

# THE POLITICS OF RIVER BASIN DEVELOPMENT

NORMAN WENGERT\*

Many articles in this symposium deal with particular river basin problems and their solutions and with substantive issues and programs. The present article, however, is concerned with certain characteristics both of the process by which problems are identified and solutions chosen and of the environment within which these identifications and choices are made. Its focus is not on decisions, but on decision-making and on the factors and forces influencing decision-making. This is the political process.

Descriptions of public or governmental decision-making frequently indicate a strong rationalist bias—an assumption that decisions are largely the end-product of logical analysis and rational calculation, or at least that they should be. As will be indicated later, this attitude is especially prevalent in the discussion of natural resources policies and programs. In this context, of course, the term *politics* has a sinister connotation and symbolizes irrational, selfish decision-making. It is only man's perverseness and corruption that stand in the way of better, more logical techniques for determining public policy and force the use of political processes for making public-governmental decisions. And these processes are regarded as undesirable and inferior ways for making second-best choices. This view is here rejected.

## I

### POLITICS DEFINED

As used in this article, the term *politics* denotes the total process by which public-governmental decisions are made—decisions involving the selection of governmental means as well as ends, decisions determining the problems of government as well as the techniques for dealing with them. This view of politics recognizes that many factors and forces, concepts and circumstances, values and beliefs, ideas and myths, influence the character and direction of public-governmental decisions. The issues themselves, the manner in which they are drawn, the participants, their goals and values, together with the structure, mechanisms and techniques, procedures and practices of government—all are elements of the political process. All are comprehended in the term *politics*.

\*B.A. 1938, LL.B. 1942, Ph.D. 1947, University of Wisconsin; M.A. 1938, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Member of the Wisconsin bar; Professor of Government and Politics, University of Maryland; Research Associate, Resources for the Future, Inc. Formerly staff member, Office of the Secretary of the Interior, 1951-52; various administrative positions with Tennessee Valley Authority, 1941-47. Author, *NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE* (1955), *VALLEY OF TOMMORROW: THE TVA AND AGRICULTURE* (1952). Contributor to public administration and political science periodicals.

<sup>1</sup>The concept of the political process here summarized is dealt with somewhat more extensively in NORMAN WENGERT, *NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE* (1955), which also contains relevant references.

In part, the process relies upon logical analysis and rational calculation; in part, upon judgment, informed guess, and hunch; and in part, upon compromise, negotiation, bargaining, conflict, and struggle.

The end of the political process is the public interest. Yet, the determination of that interest is no simple matter. Hence, a major task of the process itself is the clarification and definition of the public interest. It may well be that at some future time, mankind and governments will know enough to make social value choices entirely by nonpolitical means. But borrowing Madison's figure of speech, the view of this article is that till angels govern men, the political process, as here described, will continue to be the way in which public-governmental decisions can best be made. This is not a matter of irrationality, or corruption, or second-best choice, but of designing a process which includes within its ken the diversities of democratic life and which permits a constant examination and re-examination of values and goals, methods and techniques. The political process is, thus, regarded as necessary for refining and clarifying objectives, for permitting countervailing forces to organize and operate, and for ultimately arriving at working definitions of the public interest.

In this view, politics is a kind of market-place process in which trades and negotiations take place as individual, group, and community interests are weighed against each other, costs and benefits assessed, and choices made. Like the market place of the economists, the political market place is also concerned with allocations, not of resources directly, but of power, authority, and influence over the affairs of government. It, too, presents a picture of imperfect competition, for inadequate knowledge, power imbalances, and other impediments create frictions and distortions. And like the process of the economic market, the political process often appears confused and illogical, rather than neat and systematic. Like the concept of the economic market, too, this concept of politics accepts the limitations of man's ability to foresee the future, to consider all relevant factors, to account for all effects. It denies the present ability of any man or group of men to define for others with finality either individual or public interest, emphasizing the diversity in values and the difficulties in separating out the tangled threads of self-interest from those of public interest. This is, of course, the traditional view of the democratic, open society, based upon manifold potential choice and free will. It implicitly challenges monolithic conceptions of public policy which underlie most closed philosophic systems.<sup>2</sup>

From this pluralistic view of politics and the political process, moreover, several summary propositions may be derived. The first is that points of decision are many, scattered through the government structure and outside that structure but vitally

<sup>2</sup> The term "policy" is often used with a sense of static finality that divorces it from its relation to "politics." Policy decisions, it is implied, lead to stability. Having once decided policy, those concerned could then proceed to the next order of business and get some work done, so the argument goes. This view of policy seems to assume superior knowledge in particular decision-makers or to require overriding of divergent interests and conflicting values, instead of emphasizing the continuous, ongoing character of the political struggle. For a discussion of policy which takes a divergent view from that here suggested, positing a water policy that would be "a clear, accepted, reasonably stable body of principles," see Ackerman, *Questions for Designers of Future Water Policy*, 38 J. FARM ECON. 971 (1956).

related to it. As a result, politics and the political struggle are pervasive aspects of government. The second is that groups are dominant participants in the process, a group being simply a collection of individuals organized to act in concert for some agreed-upon purpose. The third is that struggle, competition, bargaining, and negotiation are characteristic of the ongoing process, reflecting the complexity of individual and group goals and the continuous action and reaction, alignment and realignment of factors and forces.<sup>3</sup> And finally, decisions occur in context, or, to use Gaus's phrase, government takes place in an ecological setting.

