at the Bureau's high assessment of \$1500 per acre and the poorly executed surveys that isolated some parcels within another property.¹⁸ Interior officials claimed lands went unsold simply because people were unwilling to pay fair market prices. But the department's embarrassing failure caused Dominy and Barry to order a quiet revision to disposal policy. In the future, recordable contracts would require phased disposal over ten years and better surveys and appraisals at the start.¹⁹ Not that any of that mattered much to Di Giorgio. The corporation had seen the recordable contracts as a way to buy

¹⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Secretary Udall Announces Procedures for Selling Excess Lands of Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation in San Joaquin Valley, California," 2 October 1964, FED-AHC, box 12, folder: 1961-1964 Central Valley Project.

¹⁸ "Delanans Say High Price Balked Sale of DiGiorgio Farm Lands," *The Fresno Bee*, 3 December 1964.

¹⁹ Floyd E. Dominy to Regional Director, 26 May 1965, Holum-NARA, box 3, folder: Excess Lands, Calif. 1964-1965.

time as groundwater reserves dwindled and the national produce market became tighter. Di Giorgio would continue to work the land for a profit for as long the federal government grappled with the disposal process. Even before the contracts expired, the owners were shifting away from farming to canning, processing, and winemaking.²⁰

Aside from Frank Barry, no one in the Interior building seemed to have much stomach for enforcing or modifying acreage limitation laws, and even he was beginning to concede defeat by 1966. In March, Barry turned the Imperial Valley matter over to the Department of Justice. This upset Interior under secretary John Carver, who believed “the issue, true enough, is legal; it also has policy and public relations aspects. If we are to achieve our program goals in the reclamation field...we must have the policy and public relations reins in our Department.”²¹ Barry conceded the department was in a difficult spot. Admittedly, the law was outdated. “Nevertheless,” he wrote Udall, “we are obliged to enforce it.” Two years after the Di Giorgio tracts had gone on the market, just four of thirty-one had sold. The solicitor also pointed to bigger problems ahead with the Westlands Irrigation District, part of the Central Valley Project’s San Luis Unit. Westlands had entered into a delivery contract with the government in June 1963. However, the status of some 500,000 acres of excess lands had yet to be resolved. Barry tried vainly to revive Ken Holum’s ignored suggestion for a department-wide task force on Westlands. In a succinct summary of the department’s lackadaisical approach to land issues, Udall simply scrawled in reply: “We failed to act on this one.”²²

As the Bureau’s major problems in California drifted along without resolution, Dominy began to question openly the wisdom of acreage limits. He believed farmers themselves had to

²⁰ Bancroft Library, *The Di Giorgios: From Fruit Merchants to Corporate Innovators* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 64-67.

²¹ John A. Carver to Stewart Udall, 10 March 1966, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Excess Lands-Imperial 1965-1967.

²² Frank Barry to Stewart Udall, 6 December 1966, SLU-UA, box 160, folder 7.

drive reevaluation of acreage limitations but admitted “Congress has never shown a mood for a broad change in the law.” Nor did farmers have the political power they had possessed a century before.²³ Since joining the Bureau in 1946, Dominy had been a forceful advocate for the family farm concept. But he had always argued against the idea that modern farmers should live a nineteenth-century existence. As associate commissioner in 1958, he had testified before Congress about his own family’s difficult background. The 160-acre homesteads that had supported his father and grandfather at subsistence levels were totally inadequate for a farm family that “ought to have and deserves” the material prosperity of postwar America: modern schools, good roads, electric refrigerators and the like.²⁴

That same year, he urged the National Reclamation Association to unify in “support of the family-sized farm—at whatever acreage level is required to provide the accepted American level of living.”²⁵ By 1964, the California State Grange estimated a farm family would need approximately eighty acres of grapes “to properly rear and educate a family in the modern manner.” At the going rate of \$1250 per acre plus improvement costs for a home and machinery, the total outlay for a new farm might approach \$150,000. Interest alone would amount to \$7500 per year, or roughly the median family income in 1965. Only established farmers could hope to finance such a venture.²⁶ Nineteenth-century visions of a nation peopled by small, independent farm families were anachronistic in an age of globalized agricultural markets, mechanization, and large banks.

²³ Floyd E. Dominy, “A Look at Legislative Problems Dealing with Water,” 25 February 1966, FED-AHC, box 27, folder: 1966 Travel-Feb.

²⁴ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. *Acreage Limitation (Reclamation Law) Review*. 85th Cong., 2nd sess., 190.

²⁵ Floyd E. Dominy, “Address...Before the National Reclamation Association,” 20 November 1958, FED-AHC, box 31, folder: Speeches, 1959-1962.

²⁶ J. B. Quinn to Mrs. James W. Park, 21 December 1964, NARA-RG48, Office Files of Kenneth Holum 1962-1965, box 3, folder: Excess Lands, Calif. 1964-1965.

Dominy's outspokenness and the Bureau's inconsistent approach to acreage limit enforcement aggravated many Californians. On the one hand, conservatives like *Los Angeles Times* columnist Caspar Weinberger took the Bureau to task for its "messianic-like fervor" in applying reclamation law to lands watered from an Army Corps dam in Kern County.²⁷ Like many westerners, Weinberger wanted federal funds without federal restrictions. Liberal watchdog activists like Imperial Valley physician and gadfly Ben Yellen had more legitimate complaints. Yellen labeled Dominy a "Saboteur of the U.S. Reclamation Law" and claimed the commissioner's Virginia farm was nothing more than a tax shelter. (He even cruised by Dominy's property on a visit to Washington, DC to try to verify his claims.) Like others in the Imperial Valley and in small communities across California, Yellen believed the Bureau was actively excluding "ordinary people" from the political process.²⁸ He recalled a meeting with Frank Barry in 1963 where the solicitor claimed the big growers had the power to force Udall's hand.²⁹ Others accused the Bureau of withholding information, a reasonable charge given Dominy's own surreptitious efforts to get a handle on the situation.³⁰ However, the assertion that Dominy was actively colluding with California's big growers does not hold up, nor does Yellen's claim that Udall looked the other way to garner financial support ahead of a possible senatorial or presidential campaign. In the end, few in the Interior department were interested in enforcing a law they believed was no longer relevant to modern American society.

Dominy had already reached the conclusion that attacks on subsidies to prosperous irrigators were unfair. The Bureau of Reclamation was just one of three major government agencies (along with the USDA and Army Corps) that provided varying kinds of agricultural

²⁷ "Reclamation Bureau's Fervor Can be Hard to Understand," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 1966.

²⁸ Ben Yellen, newsletter, 15 August 1967, FED-AHC, 2005 accretion, box 3, scrapbook: July-December 1967.

²⁹ Ben Yellen to William H. Veeder, 6 December 1964, PST-BANC, box 19, folder 2.

³⁰ Daniel H. Lowenstein to Paul S. Taylor, 17 April 1969, PST-BANC, box 10, folder 10.

subsidies. Yet only farmers on reclamation projects were restricted in their ability to expand to maximum efficient size. Understanding the poor relative position of western irrigators compared to their eastern counterparts, Dominy argued that the nation had two choices. Americans could face up to the fact that corporate agribusiness would forever replace the family farm. The solution then was simply to eliminate excess land laws. Or, if reclamation was to remain a vital prop holding up family farms in the arid West, “the law should be modernized where necessary and such loopholes as may presently exist should be closed.”³¹

Only Congress had the authority to make lasting changes, however. There, opinions fell into three broad categories. Some, like conservative John Saylor, believed the government had no business subsidizing irrigation on any scale. Others from across the political spectrum in the West saw acreage limits as unduly restrictive and unfair. Somewhere in the middle was the majority who had only a vague, nostalgic understanding of the family farm and its importance to the American character. By encouraging irrigators in places like the Imperial Valley to challenge acreage limits in court, the Bureau could effectively act where Congress and higher-level executive powers would not. But by this point, American agriculture had tilted so far toward corporate farming that powerful agribusiness interests were almost sure to reshape the legal landscape to suit their needs, not those of their small-fry competitors on the West’s last remaining family operations. Time had simply run out on the American family farm.

