



Donald J. Pisani. *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002. xviii + 394 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23030-9.



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Success through Failure: Reclamation's Aims and Accomplishments

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In his clearly titled *Water and American Government* Donald J. Pisani continues his planned multivolume analysis of water law, water policy, and American governmental institutions.[1] This second volume offers a narrative history of the Reclamation Service from its creation by the Reclamation Act of 1902 through its monumental, crowning achievement in the first third of the twentieth century, Boulder Dam on the Colorado River.

Pisani has written an institutional history of the Reclamation Service and its successor, the Bureau of Reclamation (1923), and the efforts by those agencies to establish and implement a national water policy that would attack social ills in the urban squalor of the East, construct the physical apparatus to deliver water for irrigation, provide electricity for homes and industry, and extend flood protection. All the while Reclamation had to survive and ultimately prevail in vigorous competition with the Department of Agriculture's Office of Irrigation Investigations and the War Department's Army Corps of Engineers for authority and fund-

ing. Pisani's is a history wherein "agency" prevails as a noun meaning a formally constituted government bureau rather than an awkward euphemism for individual or collective "initiative," where "power" is measured in standardized units including horsepower, kilowatts, votes, and dollars, or is overtly wielded by government institutions and their constituencies, rather than secreted between the lines of text. *Water and American Government* narrates a nuanced history of the Bureau of Reclamation's early life as it sought to formulate and to realize ideals relict from Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer, Andrew Johnson's Homestead Act of 1862, and the admiration of professional expertise characterizing the progressives at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Pisani's history is at its most interesting and his contribution greatest where he skillfully places Reclamation, an agency in the executive branch, and the several men who led it, in the political and ideological crossfire between the Congress and the Cabinet, the East and the West, the South and the North, principles of public and private ownership of infrastructure assets, urban and rural sectors of society, agricultural and industrial visions of the American future, and scientific and sentimental

ideologies.

Pisani argues, “it makes more sense to see the Reclamation Act of 1902 and the events that followed as evidence of the persistence of ‘frontier America’ and traditional nineteenth-century values, rather than as the emergence of ‘modern America’” or “as a symbol of ... the expansion and centralization of national power over natural resources” (p. xi). “Persistence” is Pisani’s key word in his thesis. The *laissez-faire* principles of small, individualist land owners, private or at most localized power and irrigation distribution enterprises, and decentralized administration display remarkable tenacity through the thirty-three years Pisani discusses—a tenacity all the more remarkable for the increasingly centralized administrative ideologies ascendant during the first third of the twentieth century. Pisani demonstrates in his ten chapters how the constraints of the American federal system of government and its institutionalized processes of compromise preserved the ideals of the “agricultural model of 1800 or 1850” (p. xi). It is a study of practical politics and policy wherein the political parties are often only incidentally party to the politics.

Pisani divides *Water and American Government* into three conceptual and temporal sections: reclamation’s nascence during the Theodore Roosevelt administration; its ascendance and retrenchment under withering scrutiny during William H. Taft’s administration and the good times for agricultural producers during Woodrow Wilson’s administration; and the cyclical history of irrigation, urban water supply, and electrification in the years between the end of the Great War in Europe and the completion of Boulder Dam.

In the first section he discusses reclamation’s “charmed life” during the Theodore Roosevelt administration. His chapter “Saving Lost Lives” describes the interplay between the social improvement objectives undergirding the Reclamation Act of 1902—establishing homes for self-sufficient families in the arid, presumably fertile lands of the West—and the political exigencies demanding projects be distributed throughout the western states and territories in order to garner electoral support for Roosevelt’s Republican successor. Pisani additionally integrates the powerful influence of the transcontinental railroads and the important exhortations by the “Big Three” irrigation zealots: railroad lobbyist and “home-croft” promoter George H. Maxwell, irrigation colony promoter William E. Smythe, and pioneer stream gauger and hydraulic engineer Frederick H. Newell. Maxwell and Smythe lost their ardor for the Reclamation Act and