The definition of politics and the political process outlined in these paragraphs offers a conceptual framework for selecting and analyzing data on the politics of river basin development. Space, however, does not permit a systematic and comprehensive application of these concepts to river basin development in this article. In any case, a number of detailed studies of particular basins are available which deal with some of these political forces,<sup>4</sup> and other articles in this symposium touch on particular aspects of river basin development politics. The balance of this article, therefore, considers several selected and unique characteristics of the politics of river basin development for topical treatment.

## II

### THE IMPETUS TO RIVER BASIN DEVELOPMENT

The political process in the United States operates in response to articulated demands and felt needs. Government does not act spontaneously nor for reasons of whim, but rather because some individual or some group wants something and has instigated action seeking decisions favorable to that position. In this part, some of the interests and forces that give impetus to river basin development will be considered, and some of the groups involved will be examined.

For over fifty years, an articulate group of men-of-good-will has been attracted to the idea of the river basin as a logical and proper basis for resource development. Their interests have been conservation, wise use of resources through positive, dynamic governmental action for what they considered to be the public good. Professor Samuel Hays suggests that for this group, the idea of rational management of the nation's resources was an important goal.<sup>5</sup> And undoubtedly this goal continues to

<sup>3</sup> The literature on the group basis of politics is extensive. Among the more important works are: DAVID B. TRUMAN, *THE GOVERNMENTAL PROCESS* (1951); EARL LATHAM, *THE GROUP BASIS OF POLITICS* (1952); and BERTRAM M. GROSS, *THE LEGISLATIVE STRUGGLE* (1953).

<sup>4</sup> The most written-about basin is the Tennessee, although few of the studies deal explicitly with the political forces involved. For references, see TVA, *AN INDEXED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY* (1936) (cumulative supplements issued annually). Also extensively treated is the Missouri. E.g., RUFUS TERRAL, *THE MISSOURI VALLEY* (1947); RICHARD G. BAUMHOFF, *THE DAMMED MISSOURI VALLEY* (1951); MARIAN E. RIDGEWAY, *THE MISSOURI BASIN'S PICK-SLOAN PLAN* (1955). Other basins have been less thoroughly reviewed, but note should be made of CHARLES MCKINLEY, *UNCLE SAM IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST* (1952), and that classic study, ARTHUR MAASS, *MUDDY WATERS: THE ARMY ENGINEERS AND THE NATION'S RIVERS* (1951). The periodical literature on basin development is extensive, and the government publications overwhelming.

<sup>5</sup> SAMUEL P. HAYS, *THE FIRST AMERICAN CONSERVATION MOVEMENT, 1891-1920* (unpublished doctoral dissertation in Harvard University Library 1952).

draw support for river basin development from those who value systematic resource management.

This viewpoint tends to assume that development is good (thus, really begging the whole question) and focuses attention on the type of development and the organizational forms for carrying on that development. To this point of view are drawn public-spirited citizens, conservationists, and others who seek the good of the community and find what appears to be a scientific reasonableness in river basin development. As suggested below, this position, which begins from logical enough premises, is often converted into a complex structure of myths and symbols effective in rallying public support and in providing a convenient rationale for individual values and more specific interests of various kinds.

In many river basins, acute economic problems and the hope that they might be dealt with more effectively has proved an important stimulus to programs labeled basin development. For instance, the concern of Senator Kerr over the economic well-being of his state and of the Southwest led to the five-year Arkansas-White-Red River Basins Survey.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the northern Great Plains, the problems of drought and flood, of agricultural surpluses, of population losses and industrial underdevelopment have given to proposals for Missouri basin development (especially as symbolized in the Pick-Sloan plan) an attraction that individual project proposals never had. It matters not that the basin plan is only dressed in the language of areal unity and regional development and that the practice remains largely the practice of separate function and particularized responsibility. The important element is the hope that somehow this program of development will result in solutions for some of the problems now plaguing the region.