Corporate growers in California fooled no one but themselves when they claimed to be beleaguered family farmers suffering at the hands of a mindless federal bureaucracy.³² However,

³¹ No author, “The 160-acre limitation,” undated, FED-AHC, box 15, folder: 1962-1968 National Rivers and Harbors Congress.

³² Egregious cases of reclamation fraud in California figure prominently in both Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire* and *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 1993). For a more nuanced treatment of California water politics, see Norris Hundley Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water: A History*, revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

small farmers elsewhere in the West were facing dire conditions. Despite the challenges of the postwar agricultural economy, federal agencies were no more coordinated or cooperative than they had been when Dominy joined the Bureau two decades before. This included the Bureau of the Budget, which retained a large degree of control over policy. In 1965, Budget director Kermit Gordon wrote a widely circulated article for *Saturday Review* attacking USDA price support programs that mostly benefitted the top-third of the nation's farmers. Gordon also criticized the Bureau of Reclamation, noting that irrigated agriculture indirectly caused surplus crop production elsewhere. He argued that money spent on irrigated agriculture would be better spent supplying municipal and industrial needs. Los Angeles, for instance, would soon pay \$63 per acre-foot from Lake Mead while irrigators nearby paid just \$2.25 per acre-foot.³³ An astute editor for the *Evening Star* pointed out that Gordon was simply reflecting the outlook of his boss, Lyndon Johnson. The president had connected persistent rural poverty with the new agricultural economy and apparently wanted some ten million farmers to transition to other occupations.³⁴

Gordon's article landed with an audible thud in the Interior and Agriculture departments. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman gave a lengthy public defense of his department, pointing out that only five percent of the nation's farms were earning incomes comparable to the rest of society. These farmers, he said, would lose more than half their incomes if commodity programs were removed, "a knock-out blow for efficient farmers...hard enough to shake the entire economy." Given that the top earning bracket of agricultural earners were in fact corporate interests producing a major share of the nation's agricultural output, Freeman's statement was

³³ Kermit Gordon, "The Challenge of Prosperity," *Saturday Review*, 9 January 1965.

³⁴ "Johnson Grasps Farm Issue Thorn," [*Washington, DC*] *Evening Star*, 1 February 1965.

true. But he never addressed Gordon's specific charge that subsidies were unevenly applied across classes of farmers.³⁵

American farmers were more direct in their criticism of Gordon. One Iowa cattleman suggested the Budget director look to Adolf Hitler and the Nazis for ways to eliminate millions of people.³⁶ A North Dakota farmer warned of civil war in the countryside. He feared the loss of so many independent farmers would invite a communist takeover.³⁷ Gordon received better treatment in urban areas and the business press. The editor of *Barron's* saw in Gordon's speech a repudiation of the Interior Department's intent to "turn the clock back by a generation" by enforcing acreage restrictions in the Imperial Valley.³⁸ No one in the executive branch had explicitly called for the end of the small farmer, but the writing was plainly on the wall for anyone who cared to look.

Gordon had criticized the Bureau of Reclamation at a time when the agency was facing serious budgetary pressures. The Budget Bureau had become a formidable power, largely because the competing demands of Great Society programs and Vietnam required herculean efforts to muscle competing executive agencies behind the president's agenda. Dominy's greatest bureaucratic successes had come from his ability to get money from Congress and, significantly, spend most of what he received. By the mid-1960s he had achieved the "utopian" goal of ninety percent utilization of funds. This was a remarkable figure given the scope and complexity of the Bureau's work. In fact, no commissioner had ever reached the same level. But the Bureau's fiscal 1967 budget was shaping up to be \$64 million less than the previous year. Even worse, Congress no longer granted supplemental appropriations each spring, a practice long critical to

³⁵ Orville Freeman, "Address...at the Governor's Conference," 3 February 1965, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1964, 1965 Budget Speech.

³⁶ G. W. Patterson to Kermit Gordon, 26 January 1965, KG-JFK, box 9, document 1.

³⁷ Peter Friezen to Kermit Gordon, 15 March 1965, KG-JFK, box 9, document 13.

³⁸ "Brief Notes of the Week," *Barron's*, 25 January 1965.

the Bureau's financial management of uncertain construction schedules.³⁹ This effectively gave the Bureau of the Budget the last word in funding. Even if Congress boosted an agency's appropriations above the administration's recommendations, Budget could always impound those funds as part of the apportionment process during the fiscal year. The difficulty for any presidential appointee like Dominy was that disagreements with the Bureau of the Budget could be viewed as repudiation of the president.

Dominy, who found Gordon's view on reclamation "short-sighted and stupid," had never been particularly friendly with the Budget Director. In revising the fiscal 1966 budget, Dominy openly challenged Gordon, refusing to designate cutbacks himself. This placed Budget in the politically uncomfortable position of deciding where to make cuts. As the press speculated, Dominy no doubt looked to his benefactors in Congress for protection. After Gordon's *Saturday Review* article, Dominy used his time on the witness stand before the House Interior committee to make a point-by-point rebuttal. He zeroed in on the red herring of crop surpluses. As his agency's statistics showed, *federal* reclamation projects accounted for just a bare fraction of surplus crops. Mostly they produced specialty "health foods."⁴⁰ Dominy's open defiance, and the fact that he stayed on the job through the rest of Johnson's administration, were a testament to the powerful support he had in Congress and his own sense of invulnerability.

Still, Dominy was uneasy. As he wrote a friend, "unfortunately, there are many in the Administration who are interpreting my opposition to the Budget Director's views to represent disloyalty to the President."⁴¹ Instead, Dominy appeared to be trying to drive a wedge between Gordon and the White House. He compared Budget's proposed cutbacks to "the sort of thinking that permeated the minds of those who opposed the Louisiana Purchase." The problem, he

³⁹ "Reclamation Officials Warned of Cuts," [*Grand Junction, CO*] *Daily Sentinel*, 22 August 1966.

⁴⁰ "Johnson's Official Family Curbs Budget Cutting Effort," *Albuquerque Journal*, 21 February 1965.

⁴¹ Floyd E. Dominy to Frank P. Lane, 18 February 1965, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Correspondence 1965.

argued, was not the Great Society itself, but rather Budget's "poorly considered attempt to implement the Administration's policy to hold Federal expenditures to a minimum."⁴² Dominy's major challenge in this regard was that, no matter how often he liked to link the Great Society to the Bureau's historic efforts to build rural communities, he found few sympathetic listeners.

Dominy's persistent efforts to control his own budget caused friction within Interior. John Carver was displeased with Dominy's attempts to add "new starts" even as construction on existing projects slowed due to lack of funds.⁴³ Dominy and Udall had sniped at each other over the Bureau of Reclamation's budgets since the early days of Johnson's new administration. After Dominy once protested the "ridiculous and inefficient" construction schedules that would result from budgetary cutbacks, Udall chastised him for lack of aggression.⁴⁴ "Why shouldn't you, where vital decisions are involved," Udall asked Dominy, "sit down yourself, eyeball to eyeball with Director Gordon and present the case for your budget? You are a forceful proponent, Floyd, and it would seem to me that your energies would be more wisely spent with some direct confrontations with the top Budget people rather than in writing a testy memorandum for the record to me after the ballgame is over."⁴⁵

Udall's admonition was ironic given his own reputation among Budget staff for meekness and poor gamesmanship. His initial presentations were good, they said, but Udall "then would go into his shell. No discussion of subsequent points intelligently, no response to Budget proposals,

⁴² U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, "Appeal of Budget Allowances for F.Y. 1966," undated, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1966 Budget Appropriations.