its projects when those projects failed to transform or even entice residents of the urban squalor to become independent, self-sufficient farmers. Newell, on the other hand, decided that the two-thirds of project settlers who failed did so because of their laziness or stupidity; had they listened to and followed the advice of the engineers and other experts, like himself, they would have succeeded. The first five years of Reclamation Act activities showed the inadequacy of the act’s underfunded social engineering apparatus and how attractive its public works dimension had become to politicians. Maxwell and Smythe set out to crusade for other causes and Newell settled into his office as first director of the Reclamation Service.

In his second chapter, “The Perils of Public Works,” Pisani surveys the legal, administrative, and philosophical challenges the Reclamation Service faced. Newell and the Reclamation Service sought to reserve the “surplus” water in the West for planned and contemplated reclamation projects in the face of the complexity and confusion of western water law. Pisani explains the competing riparian and appropriative water rights systems, lines up their respective supporters, and traces the judicial consequences of the Reclamation Service’s early efforts to achieve its goals. Engineer Newell sought to have the Reclamation Service administer entire drainages as an integrated, coherent system. Pisani explains the ways both politics and the laws at the national, state, and local levels impeded large-scale management. The principal components of his “turf wars” discussion include Amendment X to the Constitution, intense rivalries between the Departments of War, Agriculture, and Interior, regional blocs in Congress, and the philosophical debate between public and private ownership of interstate public works projects.

Pisani then examines the consequences of the mixed ideals related in his first chapter and the intricate relationships produced by the political process detailed in his second chapter for neighboring communities developed under those conditions. In “Case Studies in Irrigation and Community,” Pisani compares two irrigation project communities in Idaho—Rupert in the Minidoka Project by the Reclamation Service, and Twin Falls, a private venture, both initiated in the first decade of the twentieth century. In his comparison he shows how the several differences between public and private irrigation development affected the expansion of agriculture and the vibrant social and business life in Twin Falls, while Rupert, protected from the “evils” of speculation, languished. Donald Pisani’s three-layered analysis of the fundamen-

tal ideologies leading to the creation of the Reclamation Service, of its difficulties as it sought to flourish in national and administrative politics, and of local social, economic, and political realities in the Snake River Valley establishes a productive analytic method, one rich in historical contexts. Irrigation projects generally helped to create new towns and farms in previously arid expanses. Federal irrigation projects, constrained by rules and regulations crafted through Congressional wrangling and compromise, did likewise, but far less quickly.

The fourth chapter, "An Administrative Morass," chronicles how President Taft and Congress reined in the remarkably independent Reclamation Service and its director. Richard Ballinger, simultaneous with his more famous battle with Gifford Pinchot, sought to organize the Reclamation Service within a disciplined chain of command leading through rather than around his office. Ballinger prevailed and the Reclamation Service ended its expansionist period, depending upon sales of surplus power and water to consumers and distributors outside of its projects for new revenues as authorized by the Townsite (1906) and Warren (1911) acts rather than new projects as envisioned by the earlier Reclamation Act. The ability to sell surplus power and water, won during the Reclamation Service's first decade of existence, shaped its future evolution from a vehicle for social engineering to a wholesale supplier of water and electricity. Reclamation's engineers saw the opportunity first. Economies of scale and the federal government's access to the cheapest capital meant Reclamation could invest in larger storage facilities to assure reliable water deliveries across seasons, even years, and generate power more efficiently. At first glance the movement to larger-scale dams and reservoirs appears to contradict Pisani's thesis. On further examination, since the Taft administration's reforms dictated federal power and water should serve private development rather than compete against it, federal reclamation promoted diffuse individual and community initiatives to drive back and reclaim the wilderness through small scale institutions and enterprises promoting progress, settlement, and civilization.