The increased interest in river basin development in New England<sup>7</sup> reflects the recent major floods in that area. But here, too, basic forces are the fact that the economy is declining (relatively) and the hope of revitalizing it. Together, these forces may finally be sufficient to overcome the strong antigovernmental biases of the region and lead to expanded federal programs in the area.

And historically—and even to the present—economic improvement has been a major factor in the formulation of the Tennessee Valley program; and in the formative years of that program, it was obviously more significant than loyalty to the particular agency, which today bolsters support of the regional program.

In addition to support for basin development which rests on such more-or-less

<sup>6</sup> Authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1950, §205, 69 STAT. 186, 33 U.S.C. §701n (1952). For additional material on this subject see IRVING K. FOX AND ISABEL PICKEN, *THE UPSTREAM-DOWNSTREAM FLOOD CONTROL CONTROVERSY IN THE ARKANSAS-WHITE-RED BASINS SURVEY* (1957).

<sup>7</sup> New England, like the Arkansas-White-Red River region, is not a single river basin. Rigorous logic would perhaps require a definition of the term "river basin." Yet, the fact is that the term is used very loosely and, as is suggested *infra*, gains political significance from this very fact. In many cases, river basin development is equivalent to river development as this may be defined by the particular group, agency, or individual using the concept. At the same time, emphasis on the basin is usually meant to connote a broader-gauge, more inclusive approach to river problems and is often considered equivalent to a "regional" approach. But the literature on regionalism is not at all agreed on the definition of the region and even less on whether a river basin is a sound and proper regional unit.

vague yearnings for a solution to pressing economic problems, further impetus to river basin development programs or segments of programs comes from numerous special interests that will benefit or think they will benefit from particular development activities. Included in this group would be: contractors expecting construction work, together with their host of suppliers; chambers of commerce and labor unions anticipating bigger payrolls; shippers wanting water navigation or lower railroad rates; sellers of irrigation equipment; etc. And it should be noted that much of this stimulus is utterly sincere, though perhaps misguided, based in part on the necessity each of us feels to believe in the importance of what he is doing and in the desire to do more of the same.

Key elements in the support picture are the government agencies with particular programs to sell—flood control, irrigation, watershed protection, public power, etc. Here, incidentally, one of the consequences of the functional approach to government organization is apparent, for the mandates of most agencies (the TVA is a possible exception) are not to develop a region or a basin, but to prevent floods, save the soil, irrigate the land, protect the forests, etc. The result is often mere use of river basin development terminology because it is expedient and gains public support, without really adjusting programs to regional development criteria.<sup>8</sup>

Allied with the government agencies are numerous local groups and interests (including traditional political parties), the nature and motivation of their support of river basin development presenting a broad range. The strong local support for flood control in the communities affected by floods is well known, as is the fact that much of this support stems from dubious economic policies and drives which permit most of the costs of flood control to be passed on to the federal government, with the local community seeming to get something almost for nothing.<sup>9</sup> Local support for navigation works is often similarly based. In fact, of course, it is difficult to generalize, each basin, even each project, presenting a different combination of factors, and motivations being complex and variegated.

It seems obvious, too, that the many forces and factors which give impetus to river basin development are not necessarily in harmony with one another. At the same time, lack of consistency does not always result in conflict, for plural administration in a plural society encourages plural programs and policies. And the language of river basin development may suggest a specious unity of purpose and program.

In fact, mechanisms and institutions for clarifying conflicts and permitting choices with respect to the goals of river basin development are weak and inadequate. Where conflict over goals develops, pressures of various sorts push in the direction of expedient accommodation of many interests and issues (*e.g.*, the Pick-Sloan plan),<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The administrative aspects of this problem are explored in JAMES W. FESLER, *AREA AND ADMINISTRATION* (1948).

<sup>9</sup> Numerous recommendations have been made in recent years urging that beneficiaries should pay for more of the benefits, but little progress in this direction has been made, and it seems doubtful that changes in this respect will be forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this plan, see RIDGEWAY, *op. cit. supra*, note 4.

rather than resolution of conflicts and clear decisions on goals and objectives. A prime value is to avoid stalemate so that programs (as well as debate) can continue, consistent with the attitude that everybody benefits from basin development.

It might be noted, moreover, that neither the causes of the problems nor the proposed solutions need be based upon close analysis and logical reasoning. The support for river basin development arises, rather, from the belief that such development offers a solution to problems, the reality of which cannot be denied, even if the causes are not understood.

### III

#### PARTICIPANTS AND ISSUES

While participants in river basin development have been generally characterized in the preceding section, it should be noted that participants are functions of the issues and problems arising in particular basins. And within each basin, to a large degree, the combination of issues and participants is unique. This suggests the need for a case-by-case examination, which is not feasible in this article. Some of the typical issues can, however, be mentioned to suggest the nature of this aspect of the political struggle.