⁴³ John Carver to Stewart Udall, 10 February 1966, OB-JFK box 9, folder: Undersecretary John Carver, 1964-1966.

⁴⁴ Floyd E. Dominy to Stewart Udall, 30 December 1964, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Floyd Dominy, 1964-1966 (1 of 2).

⁴⁵ Stewart L. Udall to Floyd E. Dominy, 4 January 1965, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Floyd Dominy, 1964-1966 (1 of 2).

etc.”⁴⁶ Without apparently realizing it, Udall had given Dominy license to carry on a public battle with Budget. The next time Dominy met with Bureau leadership to program the upcoming budget cycle, he announced to his staff (and a few reporters) that if they spent enough money, he would return to Congress for more.⁴⁷ The Budget Bureau correctly interpreted this as an open challenge, causing further trouble for Udall.⁴⁸

Infighting over budgets spoke to larger problems within the Department of the Interior’s power structure, what one reporter called a “progressive deterioration.”⁴⁹ Although James Carr had departed for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission in 1964, factionalism still cleaved the department’s many competing interests. Carr’s replacement, former Assistant Secretary for Public Land Management John Carver, had by then developed his own power network within Washington, DC. He had good contacts with Congress, including Wayne Aspinall, who was not especially fond of Udall. Carver’s chief rival in the department was Frank Barry. The solicitor was “probably Udall’s closest friend in the Department,” which gave Barry influence on policy decisions beyond his formal pay grade. To the consternation of many westerners, Barry was inclined toward expanding federal reach rather than allowing state and local control of resource issues. To the consternation of many of Barry’s colleagues, the solicitor was uneven in his application of laws choosing, for instance, to pursue aggressively the acreage limit issue while simultaneously soft-pedaling violations of the 1872 mining law. Given the quasi-judicial functions of the office of Secretary of the Interior, inequity in enforcement was bound to draw criticism. According to journalist Helene Monberg, ideological disagreements

⁴⁶ Orren Beaty, memorandum, 29 August 1967, OB-JFK, box 3, folder: Secretary Udall as Secretary, Aug-Dec 1967.

⁴⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, “Opening Remarks by the Commissioner,” 16 August 1965, FED-AHC, box 26, folder: 1965 Travel-August.

⁴⁸ Orren Beaty to Stewart L. Udall, 28 March 1966, OB-JFK, box 8, folder: Memos to SLU 1966: Jan-March (2 of 2).

⁴⁹ “Interior Department in Disarray Under Udall,” *Deseret News*, 7 June 1966.

over equity and the fundamental role of government led to Carver's lateral demotion to a seat on the Federal Power Commission in late 1966.⁵⁰

Some of the department's personnel difficulties originated with Udall's administrative assistant Orren Beaty. John Carver called Beaty "one of the most capable men in government"⁵¹ but believed "Udall didn't have ten cents worth of experience as an administrator."⁵² Indeed, Beaty may have been the most well-connected person in the Interior building. His ability to cut through red tape with a simple phone call was beneficial to Udall but rankled assistant secretaries and bureau chiefs. As key personalities in the department came and went through the Kennedy-Johnson years, none seemed to bother Beaty more than Dominy. Rather than working within the department, the commissioner's power network reached out to Congress and White House aides like Mike Manatos. Once, when Dominy leaked information to Senator Clinton Anderson about the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, Beaty suggested to Udall "if all this proves out I would be inclined to find a new Commissioner with as little delay as possible. I am sure Senator Jackson would back you on this."⁵³ Rebuffed, Beaty could do little more than pester Udall about Dominy's travel schedule. Even a protracted airline strike in 1966 failed to slow Dominy. "It is handy to have him around," Beaty joked to Udall, "as when nobody else in the Department can get airplane reservations, he can."⁵⁴ Kidding aside, both Udall and Beaty grew increasingly frustrated with Dominy's absences since it meant dealing with an array of "acting" commissioners of varying ability.

⁵⁰ Helene Monberg, "Western Resources Wrap-up," JAC-JFK, box 3, folder: Monberg, Helene C. For the building feud between John Carver and Frank Barry, see Orren Beaty to Stewart Udall, 7 October 1964, OB-JFK, box 41, folder: SLU as Secretary, 1964 (6 of 7).

⁵¹ John A. Carver, Second Oral History Interview, conducted by John Stewart, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA, 34.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32

⁵³ Orren Beaty, "Notes to the Secretary," 27 May 1966, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Floyd Dominy, 1964-1966 (2 of 2).

⁵⁴ Orren Beaty, "Running Account of Things as They Happen (Roughly)," 22 July 1966, OB-JFK, box 8, folder: Memos to SLU, July-Sept 1966.

Petty politicking aside, budget reductions still posed formidable challenges. Kermit Gordon had left government service by the summer of 1965, but that did little to improve the department's financial position. Gordon's replacement, Charles Schultze, was less combative with executive agency heads but the escalating costs of Vietnam left him little room to maneuver. The Bureau of Reclamation had long commanded the lion's share of Interior's annual budget, meaning that it was also subject to the largest reduction. Recalling Harry Truman's actions during the Korean conflict, Udall suggested to Lyndon Johnson that Interior could absorb significant cuts, with the Bureau of Reclamation bearing the heaviest reductions. A tax increase was also possible, but politically risky, especially if it met only the escalating costs of the war and not additional domestic needs.⁵⁵

Udall knew construction slowdowns were the most expedient, if also the most politically painful, way to reduce spending. "No one would seriously propose that we are in a national emergency so dire that National Parks should be closed, Indian school teachers laid off, or important regular functions terminated," Udall wrote Schultze.⁵⁶ By December 1967, the Bureau of the Budget had instituted a freeze on all Bureau construction. An earlier House resolution had capped fiscal 1968 spending at the previous year's level, except for spending on Vietnam, the Post Office, and major social programs like Medicare and Social Security. In addition, the Interior department faced a further reduction of \$128 million. The only concession Udall was able to wrangle for the Bureau of Reclamation was for uninterrupted construction on the third powerhouse at Grand Coulee Dam.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Stewart L. Udall to Lyndon B. Johnson, 31 August 1966, SLU-UA, box 126, folder 8.

⁵⁶ Stewart L. Udall to Charles Schultze, 3 October 1967, SLU-UA, box 134, folder 8.

⁵⁷ Charles Schultze to Floyd E. Dominy, 19 December 1967, FED-AHC, box 11, folder: 1969 Budget Appropriation.

In the near term, budget reductions created a significant public relations problem for Dominy and the Bureau. Closing project offices or laying off employees inevitably angered Congress. “The people of Utah have done everything required of them to promote the project,” representative David King wrote Dominy after learning Central Utah Project funds for fiscal year 1967 had been cut. “The people expect, and have a right to expect, that construction will be accelerated.”⁵⁸ Dominy prided himself on having made a successful case for reclamation before Congress. He had also worked to make reclamation a national concern. But now his past success was coming back to haunt him. Dwindling budgets thrust him into the uncomfortable situation of arguing for specific program reductions. Moreover, the nation was considering whether it wanted to continue reclamation at all. He had long held the faint hope that the Bureau might expand nationally, perhaps handling water pollution control. He had never accepted the fact that the Army Corps, which did most of its important work in the humid East, was also allowed to build in the West while the Bureau remained legally confined to the western states. But calls for greater economy and growing environmentalist opposition to western dams brought the Bureau significant negative publicity. Articles in national media outlets like *Reader’s Digest*, *Nation’s Business*, and the *Chicago Tribune* all accused the Bureau of pork barrel spending. For easterners and many urban westerners, a “dam boondoggle” was unpalatable no matter which federal agency actually poured the concrete. In seeking national recognition for his agency, Dominy had learned the old adage to be careful what one wished for.

