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WATER AND THE WEST

*Senator Bill Bradley**

For seventeen years I was a member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee of the United States Senate. That committee has jurisdiction over the public lands that comprise about a third of the land mass of America. As most of you know, the public lands are mostly west of the Mississippi. For example, New York State has only about 1% of its land mass that is owned by the federal government, North Carolina about 6%, Michigan about 9%. You look at Colorado or New Mexico, its 35%. Here in Wyoming it's about 50%. In Nevada it's nearly 90%. So, it is very clear that what happens on the public lands affects the people of the West, the seventeen states of the West disproportionately.

At the same time, public lands are the patrimony of the nation. When I sought to get on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I sought to get on because I was interested in energy. In the middle of an oil crisis, back in 1979, I wanted to be in the middle of that action. Prices were skyrocketing then. It was a major national issue. And I didn't really have

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much interest in natural resources or the West. It was actually after several years on the committee that I really became interested in the issues and problems that affect the West. My impressions of the West, that is the land west of Missouri where I grew up as a kid, had really been shaped by the movies and popular literature of my childhood. You know the conflict between cowboys and Indians, ranchers and homesteaders. The West had seemed to me to be one great big adventure, where the personal desire for unbounded land matched the nation's desire for territorial expansion, and where striking it rich was seen as a measure of your worth. Of course, it was easy, from my childhood, the west of my childhood, to know who the good guys were. They were the ones who facilitated westward expansion and tried to make it as safe as possible. They were the trappers and the traders and the scouts and the wagon masters and the sheriffs and railroad detectives and homesteaders and ranchers, who brought structure to chaos, who defeated savagery, who promoted civilization, who carved livelihoods out of the wilderness. And it was just as clear to me, in that small town in Missouri as well, who the bad guys were. The bad guys were the Indians, the Mexicans, the bloodthirsty outlaws, the crooked bankers and you know, they had names. Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Calamity Jane, Sitting Bull, Geronimo. So the Oregon Trail, the Santa Fe Trail, the Dodge City cattle drives, gold rushes, provided the settings for the good guys to win on TV every time. These were the people and the places of the West that I learned while growing up in Missouri.

As a member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee I came to know a different West. I listened to countless corporate and individual witnesses present their cases for development of oil shale here in Wyoming and Colorado. Off shore oil in Alaska, deep sands natural gas in New Mexico, coal in Montana, uranium and gold in Nevada, silver in Idaho, logging in Washington, Oregon and Alaska, and water projects in Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, Texas, Oklahoma, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Idaho, and South Dakota. In my work on the committee I talked to a lot of westerners, both in Congress, like Al Simpson and other congressional representatives, and also back in the states. I was determined to learn more about this America that was so far from New Jersey that I represented, so different from Missouri that I had come from, but so much a part of our national consciousness. I heard miners, and ranchers, and loggers defend what they did as being part of their job. You know, you went out and logged and mined and that's what you did. I heard environmentalists on occasion, kind of self-righteously claim that theirs was the spiritual journey that led to greater stewardship. I visited wheat farmers in South Dakota, fruit growers in California, Indian reservations in South Dakota, Nevada, Arizona, and Washington and National parks in fifteen of the western states. I saw storms move across the plains, announced by lightning bolts. I saw storms in the mountains, appear suddenly, and then pass. The air seemed pure; the lights shone brighter in these western landscapes. In the spring, even the desert

shimmered with color. Slowly the region came alive for me, more subtle and various than just one vast empty stretch of arid land.

I also tried to understand the region's past. The frontier myth of Frederick Jackson Turner, espoused in 1893, embraced the old Jeffersonian belief that the work of the yeomen on the land was virtuous and it renewed the human spirit. It suggested that American inventiveness developed in part when an immigrant people were forced to work on the land in the face of harsh weather and hostile Indians. But was the frontier really a place where middle class dreams could be realized by just finding your wagon in the train? Was it paradisaical? A place of second chances where lighting out for the territory, as Mark Twain used to say, was an act of personal liberation? Was it a new world, offering material success and religious freedom? Was it the central image setting story of American history? Or, was the history of the American west something else? Something more complex?

The frontier myth left out so much. For example, it left out the power of non-western economic interests. By 1900 the railroads owned an area in the west the size of California and Washington, combined. It left out the roll of women, of racial and ethnic diversity, of xenophobia that accompanied the Chinese immigration, of outrage over Mormon apostasy, and the richness and variety of Native American cultures. The unspoiled land, in the late nineteenth century, was rarely protected for its beauty. More often it was the source of speculation and the object of exploitation.

The political historian, Richard Hofstadter, pointed out in his 1955 book, *The Age of Reform*, that westerners evoked the Jeffersonian ideal to justify their acceptance of federal assistance. That was his thesis. But, most westerners, not unlike most other people anywhere, were more interested in money and property than they were in the agrarian ideal, and they saw the federal government as a potential source of wealth.