Controversies over water allocation have been especially frequent in the semiarid West. Disputes over the allocation of costs and benefits among upstream and downstream, rural and urban, local and national interests are common. With respect to flood control, the debate over high, low, or no dams continues, complicated by considerations of the role of land-use management, diking, and flood walls. Disputes over program priorities have also arisen but rarely in a form that has permitted clear-cut decisions.

Overshadowing all other issues, however, has been the issue of hydroelectric power. Unquestionably, if this question had not been associated with river basin development, the political struggle over such development would have been much different. The conflict over hydroelectric power has most often been thought of in oversimplified terms of public versus private power. Actually, more complex questions are frequently involved, including:

1. the extent to which maximum power production should be an objective of river basin development;
2. the pattern of financing and, in multipurpose projects, of cost allocations;
3. rate or charge policies, including questions of taxation, tax equivalents, and rate of return on the public investment;
4. whether a federal agency should have a utility responsibility to provide power within a given area, expanding production by thermal generation when necessary to meet growing load demands;
5. transmission and/or distribution policies, including the question of preference customers; and

6. an overriding question of regional economic development as a federal responsibility.

These issues are too complex to examine in this article, but it should be noted that while it is relatively simple to catalogue them, it is next to impossible to characterize and classify the participants in the controversy. The temptation to oversimplify must be avoided.

The privately-owned electric utilities are usually identified as opposed to certain aspects of public power policy. But while at one time their position was hostile to all public development, they have, in many areas, qualified their stand and now seem to object primarily to public transmission and distribution policies which cut into monopoly markets. Their preferences are, thus, for partnership policies which stress sale of governmentally-generated energy to existing (and usually adjacent) utility systems. In general, these preferences are consistent with the power policy inclinations of the Army Corps of Engineers, which has not been noted for a vigorous pro-public power position. Thus, supporters of the corps program and supporters of private power interests are often in alliance.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond these simple participant relationships, however, alliances and alignments become complex and confused, requiring detailed examination of economic, geographic, and ideologic interests to determine patterns of relationships. And often the connection between the position on power development and river basin development is subtle and obscure.

#### IV

##### MYTHS AND SYMBOLS

In a democratic, open society, which generally demands a high degree of group support for public-governmental action, the use of evocative symbols in order to communicate with the general public is normal, if not necessary and inevitable. The point at which communication becomes manipulation is not considered here. But it seems axiomatic that in order to convey meaning to the mass of citizens and to mobilize support for goals and ideals, connotative, symbolic language is indispensable. It is noteworthy, too, that ideas and concepts which in origin may have precise, scientific meaning often, in the process of political communication, take on elaborate symbolic overtones and become part of a complex myth structure.

Besides being important to political communication, however, myths and symbols may also provide convenient rationalizations for particular interests, values, and goals. In either case, the articulation and use of myths and symbols may be deliberate and

<sup>11</sup> MAASS, *op. cit. supra* note 4, at 188 *et seq.*, discusses corps policies and attitudes on the public power questions. The reader interested in sampling the variegated interest structure is referred to *Hearings Before a Special Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. (1955), dealing with the U.S. COMM'N ON ORGANIZATION OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF THE GOVERNMENT, WATER RESOURCES AND POWER (1955) (second Hoover Commission Report). These hearings, held over several months in various parts of the country, cover over 2900 pages of printed testimony and evidence reflecting the complex of interests and positions.

contrived, or unconscious, automatic aspects of human intercourse. Their use may be evidence of a propaganda effort or reflect the sincere convictions of those involved. In any event, myths and symbols play an important role in the political process and must be carefully analyzed and appraised. The following paragraphs examine some of the myths and symbols that have become identified with river basin politics.

Perhaps one of the most potent symbols of river basin politics (and of resource politics generally) is the concept of *development* itself. By this term, whether applied to particular resources, to water projects, or to an entire river basin, are evoked a host of images and favorable responses, ranging from pictures of the desert blooming, with yeomen farmers tilling it, to active waterway commerce and industrial expansion giving new life to the economy of the basin. Of course, Americans want to develop their resources, their river basins. No one can effectively oppose development;<sup>12</sup> to resist amounts almost to subversion. Yet, the very term *development* begs the questions of how much, by whom, when, at whose expense, and for whose benefit. It says nothing about what development means nor how it can be achieved. It is, in short, a twentieth-century counterpart of the "boomer" attitudes of the last century, which led to the disposal and settlement of the public domain, the harvesting of the forests, and the promotion of resource utilization generally.