The final fight for compressive water legislation on the lower Colorado River lasted three years and encapsulated Dominy’s career in federal service. He would struggle against his superiors in the Interior Department and alienate some of his closest supporters. The Grand

⁵⁸ David S. King to Floyd E. Dominy, 22 January 1966, DSK-UU, box 27, folder 5.

Canyon fight would also make Dominy one of the environmental movement's most vilified figures, a role he actually relished. He had become emboldened after surviving decades of bureaucratic infighting. Indeed Dominy had built himself an empire, although it was one dedicated to him personally, not to the manipulation of the West's waterways. He was all but working for Congress. By this point, the agenda of Stewart Udall and the administration that employed him appeared increasingly irrelevant.

In this last great water battle, Dominy had to contend with two problems. The first was familiar: the lack of unity among the West's major political and geographic divisions. The second was the increasing strength and popularity of preservationist conservation. In the decade since the CRSP authorization, Sierra Club director David Brower had become increasingly unwilling to trade one special place for another. Brower's militancy eventually caused problems within the Sierra Club hierarchy but much of this was invisible to the public. From 1965 onward, he vehemently opposed the Bureau's plans to build dams near Grand Canyon National Park. Increasingly, so did the American public.

Despite the growing financial crisis, supporters of major water projects on the lower Colorado had continued their lobbying efforts. Stewart Udall's Pacific Southwest Water Plan had died quietly at the end of the Eighty-eighth Congress in early 1965. In the summer, Interior announced a new attempt at a regional plan. The "transcendent difference" between the new and old proposals, Udall said, was "meeting of minds between Arizona and California on an acceptable guarantee for the protection of existing water uses." Recognizing the Colorado River simply could not supply the region's insatiable water demands, the new legislation assumed future water imports from outside sources. In the meantime, California received a guarantee for

4.4 million acre-feet annually, even if that reduced the amount available for the Central Arizona Project.

The plan had one other major difference. Udall proposed deferring construction of the controversial dam at Bridge Canyon downstream from Grand Canyon National Park. Additional power revenues would instead come from a fossil fuel plant somewhere in the region. The secretary expected transbasin water imports would arrive around 1990 when CAP was expected to reach full capacity. Satisfied with the new plan, thirty-three California representatives, both California senators, and all three Arizona representatives introduced identical bills. As always, however, not all congressional voices counted equally. Supporters still had to contend with the two giants of western water politics: Carl Hayden and Wayne Aspinall.⁵⁹

But most parties were optimistic in 1966. In fact, that year produced major compromises and concessions that allowed the Colorado River Basin Project Act to pass two years later. The upper basin states, represented by Wayne Aspinall, had rapidly supplanted California as the leading opposition bloc to CAP. He could use his power as chair of the House interior committee to bottle up legislation indefinitely. As the price for his cooperation, Aspinall demanded that any lower basin water package include five marginal irrigation projects in western Colorado, what Dominy later called “a bunch of cats and dogs.”⁶⁰ Budget suggested deferring the projects until a national water commission could investigate.⁶¹ The Johnson administration supported formation of such an agency, as did northwesterners like Henry M. Jackson who were concerned about losing control of the Columbia River. But most western politicians and water managers

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Secretary Udall Supports Authorization of Comprehensive Package to Meet Long-Range Water Needs of the Lower Colorado River Basin,” 19 May 1965, FED-AHC, box 16, folder: Pacific Southwest Water Plan.

⁶⁰ FED-OH, 174.

⁶¹ Phillip Hughes to Stewart L. Udall, 30 April 1966, FED-AHC, box 21, folder: 1966 Lower Colorado Basin Project I.

feared a commission would do little more than check western growth. And ultimately, continued western growth remained the principle concern.

To match the pace of southwestern development—and no doubt breathe new life into an agency that was rapidly running out of places to build dams—Dominy was even willing to supplement the Bureau’s hydropower network with thermal plants.⁶² As a concession to environmentalists, he agreed to John Saylor’s proposal to expand Grand Canyon National Park’s boundaries and eliminate Marble Canyon Dam. The Arizona political contingent discouraged this move. But as Orren Beaty recognized, “Dominy and his boys would gladly give up Marble Canyon if they had a chance to build the high Bridge Dam they have long planned.”⁶³ A low dam at Bridge Canyon would have prevented slack water from backing up into the park but produced only eighty percent of the high dam’s revenue.

To gain more public support, the lower Colorado contingent renamed the proposed dam at Bridge Canyon “Hualapai” after the Native Americans who lived nearby. Generally, Indians in the region supported the Bureau’s work. Hydropower and projects like the 70,000-acre Navajo Indian Irrigation Project in New Mexico offered an opportunity to overcome grinding poverty on the Southwest’s reservations. The Bureau also used the economic appeal of recreation to coopt Native American support. “Thousands of people will come to take boat rides on the lake and to fish in it,” Hualapai tribal chairman George Rocha wrote in 1966, “and we plan to make a fine place for them to stay and to sell them the supplies they will need.”⁶⁴ From a rhetorical standpoint, dam proponents hoped the public would be less willing to attack a dam named after a

⁶² Orren Beaty to Stewart L. Udall, 15 February 1966, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Excess Lands – Imperial 1965-1967.

⁶³ Orren Beaty to Stewart L. Udall, 6 April 1966, OB-JFK, box 16, folder: General/Current – Water Plan, April 1966.

⁶⁴ George Rocha, “Dear Friend,” 30 June 1966, FED-AHC, box 18, folder: 1966-1967 Sierra Club.

struggling reservation population.⁶⁵ A vote against Hualapai Dam would thus be a vote against the Hualapai people. John Saylor saw right through the “blue sky promises designed to attract the support of American Indians.” He dismissed the Bureau’s paternalism with his own, arguing “those of us through the years who have fought for better opportunities for our Indian friends are resentful of this tactic.”⁶⁶ Rocha, Saylor claimed, had simply been the victim of Bureau propagandists.

John Saylor was still the dam opponents’ most valuable, if controversial, congressional ally. He was not above using his office for petty attacks on Dominy and the Bureau for their assault on the Grand Canyon. In early 1966, he took to the House floor to crow: “Hominy Dominy sat on the wall/Hominy Dominy had a great fall/and all Udall’s horses and all Udall’s men/couldn’t put Hominy Dominy together again.”⁶⁷ David Brower maintained close association with the Pennsylvania Republican, even though some key environmentalists, like Richard Bradley, believed Saylor might embarrass their cause.⁶⁸ Bradley had touched off a round of heated public debates in early 1966 after publishing the high-profile article “Ruin for the Grand Canyon?”⁶⁹

Dominy and Ottis Peterson responded immediately with a media barrage of their own to counter Bradley’s “known errors or misstatements.”⁷⁰ Dominy commissioned a giant scale model of the Grand Canyon region which Bureau employees dutifully hauled around to public meetings to show the seemingly minuscule effect the dams and reservoirs would have on the

⁶⁵ Beaty to Udall, 6 April 1966.

⁶⁶ John Saylor, “The Indians’ Stake in Grand Canyon,” 28 July 1966, JPS-IUP, box 36, folder 7.

⁶⁷ “Nuances of Congress Story Not Always in the Banners,” *Lawrence [KS] Journal-World*, 5 March 1965. [Original in *Congressional Record*, 11 February 1965, extended remarks.]