In 1878, Major John Wesley Powell, founder of the U.S. Geological Survey, published his report on the land west of the hundredth meridian. Powell was concerned that much of the land being given away under the Homestead Act was too dry to support farms, and the small farmers who went west expecting to make living growing crops in the desert, were going to go bankrupt. Now he wanted to insure homesteading only on land that was irrigated and he took the position that the federal government should see that that land was irrigated. Above all, he warned against unrestricted development and urged awareness of the uniqueness of this vast, dry open space. A decade later he urged that a hydrological mapping of the entire west, and especially the seven major river basins, take place *before* the federal government gave more land to homesteaders or to anyone else. The water survey was ultimately completed but Powell's caution and professionalism were ignored.

The politicians rejected the slower, more planned development that the conclusions of his report called for, and instead, the land was poked for gold and silver, drilled for oil, gouged for coal and uranium, clear cut for logs, and by the 1930's, parts of the west had been homesteaded into a dust bowl.

From 1987 to 1995 I was the chairman of the Water and Power Subcommittee of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which had jurisdiction over the Bureau of Reclamation, and the person who was my staff member is here today, Tom Jensen. So, that was my new assignment. The guy from New Jersey now is in charge of water in seventeen western states. Growing up in Missouri where we had forty inches of rain and were next to the greatest river in America, I never really thought much about aridity. Though the Mississippi usually was narrower in August than it was in May, it never dwindled to a trickle. Yet I knew that man's attempt to control nature in the West meant damming, storing, and distributing the water of the great river basins; the Colorado, the Columbia, the Missouri and a few others.

In the Colorado basin, the most litigated and the most famous of the lot, people were astonished when they learned that all the fuss was about a river whose volume was only about one percent of the Mississippi. I also knew that people had been fighting over water in the West for a long time. I saw the movie *Chinatown*, I heard the old man say that, you know, oil is for money and water is for fighting. Yes, water played a central role in the politics, economy and life of seventeen western states and I thought by understanding water issues I could learn about this unique place in America.

Of all the water projects, I was told the Central Valley Project (CVP) of California had the most intractable and important set of problems and opportunities and they said, "And oh, by the way, it'll never be reformed". Well, I knew my first step, if I wanted to reform the Central Valley Project, was to learn all I could about California water. In particular, I had to learn about the central Valley, an area three times the size of New Jersey that extended 400 miles from Mt. Shasta in the north to the Tehachapi Range in the south in an almost perfectly flat swath fifty miles wide. I found that 85% of California's water was used for agriculture even though agriculture only represented 4% of the state's economy and 3% of the employment. In San Diego County once, I remember seeing grapefruit trees being watered through tiny plastic pipes that were under strict control and flooded the roots with small amounts of water twice a day. Meanwhile, in the Central Valley of California, unpaved irrigation canals were drained by giant sprinkler systems that sprayed water over the vast fields as if it was rain in New Jersey. The drip versus the spray; for me that was a vivid picture of how agricultural water usage depended on cost. By 1990, I realized the first step in water reform required bringing the price of CVP water more in line with what the market would dictate in a world where entrenched political power did not

guarantee outrageous subsidies. With higher prices, conservation had to improve, as farmers, like the San Diego grapefruit growers, made greater efforts not to waste the precious commodity. If agriculture in California simply conserved ten percent—maybe water metering would help, maybe tiered pricing would help—it would double the water available for the residential and commercial sectors. A more efficient use of water, monitored by price, in turn, would mean less pollution from agriculture and some of that water would be set aside for fish and wildlife, and mitigation of environmental damage. Water purity would be enhanced in the long run for millions of Californians, and the water would flow more easily to the industries that generate the jobs of California's future.

I also learned that the environmental abuse and over-consumption in the Central Valley were not just California issues. They affected the entire west. To begin with, there were fewer wetlands for migratory birds flying from Mexico to Canada. In addition, the fishermen in the Pacific Northwest, just as well as those in California, were hurt by the decimation of the Pacific Salmon and the Steelhead Trout populations. But more important, proper management was vital to the protection of water resources of neighboring states.

To the extent that federal law prevented California from transferring water out of the Central Valley to meet its growing urban needs (800,000 are moving to the state every year), the state would be obliged to try to find water elsewhere. To the senators from Arizona and Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico, this meant that California would do its damndest to modify the Colorado Basin Compact so that more of that water would go to California. Or at least, that California would want to keep the part of Arizona's water that it had been buying since Phoenix was just a mid-size city.