The wisdom of hindsight has led to serious question whether the policies of that earlier period were entirely sound. And it should be noted that the policies followed were not without criticism and objection. But critics and objectors were overwhelmed by "boomer" enthusiasms which carried the day. Whether current stress on development may appear in hindsight to have been ill-conceived remains to be seen; but the parallel is sufficiently clear to be disturbing.<sup>13</sup>

A somewhat more subtle mythology has grown up with respect to water availability. In the subhumid and semiarid West, the absolute scarcity of water has always given an urgency to water supply which, until recently, was foreign to the more humid parts of the nation. But in the last decade, these areas have encountered a variety of water problems, and a strong tendency has developed to approach these humid-area water problems in western terms. Problems that have their roots in inadequate municipal planning, engineering, or financing are publicized and discussed as analogous to the traditional problems of the West. Difficulties that have been created by plenitude and low cost of water, such as profligate use, are dramatized in terms of a desert economy. Thus, a myth develops that America has a single water problem, that the water supply is running out. It is obvious that the political impact of this myth of oversimplification may be, and is, of considerable importance.

Allied is the mythology that is developing with respect to water pollution. Here,

<sup>12</sup> In the bitter fight over whether to establish a Missouri Valley Authority, the *level* of development was not at issue, nor was it suggested that the MVA program might mean a lower level of development expenditure. The controversy was over the control of development, not its scope.

<sup>13</sup> A significant study of the impact of "boomer" psychology on public policy is WALLACE STEGNER, *BEYOND THE HUNDREDTH MERIDIAN* (1954).



the symbol of the pristine, sparkling mountain brook is portrayed as the proper goal of public policy, no matter what the engineering problems, no matter what the cost, and often no matter what the facts as to causes and cures.<sup>14</sup>

Particularly difficult to analyze is the myth that envelops many resource policy questions and river basin questions in particular. This is the myth that decisions in this area of policy are simply questions of science and engineering—that only physical standards and criteria are relevant to sound decisions. The explanation of this situation is not hard to find. From the beginning of the conservation movement, some fifty years ago, many of its active leaders were engineers and scientists. And members of these professional groups continue to play important roles in the formulation of resource policies. Their values are conditioned by their professional backgrounds (which is natural), and they often share a Platonic dream of a rationalized world in which public decisions would be made by philosopher-kings, who, in the field of resource policy, would undoubtedly be engineers and scientists.

The resultant belief that in these technical skills lies a solution to political conflict is evident, for instance, in the current proposals for a Board of Review as the final top-level authority in the field of water policy.<sup>15</sup> To assume that economic choices and social values can thus be disciplined or submerged is to mistake the real character of the forces that lie behind river basin politics. To follow such a course, moreover, may merely divert the struggle to another point of decision. And if this is the objective, then the analyst must determine, among other things, whether the result removes the decision farther from public scrutiny and control, whether it deters the operation of the countervailing forces which are vital to the democratic processes of decision.<sup>16</sup>

Uniquely important to the politics of river basin development are the myths and symbols that have grown around the idea of the river basin as an appropriate unit for development programs. For many years, certainly into the 1920's and still today, a dominant interest in rivers was not the basin as such, but particular projects, individual activities, isolated functions. The issues of what action government should or should not undertake with respect to particular rivers involved intense political struggle. But these issues were initially seldom drawn in terms of the basin and its development. This was water politics, not strictly basin development politics.<sup>17</sup> The two are, of course, closely related, for river basin development includes water

<sup>14</sup> The attitudes on pollution are reflected in *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Public Works on S. 890 and S. 928*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. (1955), and *Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Public Works on S. 890 and H. R. 9540*, 84th Cong. 1st and 2d Sess. (1955 and 1956).

<sup>15</sup> This has been the position articulated in NATIONAL WATER POLICY PANEL OF THE ENGINEERS JOINT COUNCIL, *PRINCIPLES OF A SOUND NATIONAL WATER POLICY* (1951).

<sup>16</sup> Those concerned with government organization and structure often overlook the importance of relating points of decision to the desirability of full and free political struggle. Criteria for governmental organization involve not only questions of social psychology in the relation of supervisors to supervised; they also involve questions of providing for the effective play of political forces in the decision-making process.

<sup>17</sup> A history of comprehensive water development may be found in 3 PRESIDENT'S WATER RESOURCES POLICY COMM'N, REPORT C. 9 (1950).

development. The significant distinction lies in the broader scope of river basin development and the symbolic overtones of such a broader approach. A brief survey of the evolution of ideas with respect to the river basin is suggestive of the way in which myths and symbols grow.

At the turn of the century, a new interest in using the rivers of the nation for navigation was evident. The burgeoning electric power industry was scrambling for hydroelectric power sites, while in western states, clamor for irrigation resulted in injecting the national government into this phase of water use. At the same time, a new stimulus to flood control in the lower Mississippi and increasing urbanization in other areas set the stage for a growing concern over flood losses and water supply.