⁶⁸ Thomas G. Smith, *Green Republican: John Saylor and the Preservation of America’s Wilderness* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 193.

⁶⁹ The article first appeared in the January-February 1966 issue of *Audubon* before reprinting in *Reader’s Digest* in April 1966.

⁷⁰ Floyd E. Dominy to Margaret C. Young, 2 February 1966, FED-AHC, box 21, folder: 1964-1966 Lower Co. River Basin I.

landscape. He never forgave the “sanctimonious bastard” Brower for misleading the public with the idea that tourists at the Grand Canyon would see only a giant lake stretching from rim to rim.⁷¹ Twice Dominy flew up the Colorado in a helicopter to photograph a 245-mile stretch of river behind the proposed dam site. He painstakingly altered the photos with blue paint to show exactly how a reservoir would appear. Believing he had won over public opinion on Lake Powell, he wanted to prove a reservoir in the Grand Canyon would be even more spectacular.⁷²

Despite the CAP’s enormous cost and technical challenges, the initial bill had been fairly uncomplicated. But key House members like Arizona representatives John Rhodes and Morris Udall (Stewart’s younger brother) believed it had been overloaded with compromise measures. The issue of water importations, critical to the basin’s overall water accounting, stumbled as Wayne Aspinall tried to water down the importation study language to appease Jackson. He did please the senator but angered Californians. On this point, Bureau insiders cited the waning influence of Carl Hayden, who might once have been able to shoulder past Jackson’s objections.⁷³ Brower’s anti-dam campaign was also gaining traction. Parroting the Sierra Club position, many writers to the Bureau and Interior department argued for fossil fuel or nuclear power as a substitute for dams. Although a moderate advocate for Bureau-run steam plants, Dominy believed losing the dams would have dire consequences. Should thermal plants become the project’s “cash registers,” private-power opposition would dwarf the environmentalists’ past efforts. And in the end, the overall water plan was more important than any single dam.

Deeply disappointed with Congress’s failure to pass legislation in 1966, Dominy lashed out in the media. “The bill came within a hair of going through Congress this year, but at the last

⁷¹ FED-OH, 168.

⁷² Floyd E. Dominy to Charles E. Dominy, 16 February 1967, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: 1959-1969 Charles Dominy.

⁷³ “Dominy Proposes Compromise with Sierra Clubbers,” [*Grand Junction, CO*] *County Mail*, 1 September 1966.

minute we couldn't get any help from the White House, so she died. Now the whole thing is in a mess," he told a reporter.⁷⁴ Initially, White House mail had been in favor of dams on the lower Colorado, but by July 1966 the tide of public opinion was running against the Bureau. Still, letters on the subject were a small fraction of White House mail. One congressional staffer claimed that "mailbags were coming in by the hundreds stuffed with letters from schoolkids," but more Americans bothered to write fan mail to Lady Bird Johnson than protest the dams.⁷⁵

With public debate heating up, Orren Beaty encouraged Udall to rein in Dominy, whose relentless attacks on the Sierra Club and unflagging support for Hualapai Dam undermined official department policy. (Beaty seemed to believe Udall was finally willing to fire Dominy in late 1966. He suggested the secretary sound out Carl Hayden on the matter.)⁷⁶ Udall and Brower had developed a friendly correspondence. The Sierra Club director believed Udall was in his corner, and went so far as to share the details of the club's anti-dam propaganda campaign. "I even have another debate coming up with Floyd Dominy," Brower wrote, "and hope he finds reasons to be on your team and not an independent operator, gritting his teeth as he contemplates the modern solution."⁷⁷ In response, Udall directed Dominy to keep a low profile "and not debate the Dave Brower types for now."⁷⁸ By that time, Udall favored eliminating the dams, partly because of his own environmental leanings—he was rapidly completing his evolution from a Roosevelt-Pinchot conservationist to a Muir-Brower preservationist—but also because he knew that water projects threatening a national park had no probability of passing congressional muster. Dominy still believed otherwise.

⁷⁴ "Dominy Says River Project in Mess," *Farmington [NM] Times*, 20 October 1966.

⁷⁵ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 1993), 288.

⁷⁶ Orren Beaty to Stewart L. Udall, 1 November 1966, OB-JFK, box 24, folder: Floyd Dominy, 1964-1966 (2 of 2).

⁷⁷ David Brower to Stewart Udall, 6 February 1967, OB-JFK, box 43, folder: SLU as Secretary, 1967 (2 of 14).

⁷⁸ Stewart L. Udall to Floyd E. Dominy, 16 February 1967, FED-AHC, box 14, folder: 1967 Memoranda.

The following year was a roller-coaster for CAP supporters. In May 1967, the Senate interior committee held another round of CAP hearings. Chairman Jackson made a defiant stand against water exports from the Columbia River. He would support a version of CAP only in conjunction with creation of the National Water Commission, which would thoroughly survey the West's water needs and delay, perhaps indefinitely, water diversions from the Northwest. Interior officials had already privately agreed to meet Jackson's demand. But during the hearings, Udall imprudently remarked "that the people in the northwest, and I think quite rightly, regard the authorization of Hualapai Dam as a gun pointed at the Columbia River." With this, Jackson wavered, indicating he might not support any bill with the dam. For much of Interior's testimony, Dominy sat mute beside Udall as the secretary "clobbered" the commissioner "again and again with asinine statements concerning his adamant position against dams on the Colorado River." Dominy "refused to be cowed" and showed his doctored photos of the proposed reservoir.⁷⁹

But he had little impact. Felix Sparks, director of the Colorado River Conservation Board, believed Lyndon Johnson and Stewart Udall had "completely abandoned all of the states of the Colorado River Basin, except Arizona, in favor of the Pacific Northwest and the Sierra Club."⁸⁰ At the end of June, the committee reported out a bill for the Colorado River Basin Plan (CRBP.) It included CAP, as well as Utah's Dixie Project and Wayne Aspinall's five pet projects in Colorado. The bill also guaranteed California a 4.4 million acre-feet priority in perpetuity. Hualapai Dam was out. Instead, Interior was allowed to contract with non-federal thermal plants as needed. In August, the CRBP passed the Senate by a voice vote.

⁷⁹ Floyd E. Dominy to Charles E. Dominy, 3 May 1967, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: 1959-1969 Charles Dominy.

⁸⁰ Felix Sparks to Members, 6 June 1967, FED-AHC, box 20, folder: 1967-1969 Colorado River Storage Project-General.

The CRBP's fate was now in Wayne Aspinall's hands. He bristled at Jackson's "provincial" attitude toward the Columbia River and the "selfish position" of Arizona and California "in trying to take care of their needs at the expense of the Upper Basin." Without a plan for augmentation of the Colorado River, Aspinall refused to act on the bill. He also indicated he might want more than the five projects he had already asked for.⁸¹ In a defiant gesture, Aspinall concluded business in the House interior committee and went home to Colorado, stopping the CRBP's progress in its track. With Hayden due to retire after the next session, Aspinall's petulance seemed to dash hopes for CAP's passage. Senate minority leader Everett Dirksen was outraged called for Aspinall to be "hailed back" to Washington or censured.