If Reclamation waned overall following the Theodore Roosevelt administration, it waxed with respect to Indian lands and water rights. The muddy waters of the Winters Doctrine directing the water rights relationships between the United States and Native Americans, and the inconsistent policies administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, command Pisani's attention in his strong sixth and seventh chapters. The Reclamation Act of 1902 stipulated that reclamation projects be funded from,

among other sources, the revenues earned by the sale of the public domain. As Congressional appropriations dwindled, and readily tillable and irrigable lands outside the reservations sold, the lands the Dawes Act defined as "surplus" within became increasingly attractive. Reclamation, far more powerful than the Bureau of Indian Affairs, gained control of Indian irrigation. In "Uneasy Allies," Pisani narrates the convoluted judicial, legislative, and administrative history of the formulation and implementation of Indian irrigation policies. Without degenerating into a triumphalist cant or a jeremiad, he establishes a clear case of a systematic exercise of institutional and cultural imperialism. He concludes, "Native Americans flooded the Indian Office and Congress with protests, but whites who lived on or near the reservations had far more influence within the Indian Office than Indians, who could not be blamed for concluding that reclamation was just another scheme to evade treaty obligations and transfer control over their lands to whites" (p. 177). His "Case Studies in Water and Power: The Yakima and the Pima" applies the focused local inquiry technique of his third chapter to this question with similar success. Examining the Yakima from the resource-rich Northwest and the Pima of the arid Salt and Gila River valleys, Pisani argues, "If any Indians could serve as successful agricultural models to other Native Americans in other parts of the West, these were the ones. Instead, the bureau catered exclusively to white farmers and land speculators" (pp. 181-182).

Donald Pisani next returns to his analysis of the Reclamation Bureau's continuing task of building and paying for dams and the increased importance of hydroelectric power generation and sales in irrigation project financing in "Wiring the New West: The Strange Career of Public Power." Returns from land sales and settler repayments consistently failed to support construction costs. Congress seldom appropriated funds to make up for the shortfalls and frequently forgave settlers their obligations to repay capital expenditures incurred constructing the irrigation projects that served their lands. Comparing and contrasting the Minidoka and Salt River projects, Pisani shows how the "cash register dams" augmented the Bureau of Reclamation's tenuous revenue stream and electric power literally lifted water to some irrigators. As Reclamation evolved into an electrical power supplier it had to adjust how it operated its reservoirs, generators, and canals and its relationships with its settlers and private power companies. Then in a comparison of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Colorado River Project, and the Mississippi River flood control efforts

Pisani shows how the nation grappled with the question of “large-scale public power” projects that in each instance extended across numerous states (p. 220). Following the centralized industrial and power planning during the First World War’s mobilization, Reclamation warily sought to avoid an anticipated “backlash against collectivism and socialism” while electrifying the homes and farms served by its projects (p. 219). Congress addressed the public-private debate in the Water Power Act of 1920, which established the Federal Power Commission comprised of the secretaries of War, Agriculture, and Interior. Congress charged the Commission to review and select public and private hydroelectric proposals to receive federal leases for dam sites. Although the Federal Power Commission might have begun an era of centralized planning and administration, the commission suffered under a lack of support from presidents Harding and Coolidge and from Congress and wielded no authority over states’ rulings on water rights. The diffused political authority fundamental to the American system of government again worked as its designers had intended. Only applied political wrangling could wrest agreement from and between the states. Distributing authority between private power companies, municipalities, states, and the federal government became the “genius, as well as the curse, of Boulder Dam [for] the way in which it blended private and public enterprise” (p. 234). Publicly funded electrical power could help pay for large scale reclamation and flood control projects. It took a mighty flood on the Mississippi River in 1927 to galvanize the political coalition supporting national scale programs to control flooding on interstate streams.