Since these several interests frequently involved the same river, the reasonableness—even necessity—of considering interrelationships in the entire system seems obvious. When engineering techniques advanced to the point where it was possible to construct a large power dam, its relationship to navigation and flood control (and irrigation in the West) was perceived. Hence, concern for multipurpose projects was a logical progression. Similarly, the interrelationships among projects in a single river system was a natural result of more intensive development of particular streams. And intensive development of a particular stream directed attention to the uses of the water, power, and other benefits. But while the imperatives of topography, hydrology, and engineering led logically to a coordinated approach to water development, such an approach might still be considerably short of what is today included in the concept of river basin development.<sup>18</sup>

In his autobiography, Gifford Pinchot tells how the concept of resource interrelationships and basin unity came to him and was developed and elaborated by his co-worker, W. J. McGee. To the latter, he attributes the language which President Theodore Roosevelt incorporated in his letter establishing the Inland Waterways Commission in 1907, stating:<sup>19</sup>

It is not possible to properly frame so large a plan as this for the control of our rivers without taking account of the orderly development of other natural resources. Therefore, I ask that the Inland Waterways Commission shall consider the relations of the streams to the use of all the great permanent natural resources and their conservation for the making and maintenance of prosperous homes.

It is the progression from mere water development to the development of all resources that distinguishes a river basin approach and that gives to it its great symbolic appeal.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the watershed is visualized as an organic whole, having peculiar, often mystical unifying characteristics. The river basin region is, consequently, regarded as offering a logical basis for economic development, which is

<sup>18</sup> Limitations of data, inadequate technology, or merely a narrow focus of responsibility should not be equated with an unawareness of the physical relationships in an entire river.

<sup>19</sup> Inland Waterways Comm'n, *Preliminary Report*, S. Doc. No. 325, 60th Cong. 1st Sess. iv (1908). See GIFFORD PINCHOT, *BREAKING NEW GROUND* 328 (1947).

<sup>20</sup> So compelling is this symbolism of the basin that Senator Kerr found it useful to secure a study of the three rivers that affect his state, the Arkansas, White, and Red Rivers. Cf. note 6 *supra*.

contrasted with the alleged inappropriateness of traditional political boundaries. In much of the discussion, these naturalist overtones are related to ideas of the balance of nature, of the necessity of acting in harmony with the demands of flowing water. Thus, basin development comes to be linked to elemental life processes.

The chain of reasoning which gives an essential unity to the river basin, not alone for water programs, but for total development, leads, in this argument, to the necessity of planning unity. And the entire conceptual structure is bolstered by heuristic and hortatory phrases like "comprehensive," "multipurpose," "integrated," "unified," and "balanced." Economic and general development are associated with river development, and the watershed is assumed to be a proper and effective unit for government planning and action.

Certainly, no one can argue for disunified, uncomprehensive, uncoordinated, disintegrated development. But these are not the logical alternatives. Yet, stating them pinpoints the tremendous impact of the symbols<sup>21</sup> and emphasizes the difficulties of penetrating to the real issues of costs, benefits, alternatives, and consequences. One result of this may be that the political struggle occurs over the wrong questions; for, myths and symbols, especially when they possess an aura of rationality and reasonableness, can be effective diversionary devices, used to increase and preserve power, prestige, and advantage. By cutting off analysis and criticism—and it is recognized that the precise line between valid criticism and destructive attacks on essential values is not always easy to draw—myths and symbols can provide a convenient and secure façade for individual, group, and community or regional benefits presented in terms of a larger public good.

Other myths and symbols of importance to the politics of river basin development are suggested by terms and phrases like "valley authority," "private enterprise," "partnership policy," and "the power in the river belongs to the people." Each of these and many others require sophisticated analysis if the political struggle over river basin development is to be understood. But it is only possible to mention them here to indicate the complexity of the myth and symbol structure.

## V

### THE POLITICS OF SPACE

The river basin is, by definition, a unit of space. And, as suggested above, the idea of river basin development has had a strong popular appeal because of its implications of areal unity and integrity, especially when contrasted with an alleged atomistic approach based on single purposes or single projects. From such an idealized portrayal of river basin unity, it has often been assumed that areal integrity eliminated politics, unity being equated with harmony. This assumption

<sup>21</sup> The hostility of so-called "regional scientists" to the river basin as a proper unit for regional development and specifically to the Tennessee watershed is reflected in that still important study, NATIONAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, *REGIONAL FACTORS IN NATIONAL PLANNING* 146 (1935). Yet, the validity of these criticisms of the basin approach has been largely forgotten in the ensuing years, because, in my opinion, of the symbolic appeal of the basin approach.

rested upon a belief that a river basin development program necessarily was the equivalent (if not the acme) of a rational, calculated plan of action, and as such, conflict or controversy, choices or value differences were irrelevant and improper.