Whatever bitterness Dominy harbored over the loss of Hualapai Dam, he had at that moment the chance to save the CRBP or let it founder, perhaps forever. He chose to save it. He proposed the "Dominy Formula" (first suggested a year earlier) whereby Hayden would attach authorization for CAP as a rider to the Senate's public works appropriation bill. Hayden also threatened to delete funds for Colorado's Fryingpan-Arkansas Project. Aspinall was livid and raced back to Washington. Secretary Udall remained above the fray publically but privately expressed hope Aspinall would agree at least to take up the bill at the beginning of the next session in January, which the congressman eventually did.⁸² With Aspinall now compliant, Hayden withdrew the CAP amendment and restored Fryingpan-Arkansas funds. The House CRBP bill passed in May 1968. In conference the two houses resolved the major sticking point of water importation by forbidding the Secretary of the Interior to conduct importation studies for ten years. Although no one probably anticipated it at the time, the American environmental

⁸¹ Wayne Aspinall to Edwin C. Johnson, 27 July 1967, WNA-UD, box 234, folder 4.

⁸² "Dirksen Blasts Aspinall on Central Ariz. Project," *Rocky Mountain News [Denver]* 4 October 1967; and Ted Riggins to Floyd E. Dominy, 5 October 1967, FED-AHC, box 28, folder 1967 Overseas Travel.

movement would be much stronger by then, with the legal firepower to block transbasin diversion schemes.

Dominy was sorely disappointed that the Bureau's grand plan for the lower Colorado, which included Hualapai Dam, was not approved. In a 1973 interview, he blamed the defeat on the "misleading propaganda put out by people who deliberately mislead the public." He singled out the Sierra Club's full-page advertisements in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which had plaintively asked the public, "Should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?" When that ad appeared in 1966, the senior senator (Carl Hayden), Interior secretary (Stewart Udall), and the Republican Party's recent presidential nominee (Barry Goldwater), all hailed from Arizona. Even Vice President Hubert Humphrey was behind the plan. Dominy could not believe it failed even with that kind of high-caliber support.⁸³

In any case, Dominy recognized that the CRBP was the last of the big, multi-dam, multi-purpose projects which had offered the Bureau a new lease on life barely two decades before. The environmental movement was certainly a factor. But so too, he believed, was the promise of cheap nuclear power, which would have rendered the Bureau's cash register dams obsolete. The Bureau had also been a victim of its own success. "There wasn't too much left to do in terms of managing rivers and making them more productive for the use of man," he concluded.⁸⁴

In the summer of 1968, Floyd Dominy watched as the country appeared to dissolve around him. He mourned the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in June and decried the nation's "all too-permissive society."⁸⁵ Urban centers and college campuses were exploding in protest against Vietnam and the failed promises of the Great Society. The war was costing \$2 billion per

⁸³ Floyd E. Dominy, interview by Ross R. Rice, 20 November 1973, Ross R. Rice Papers, MSS-129, Arizona State Libraries, Arizona Collection, folder 37, 23-26.

⁸⁴ FED-OH, 173-74.

⁸⁵ Floyd E. Dominy to J. Laghina Serafim, 24 June 1968, FED-AHC, box 29, folder: 1968 Travel-May.

month and as Dominy travelled around the country for speaking engagements he tried to reassure audiences that reclamation would again become a financial priority. He reflected on “the hard core unemployed and poverty stricken who are contributing to the decay of our inner cities.” Reaching back a century to the myth of the rural American West as a safety valve for urban pressure, he extolled the virtues of farm life and the prosperity of reclamation projects. He held up the Columbia Basin Project, scene for so much of his own bureaucratic struggles, as a model for solving the worst of the nation’s ills.⁸⁶

At the Bureau’s annual budgeting conference he commended his staff for its accomplishments despite the government’s freeze on contracts. Although appropriations had been steadily contracting, the Bureau converted more than ninety percent of its funds into production for the third consecutive year. He warned his staff about more lean times ahead. He was focused solely on the impact of military spending and assumed that as the war wound down, domestic spending would increase. He did not, at the time, see the environmental movement as anything more than an annoyance, able to defeat the Bureau from time to time but nothing an aggressive commissioner and his loyal staff could not handle in the long run.⁸⁷

In September, Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Colorado River Basin Plan Act. Even the signing ceremony did not escape politicking. Arizona Democrats dissuaded Johnson from signing the bill in the state, fearing Barry Goldwater would gain prestige by association. John Saylor, who had always lobbied hard against western water development, lobbied just as hard to get one of Johnson’s ceremonial pens. And Johnson’s staff, having been largely deaf to the pleas

⁸⁶ Floyd E. Dominy, “Speech...at the Annual Convention of the National Rivers and Harbors Congress,” 6 June 1968, box 32, folder: Speech File, 1968.

⁸⁷ Floyd E. Dominy, “Opening Remarks by Commissioner,” 29 July 1968, box 29, folder: 1968 Travel July.

of a legion of tireless dam opponents, worked to credit the administration for saving the Grand Canyon. Five weeks later, the Democrats lost the presidency to Richard Nixon. The Republican administration would oversee the passage of sweeping environmental legislation that forever changed the calculus of western water management. Stewart Udall and his immediate staff would be gone in January with the change of administrations. Dominy, however, would linger in his position well into 1969. Given the long lead times in the budgeting process, he was already looking ahead to fiscal 1971. The future was uncertain but after thirty-six years on the federal payroll, Dominy clearly knew his days were numbered. But he would be sure to leave government service with as much fight as when he entered it.

Epilogue: "...Times of Plenty"

In early 1969, writer John McPhee contacted Floyd Dominy with an idea to float the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon with David Brower. Dominy persuaded McPhee to spend the first week of the trip on Lake Powell. What followed became one-third of McPhee's *Encounters With the Archdruid*, a near instant classic of environmental writing. The book also cemented Dominy's status as the arch-villain of American environmentalism. Brower and Dominy seemingly had little common ground. Yet they respected each other. "Floyd and I have rarely agreed about anything," Brower once conceded, "but I admire his dedication to what he believes just the same."¹ The sentiment was mutual, although Dominy forever believed that Brower had shamelessly exaggerated the threat to Grand Canyon. When McPhee's party pushed off in June, Dominy's pending departure from the Bureau was official. Brower had already left the Sierra Club under a cloud, guilty of marching out of step with the club's staid leadership.

For years the two men had exchanged barbs in public and in private, and so at times the dialogue in *Encounters* seems stilted and contrived. But McPhee still managed to record a rare moment in the history of American environmentalism, perhaps as close as we will ever come to a voyeur's eye view of the disagreements that had long strained the uneasy marriage between conservation's utilitarian and preservationist wings. Although the setting, with red sandstone cliffs, grilled steaks, and pop top beer cans, was a world away from the Sierra Nevada Mountains that had been the focal point of earlier debate, McPhee's readers had a glimpse of what had so animated John Muir and Gifford Pinchot three-quarters of a century earlier. "For Christ's sake, be objective, Dave. Be reasonable," Dominy implored Brower as they refought the battle over Hualapai Dam. "Some of my colleagues make the error of trying to be reasonable, Floyd," Brower replied. "Objectivity is the greatest threat to the United States today." On a sandbar

¹ David Brower to Scott R. Maier, June 16, 1980, DRB-BANC, carton 18, folder 45.

somewhere along the Colorado River in 1969, Floyd Dominy and David Brower buried American conservation.²

In the election year of 1968, Richard Nixon had vowed to overhaul the Washington bureaucracy. Cabinet secretaries, their staffs, and other high-profile or controversial government figures were clearly on the way out. But for hundreds of mid-level presidential appointees like Dominy, the future was far less certain. Incoming Interior secretary Walter Hickel would not even meet with Dominy to discuss the commissioner's fate. Hickel had just survived a bruising, partisan confirmation process in January and had yet to select assistant secretaries, who no doubt would want some hand in choosing the agency chiefs. In February, Dominy decided to test the waters and submitted a pro forma resignation letter to Nixon, through Hickel, alluding to possible doubts within the administration over his continued service. Hickel assured Dominy of his support but did not explicitly guarantee his position. In April, Dominy again prodded Hickel to make a decision. Without a formal presidential reappointment, Dominy's lame duck status was a political liability both in Washington and in the West.³

Despite Dominy's controversial reputation, he retained solid support from major western water organizations and influential members of Congress (Henry M. Jackson and a few others notwithstanding.) The "doubts" Dominy believed were behind his stalled reappointment led back to one individual: Pennsylvania Republican John Saylor. Saylor had coveted the Interior secretary's job for himself and, failing that, demanded the administration accept his candidates for key positions. But as an outsider to Nixon's inner circle, Saylor's recommendations went

² John McPhee, *Encounters With the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, 1977), part three.