The western artist, Charles Marion Russell, who has many of his great works in this wonderful museum, lived in Great Falls, MT, where he drank a lot and painted a lot. Once, in 1923, he was asked to address the Great Falls Booster Club, and after several speeches by local dignitaries where they were praising the pioneer spirit and the admirableness of the pioneers and the pioneers this and the pioneers that, Russell tore up his prepared talk and said to the assembled audience, "In my book a pioneer is a man who turned all the grass upside down, strung barb wire over the dust that was left, poisoned the water, cut down the trees, killed the Indians, ruined the land and called it progress. If I had my way the land here would be like God made it and none of you son of a bitches would be here".

The West, in the beginning of the 21st century, is a world apart from the West on the eve of the 20th century. The Homestead Act was one of the most successful land distribution schemes in history and the railroads needed generous incentives to make sizeable investments and the desert needed wa-

ter in order to farm. Each of these subsidies over time became excessive and this way of operating ignored the long term consequences of unplanned development. The imperative to preserve the environment and to create jobs cannot be a zero-sum game. The focus has got to shift from the interest of a specific resource concern to one about a complete ecosystem. Not this or that piece of the west, but the entire region. Not the old West, but the whole West. And increasingly, a new generation of senators from the West, Al Simpson being one of them, began to do that.

Even though ninety-five million acres in America have been declared official wilderness, the frontier is a place that is long gone, notwithstanding my eastern friends who come for cowboy hats and boots at Wayne's. In 1945, eighty-thousand people lived in Phoenix. Today it's a metropolitan area of over two million people. The same kind of explosive growth has taken place in Denver, Salt Lake City, Tucson, Albuquerque, San Diego, Las Vegas, and Reno. There are more city dwellers as a percent of a total regional population in the West today than in any other part of the country. The land of what Bernard DeVoto once called "The Plundered Province," if it is to avoid population controls, must be managed to protect its waters and its traditions or that way of life will be destroyed by developers who converge on the region from the east and west as if they were a pioneer movement bent on conquest.

For example, the Colorado Basin Act of 1968 divided up the Colorado River among the seven Basin states. The Act assumed that there would be thirteen million acre feet of water available for distribution each year. This best case scenario, that allowed the bill to pass by giving each of the senators enough water that they wanted for each of their own states, now forty years later has proven overly optimistic to say the least. The average distribution has been around ten million, average flow around ten million, and Lake Mead and Lake Powell, thirty-five to fifty percent below capacity. In short, there is less and less water.

At the same time that the long drought has reduced available water, more and more people have continued to pour into the region. They came for the weather; they came for the lifestyle. In the final conference on the 1968 bill, the issue came up about that part of the Colorado River that flows to Yuma, Arizona and Laughlin, Nevada. One of the participants, an elected official, said, "You can forget about development in that place. Forget it. There'll be no development there. It's hotter than hell and the only things that live there are lizards and rattlesnakes." Well, last winter along the Yuma/Lake Havasu City/Laughlin stretch of the Colorado River there were nearly a million people. From January to May there were a hundred thousand RVs at Quartzsite, Arizona alone. The result of this septic tank supported development is dangerous levels of nitrates flowing into the river and the groundwater. Well, to get the money to clean up the water, some states have chosen to sell off more land to more developers, who build more shop-

ping centers and more houses that create demand for more water and create more pollution problems.

This path is not sustainable. At some point the ideas embodied in the Central Valley Improvement Act, pricing which has to reflect cost, conservation that's got to be improved, the use of water for agriculture has to be more efficient so that it can also be used for commercial and residential development. Those things become common sense as you look at the circumstance. The sustainability movement asserts that one generation must be the trustee for the next. It attempts to provide both job creation and environmental value by increasing the productivity of the land through the application of knowledge and technology. It begins by determining the natural and cultural setting that must be sustained and then it plans how, for example, a stream can be used as a commodity in mining and power production and still, at the same time, be a blue ribbon trout stream. Or how a forest can provide lumber and still preserve habitat. At the core of this idea is the commonplace common sense observation that the right of the property owner must be balanced against the needs of society. Yesterday the conference was addressed by Charles Wilkinson, who is a man I tremendously respect, and he said in his great book *Crossing the Next Meridian*, "Were not Powell and Stegner right after all about their central point? That the aridity and terrain dictate finiteness beyond the hundredth meridian? Is not the finite in view?"

The only thing that will guarantee the West a brighter future is the good will of all the stakeholders. The kind of thing that would happen if Al Simpson and I sat down to try to work out an issue. And the acceptance in other river basins of some of the ideas and provisions embedded in the Central Valley Improvement Act and the long term horizon of the sustainability movement. The old economic and political power cannot improve the current circumstance. The get in and get out mentality of the miner looking for gold must give way to thinking on a different time scale, and even a senator or a citizen coming from as far away as New Jersey has the obligation to point out that the vast public lands and their resources belong to us all.

Thank you very much.