In fact, however, spatial aspects of river basin development have involved intense political struggles. The issues of boundaries, the conflict among upstream and downstream interests, the reconciliation of urban and rural hostilities, and the difficulties that have arisen because of the absence of a forum for political discussion and decision are illustrations of some of these spatial factors.

River basin boundary politics have involved relations with contiguous areas as well as conflicts within the basin itself. They have raised questions of intergovernmental relations and states' rights and have encouraged struggles among competing bureaucracies for power, prestige, and especially for appropriations. Only a few of these can be referred to here as typical.

First, is the question of what river system is to provide the boundaries for the basin. This is the problem of drawing regional lines. No one has seriously proposed using the Mississippi watershed as the unit for basin development. Yet, this rejection implicitly raises the question of why the Missouri should be and the Ohio should not be the basis for development programs.<sup>22</sup>

So long as development is limited to navigation and local flood works (the traditional programs of the Army Corps of Engineers), no serious conflicts over basin boundaries arise. But add hydroelectric power, flood-storage reservoirs, irrigation, and broader development programs, and the struggle for inclusion or exclusion becomes intense. And once boundaries for development have been chosen, the basin does take on a degree of unity with respect to other sections of the country. The very process of choosing is aided because basin boundaries are set by nature and, thus, carry an aura of determinist superiority over boundaries set by administrative or political fiat. This the TVA learned as it retreated to its natural boundaries with respect to all of its activities except power distribution and fertilizer research and development.<sup>23</sup>

The controversy between upstream and downstream interests has taken several forms. In the Missouri basin, where substantial environmental, cultural, economic, and other differences serve to set upstream off from downstream areas, disputes over whether scarce water should be used for upstream irrigation or downstream navigation have been bitter. Participants took sides as between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers in this dispute.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> And, one might ask, why three basins should be considered appropriate for development: the Arkansas, White and Red River basins. See note 6, *supra*.

<sup>23</sup> The TVA Act had wisely provided that TVA programs might include contiguous areas, but pressures of various sorts confined most of the TVA programs to the watershed, whether or not this was logical from the viewpoint of the program. Among the important pressures in this situation were competing federal agencies. In this connection, see NORMAN WENGERT, *VALLEY OF TOMORROW: THE TVA AND AGRICULTURE* c. 8 (1952).

<sup>24</sup> The conflicts were not resolved, although their intensity was reduced by the Pick-Sloan plan, which critics generally deride as no solution, and by additional hydrological data which seemed to indicate that water supply might be adequate for both upstream and downstream requirements.

A variant of this controversy has been that between urban and rural interests over flooding of agricultural land by reservoir construction to protect downstream cities from floods or provide them with power. Except where storage reservoirs are built in uninhabited, isolated regions, this conflict seems universal. It reached particular vehemence in Kansas, where reservoirs to protect Kansas City would have flooded high-value farm lands.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of power and consumptive uses of water, the struggle over who shall get the power or water has frequently been intense, but the solution to these conflicts has often been less than creative. Water allocation agreements (compacts) among riparian states are common, but their underlying philosophy is sterile, emphasizing legalistic rights to given quantities of water, rather than determinations of public interest in water use and optimum development. Following the pattern with respect to water, states have also sought to control hydroelectric power produced in or generated by water falling within their boundaries. Thus, for example, North and South Dakota resist sale of Missouri River energy in Minneapolis; and North Carolina has expressed some dissatisfaction over the distribution of TVA power in downstream states. Fears of Idaho that Columbia River power, generated in Idaho headwaters, will benefit the sea coast metropolitan complex is said to be one of the factors in the Hells Canyon controversy.<sup>26</sup>

This general issue of who benefits from river basin development has recently taken on a new slant in connection with the recently authorized small watershed program of the Soil Conservation Service.<sup>27</sup> Here, major disputants are two bureaucratic power groups—the United States Department of Agriculture on the one hand, and the Army Corps of Engineers on the other. Partly involved are technical questions regarding the significance of land management for flood control. But the steady accumulation of hydrologic data over the past twenty years has resulted in a retreat on the part of the agriculturists from the extreme positions that once were asserted, when floods were largely blamed on bad land use.<sup>28</sup> But while most bureaucrats have adjusted their positions to newer and more reliable data, enthusiasts and partisans continue to make exaggerated claims that if we just manage our soils properly, floods will be eliminated and at a fraction of the cost of dams and levees.<sup>29</sup>

In many cases, the crux of the small watershed controversy is the fact that upstream land management with small control structures (as encouraged by the SCS) may have a sufficient impact upon smaller, more frequent floods, while, at the same time, leaving downstream urban centers victims of the larger, less frequent floods.

<sup>25</sup> This was the Tuttle Creek Dam.