“Gateway to the Hydraulic Age: Water Politics, 1920-1935,” Pisani’s ninth chapter, argues “modern water politics was born in the 1920s” (p. 235). The intra-cabinet rivalries between the departments of Agriculture, Interior, and War triggered several cabinet reorganization proposals in the wake of American experience with centralized planning practiced by several of its wartime allies. Nearly thirty federal agencies had something to do with public works. Competition rather than cooperation prevented integrated planning and administration. Pisani shows how Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover sought to centralize the management of rivers in order to “increase the nation’s wealth—through power, reclamation, or flood control, if not transportation” (p. 244). When the Mississippi broke through its levees and laid muddy waste to much of the South, that region relaxed its long-held states’-rights stance and entered a period characterized by “political alliance and vote trad-

ing between South and West” that redefined water politics and cemented support for the flood control on the Colorado promised by the high dam proposed for Black Canyon (p. 253). Consistent with his thesis, Pisani argues that as the “utility companies replaced the railroads as the ‘mother of trusts,’” public opinion came to accept federal power generation at Boulder Dam, six times larger than all the capacity in all earlier federal reclamation projects, in addition to the flood protection for the Imperial Valley and the power to lift the waters of the Colorado River Aqueduct over the San Gabriel mountains and into the burgeoning Los Angeles Basin. The sectional compromises negotiated to support the Boulder Dam Project allowed subsequent large dam projects, again offering multiple uses for multiple constituencies, at Grand Coulee on the Columbia River in Washington and the Shasta Dam on the Sacramento River in northern California.

Water and American Governments is a well constructed monograph. Each chapter stands solidly on the subjects broached and the aims proclaimed in its introduction. The two or three chapters devoted to each major segment of water policy history in the United States work together smoothly and efficiently and the narrative proceeds through Pisani’s sequence of analytic lenses. In his conclusion he mirrors the summary and broadly interpretive endings of each chapter. Reclamation implemented through national policy failed to spread small farms across the marginal lands of the nation. Instead it encouraged the growth of the sprawling urban centers in Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City. Rather than establishing a national control of natural resources, federal reclamation stimulated the creation of local administrative institutions, foremost among them the Metropolitan Water District formed to deliver Colorado River Aqueduct waters throughout Southern California. Even as President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to implement a national water planning agency, he opted to charge the Bureau of Reclamation rather than the Army Corps of Engineers with the task because, in Roosevelt’s words, “such a process of national planning should start at the bottom ... in the State and local units” (p. 270). Still, in 1935 the principles of diffused authority and local authority prevailed. Persistence indeed.

Water and American Government is masterfully typeset and seemingly free of typographical errors, presenting Pisani’s writing in a quality package. Yet it is not nearly so impressive a book, in the physical sense, suffering from several cost-cutting compromises to the principles of quality publishing. Donald Pisani writes a highly distilled text, reducing complex ideas into crystalline sen-

tences that one time in three drove this enthusiastic reader into Pisani's robust notes, nearly wearing out the well-bound book shuffling to the end rather than to the bottom of the page. In a similar vein, all the maps are clumped together in the front matter rather than integrated into the text where they would have served the reader far better. One map erroneously depicts the confluence of the Snake and the Columbia River. Neither the Columbia nor the Colorado extends beyond the borders of the contiguous United States in a bit of cartographic insularity. The twenty illustrations, mostly photographs selected from the Bureau of Reclamation and Idaho State Historical Society collections, although printed on the same top-quality paper as the text, have been inserted in the center of the volume between the sixth and seventh chapters rather than incorporated into the text. A bibliography organizing and displaying Pisani's broad, deep, and awe-inspiring research is inexplicably absent

and deeply missed.

Diverse critics of the many projects, practices, and facilities exploiting the waters of the United States have posed a rhetorical question: how could such things have happened? *Water and American Government* clearly and thoroughly explains how the nation came to engage in these important public works. It leaves to others to explain, to tout, or to decry the consequences of those projects. Would that they should do so so well as Donald J. Pisani in *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935*.

Note

[1]. Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

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