³ Floyd E. Dominy to Walter J. Hickel, 20 February 1969, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information Employment; Floyd E. Dominy to Richard Nixon, 20 February 1969, FED-AHC, box 2, folder: Biographical Information Employment; and Floyd E. Dominy to Walter Hickel, 1 April 1969, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: Correspondence, 1969 Resignation.

unheeded. Unwilling to walk away empty handed, Saylor next targeted Dominy, calling his possible reappointment a “personal affront...not in keeping with this administration’s mandate to ‘clean house’”⁴ In the press, Saylor had begun bashing the administration for slow progress on Interior legislation. White House staff recognized that Saylor’s disappointment over Interior appointments had “left him irretrievably bitter” and knew his erratic behavior was not well-received in the House. But they had no compelling reason not to placate the outspoken congressman.⁵ With Dominy still on the job in mid-May, a Saylor aide expressed dismay that the commissioner had not bothered to quit outright.⁶

Dominy’s reputation for hard living also played a role in his departure, although the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s background check was not completed until Dominy had already submitted three resignation letters. FBI agents uncovered considerable second-hand gossip about public drunkenness, aggressive behavior toward women, illicit relationships, physical altercations with coworkers, and generally boorish antics.⁷ His allies dismissed these allegations as the sour grapes of the many old bureaucratic enemies Dominy had crossed along the way. By 1969, at least, he had become more restrained in public and his wife Alice often accompanied him on his official travels. The FBI could not corroborate the most outrageous claims (including the rumor that an intoxicated Dominy would sometimes remove the pilot from the cockpit of the Bureau’s twin-engine plane and fly it himself.) Perhaps the most astute assessment came from one former Bureau engineer who told the FBI Dominy’s case was a “typical situation where a man with lots of ability stayed in a job too long so as to become

⁴ John Saylor to Richard Nixon, telegram, 15 March 1969, WHCF-RMN, FG 19, box 7, folder 11.

⁵ Bryce Harlow to Staff Secretary, 9 May 1969, WHCF-RMN, box 1, folder 2; and Alexander P. Butterfield to Bryce Harlow, 24 April 1969, HRH-RMN, box 50, folder 14.

⁶ “BuRec’s Dominy Quits...Again,” *Engineering News-Record*, 15 May 1969, 23.

⁷ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 1993), 250-251. Reisner’s story is repeated and embellished in James Lawrence Powell, *Dead Pool: Lake Powell, Global Warming, and the Future of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 143.

autocratic and in his mind could do no wrong.”⁸ While the contents of Dominy’s FBI file would no doubt be sufficient to block a presidential appointment today, in 1969 the administration’s decision not to reappoint him was a purely political calculation aimed at appeasing one of his oldest congressional foes. After nearly four decades in government service, Dominy’s fate was reduced to a simple question between two Nixon staffers: “Can this one go?”⁹

Dominy forever resented any implication he had been fired. And in fact, his formal overtures toward resignation made firing unnecessary. In a second letter to Nixon, Dominy indicated he would stay on in government until the end of the congressional session in December (to better his civil service retirement standing) but would step down as commissioner whenever a replacement was found.¹⁰ In one last thumbing of his nose at the Interior brass, Dominy called a surprise press conference to announce his departure, putting his boss, assistant secretary for water and power James R. Smith, on the spot. Many of the reporters had known Dominy for a long time and appreciated his candor and open-door policy. They used the meeting to needle Smith and Hickel. Noting that more than three months had passed since the inauguration, one reporter asked Smith, “Do you have that little influence about...third and fourth echelon appointments in your Department? Is that something entirely taken away from you people by the White House?”¹¹

The administration formally accepted Dominy’s retirement on May 21st and, in the sort of slight that matters a great deal to a career bureaucrat, declined to make an official announcement.

⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, file on Floyd Elgin Dominy, FOIPA No. 1154757-000. Copy in author’s possession.

⁹ William Timmons to Bryce Harlow, undated memorandum, WHCF-RMN, FG 19, box 7, folder 11. This document contains several small slips of paper stapled together chronicling the White House’s discussion of Dominy’s future in the administration.

¹⁰ Floyd E. Dominy to Richard M. Nixon, 8 May 1969, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: Correspondence, 1968, 1969, Congratulations – Commissioner.

¹¹ “Transcript of Press Conference by Assistant Secretary James R. Smith and Commissioner of Reclamation in Secretary Smith’s Office,” 9 May 1969, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: Correspondence, 1969.

No doubt fearing an explosive outburst, Smith directed his deputy, James Watt, to deliver the news. But Smith need not have feared. “Floyd was a perfect gentleman and showed me respect for doing my job,” Watt later recalled.¹² Hickel’s problem now was finding a new commissioner. After considering several candidates, he settled on Ellis L. Armstrong, an assistant regional director in the Bureau’s Salt Lake City office. Hickel initially wanted an outsider and believed, according to Helene Monberg, “that the Bureau has been inbred for too long.”¹³ Armstrong had come up through the Bureau’s ranks but from 1954 to 1968 had served in other federal agencies and as a private consultant. Smith hoped to get Nixon’s man Armstrong in position before the National Reclamation Association conference in October.

Dominy’s swan song lasted five months. Hundreds of admirers came out to bid farewell as the Bureau’s regional offices celebrated their boss with lavish parties. Freed from any loyalty to Nixon or Hickel, Dominy used the opportunity to rail against the administration. He accused Agriculture secretary Clifford Hardin and Vice President Agnew of ignorance. In Wyoming, he rambled for several minutes about John Saylor, “a tiger exercising a negative pique as a face saving gesture.”¹⁴ Any suggestion that his departure had been a mutual agreement between himself and Nixon’s people was lost. As always, he found common cause with congressmen who believed the administration was trampling the legislative branch’s constitutional authority to control budgets. But Congress had also done the Bureau a “moral” disservice by authorizing more projects than it was willing to fund.¹⁵

¹² James G. Watt, personal communication with the author, 15 October 2012. Watt would later become Secretary of the Interior for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

¹³ “BuRec Head Sifting Begins Again,” [*Grand Junction, CO*] *Daily Sentinel*, 15 June 1969.

¹⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, “Speech...before the Wyoming Production Credit Association,” 6 July 1969, FED-AHC, box 30, folder: 1969 July Travel.

¹⁵ “Dominy Laments Failure to Put Reclamation Story Over to U.S.,” *Arizona Farmer-Ranchman*, 5 July 1969.

In 1969, the Bureau had a backlog of some \$5 billion in authorized but unfunded projects, an enormous amount considering how much overhead and maintenance ate out of the Bureau's \$245 million budget that year. With the Apollo moon program making world headlines that summer, Dominy was incredulous that the administration wanted to reduce further the Bureau's funds while lavishing some \$23 billion on Apollo and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "I can't for the life of me understand why it's necessary to reduce the Bureau's budget to a level where we are not living up to the moral commitments we have made to people when we undertook certain projects," he told one audience.¹⁶ Dominy would not, he wrote Montana senator Lee Metcalf, "preside over any liquidation or phasing out of the Bureau of Reclamation," an event that would no doubt please his Washington enemies.¹⁷ Many western journalists agreed and suspected Dominy's departure was a sign Nixon did not care much about the West's problems. Indeed, Hickel's 328-page memoir of his twenty-two months as Interior secretary makes just one mention of dams.¹⁸

Still grasping at the tattered remnants of Great Society liberalism, Dominy continued to claim that "we don't have any ghettos in Reclamation projects."¹⁹ As even the most casual observer would have seen, the appalling living conditions for the irrigated West's predominantly Hispanic migrant labor force were no better than they had been for Exodusters a generation before. But Dominy was correct about reclamation's overall contribution to the growth of the modern American West. Twenty million more people now lived in the West than when Dominy had started with the Bureau in 1946. Seven of the nation's twenty largest cities were in

¹⁶ "Dominy Blasts at Reclamation Cuts," *The Minot [ND] Daily News*, 27 June 1969.

¹⁷ Floyd E. Dominy to Lee Metcalf, 8 September 1969, FED-AHC, box 3, folder: Correspondence, 1968, 1969, Congratulations – Commissioner.

¹⁸ Walter J. Hickel, *Who Owns America?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971).

¹⁹ Floyd E. Dominy, interview with A. N. Weckslar, 13 June 1969, FED-AHC, 2005 accretion, box 6, scrapbook: April-October 1969.

reclamation states and some fifteen million urban westerners flushed their toilets with water from Bureau of Reclamation projects. The literal fruits of reclamation's labor could be found in nearly every refrigerator and pantry in America. Hickel's Interior department was already trying to rebrand reclamation as a "people-oriented" program serving "the growing municipal and industrial demands of the western states."²⁰

But Americans, at least the relative few who did pause to consider reclamation, now focused on the negative ecological and aesthetic impact of large dams rather than the comfort and convenience they provided. The time had already come, as one of Dominy's subordinates wrote in 1964, where "control of the country is passing into the hands of a generation that does not remember the 30's, tends to accept normal rainfall as inevitable, and is oriented toward shiny new technology."²¹ This reorientation was also reflected in the changing contours of western politics. Congressional redistricting in the early 1970s shifted the West's power base away from conservative, rural, pro-reclamation areas to urban centers. Wayne Aspinall, who had been nearly invincible when he represented Colorado's west slope, lost the 1972 primary to a challenger more attuned to urban Colorado's environmental views.

The Bureau of Reclamation was not, as Dominy feared, dead-on-arrival at the dawn of the 1970s. Construction of water distribution and drainage works still consumed fifty to sixty percent of the agency's annual budget after Dominy retired. After the lean years of the Nixon administration, appropriations increased into the 1980s. But another statistic is perhaps more telling, at least insofar as the Bureau's relevance to the American public. Whereas the Bureau had once commanded better than half of Interior's total budget, its share slowly eroded after the

²⁰ James R. Smith to Walter Hickel, 10 October 1969, JGW-AHC, box 1, folder: 19.

²¹ Bruce Johnson to Floyd E. Dominy, 8 May 1964, FED-AHC, box 15, folder: Professional File, Missouri River Basin Planning Office.

mid-1960s. In 1981 National Park Service appropriations eclipsed the Bureau of Reclamation's funding for the first time.²²

Ironically, Dominy had missed one major chance to reinvent the agency at the height of the 1960s budget crises. For a man who supposedly never met a dam site he did not like, Dominy was only ever a lukewarm supporter of overseas projects. He refused to give blanket endorsement to Lyndon Johnson's plans to develop the Mekong River in Southeast Asia until the Bureau could conduct detailed engineering studies. International projects offered federal dollars (from other agencies beside the Bureau) and generous host-country support. Moreover, no international environmental movement existed to thwart the Bureau's plans. But the Bureau's lasting legacy overseas came not from building but from training. The Denver office hosted engineers from around the world. Dominy, always self-conscious about his lack of engineering credentials, turned the Bureau into perhaps the world's preeminent center of engineering expertise, and in this way it continues to shape the landscape of arid lands worldwide.

For a man who had never retreated from the rough-and-tumble of western water politics, Dominy slipped into retirement rather quietly. He completed a few minor consulting jobs, including an environmental impact assessment for the trans-Alaska pipeline project in 1971. Reflecting on the sea change in federal natural resource policy, Dominy attacked the new Environmental Protection Agency and warned Alaskans of the "dangerous men in high places who would stop development."²³ Alaskans by this time had apparently forgotten that Dominy himself had once fought hard against needless development in the state. But his heart was never in consulting. Between his suburban homestead at Hickory Knoll and the 550-acres at Bellevue

²² Federal Budget of the United States of America, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1950, 1966, and 1972-1983, inclusive.)

²³ "Dominy Warns of Wolf's Cry," undated newspaper clipping, FED-AHC, 2005 accretion, box 8, green scrapbook.

Farm, Dominy had never lost touch with his connection to the soil even in his busiest days as commissioner. In retirement he focused his efforts on breeding Angus bulls, and earned the Virginia Beef Cattle Association's Seed Stock Producer of the Year award in 1979. Perhaps surprisingly for those who did not know Dominy, this award pleased him as much as any accolade he earned as commissioner.

As the post-Earth Day environmental movement blossomed and the pace of reclamation construction resumed, Dominy had a second career of sorts. He became a reliable sound bite, especially as he grew older, and a spot of color in an otherwise dull topic. He could distill reams of congressional testimony on the West's complicated relationship with water into salty bumper sticker slogans. The first voice in the film adaptation of Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*—and the only line of dialogue repeated in the documentary—is Dominy's: "I have no apologies. I was a crusader for the development of water. I was the messiah! I was the evangelist that went out and argued persuasively to develop our rivers and water supplies for the benefit of people."²⁴ The filmmakers' intent was to emphasize the arrogance of an unreconstructed dam builder. He comes across as a buffoon, the self-anointed messiah for the Gospel of Reclamation. What I have tried to show here is that understanding the second half of Dominy's statement, the rather pedestrian arguments he made for developing western waters for the benefit of people, is more important to our knowledge of the hydraulic West's precarious situation than the simple two-dimensional character he allowed himself to become.

Alice Dominy, described as a "saint" by all who knew her, passed away in 1982. Floyd spent his last years at Bellevue surrounded by signed photographs and other memorabilia from his glory years in the Bureau. For a long time he devoured books, mostly dense histories and

²⁴ Floyd E. Dominy, *Cadillac Desert: Mulholland's Dream*, VHS, directed by Jon Else (San Jose, CA: KTEH-TV, 1997).

biographies, but eventually gave up reading as his eyesight deteriorated. Dominy attributed his extraordinary longevity to a lifetime diet of unprocessed foods and spent many hours sitting out on the porch with a rifle, protecting his vegetable patch from gophers. On Bellevue Farm in 2010, four months past his hundredth birthday, Floyd Dominy died of congestive heart failure. According to his wishes, the Dominy family donated his remains for medical research. His ashes were later interred with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, practically within sight of the Interior Department Building.

For a generation of environmental activists and scholars, Dominy still stands as a potent symbol of the nation's reckless disregard of nature. His personal imprint and the work of his subordinates is writ all across the western landscape. But in many ways, he was simply an unremarkable bureaucrat, toiling away in the obscurity of a Washington office building. As westerners face climate change in the coming century, the Bureau of Reclamation and its hydraulic infrastructure will become increasingly important to millions who depend on them for domestic, industrial, and agricultural needs. Our society is conditioned to view environmental problems in terms of brief presidential policy statements or the simplified rhetoric of cable news pundits. But as Dominy's career illustrates, we would do well to consider the complex set of circumstances and personalities that created our present situation and the equally complex solutions necessary to face future environmental and social challenges.

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