<sup>26</sup> See Bessey, *Political Issues of the Hells Canyon Controversy*, 9 WEST. POL. Q. 676 (1956).

<sup>27</sup> Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954, 68 STAT. 666, 16 U.S.C. §§1001-07 (Supp. II, 1955).

<sup>28</sup> The shift in views on this is clearly reflected in MISSOURI BASIN SURVEY COMM'N, MISSOURI: LAND AND WATER 124 *et seq.* (1953). See also the definitive study by LUNA B. LEOPOLD AND THOMAS MADDOCK, JR., *THE FLOOD CONTROL CONTROVERSY* (1954).

<sup>29</sup> For this point of view, see Farb, *A Flood Prevention Plan*, 65 NAT'L MUNIC. REV. 214 (1956); see also Peterson, *Big-Dam Foolishness*, Reader's Digest, July 1952, p. 63.

In consequence, the economic basis for any flood works in the towns and cities, as presently calculated by cost-benefit formulas, may be destroyed.<sup>30</sup>

Of a different character have been the political space problems raised by the lack of coincidence among economic, administrative, and political boundaries with those of the watershed or river basin. The ardent advocate of basin development urges that economic and political boundaries are irrelevant. But, as has been suggested, this assumes that the watershed boundaries are reasonable and sound for general development, contrary to the facts in many cases.<sup>31</sup> The resulting tensions and problems are complex.

One aspect of the boundary question that has not received sufficient attention is the absence within the river basin unit or region of effective devices and institutions for raising and settling value, goal, and other policy issues. In short, the political process is stunted with respect to the river basin because there is no effective political forum for discussion and resolution of basin problems. This political-institutional deficiency can have serious consequences.

At the national level, Congress can, at best, devote only casual attention to policy questions affecting particular basins, unless, perhaps, there is a prospect of patronage dividends. And then, decisions are likely to be on the basis of bargains and trades. Most federal agencies, similarly, find it difficult to deal with basin problems in a basin perspective. To be sure, these agencies talk about river basin development, but too often this is convenient cover for an essentially functional approach. The mere fact that agencies operate in a particular basin does not give to their programs a basin orientation. The crucial distinction is, on the one hand between carrying programs to this or that region, and on the other of developing a regional program on the basis of basin needs and problems, with program content being determined by these needs and problems.

The result is that no matter how suitable a river basin may be as a spatial unit for the solution of water and other resource problems, the absence of political and administrative organizations and institutions competent and responsible for basin decisions hampers this approach. It intensifies the use of myths and symbols of basin development for protection of decisions that have not been examined in terms of regional interest and permits development decisions to be made by default—for the public cannot know what is going on in the absence of effective political struggle.

In this context, the valley authority device needs to be re-examined to determine the extent to which it may provide a more effective instrument for raising and resolving issues for political decision. It makes only tactical difference whether the regional agency is called an *authority*, after the TVA model, or a *commission*, as proposed by the Missouri Basin Survey Commission. The important test is the scope of the agency's responsibilities and its authority to deal with basin problems.

An adequate regional agency would at least provide an *administrative* forum

<sup>30</sup> This is well illustrated in the comparative study of alternative plans for the Salt-Wahoo basin made by the MISSOURI BASIN SURVEY COMM'N, *op. cit. supra* note 28, at 132 *et seq.*

<sup>31</sup> See note 21 *supra*.

for dealing with basin problems in a basin perspective. It would leave unresolved the need for an institution around which processes of representation, election, debate, and discussion might center and through which responsive and responsible decisions might be made. From the administrative point of view, it is easy to overlook the importance of those aspects of the political process which permit the political struggle to go on and which offer a correlation between responsibility, responsiveness, and control. It is essential to provide a playing field, as it were, in which contending and countervailing forces maneuver and mobilize more-or-less in the open and under public scrutiny. This is the unique role of the legislative process, and it is the absence of legislative phases of the political process which sets limits to the basin approach. For in the absence of new political boundaries, no administrative agency can alone provide an adequate mechanism for the policy choices which are involved.

## VI

### PLANNING POLITICS

That river basin development requires planning of some kind is implicit in the concept as such and has been taken for granted for many years. By planning is meant merely a more-or-less systematic means for identifying problems, marshalling facts, and preparing solutions so that decisions may be more deliberate and consequent. Thus defined, planning may occur at many points within the governmental structure, and its frame of reference may be very broad. It can, of course, be good or bad, effective or ineffective. Moreover, since, by definition, planning deals with the future, and since, by implication, it is often an early and major step in organizing or reorganizing power and power relationships in the context of particular objectives, an active political struggle frequently arises over who shall plan and to what ends.<sup>32</sup> These questions, rather than abstract issues of whether there shall be planning, are vital to river basin development. And the struggle to control planning and to determine the goals of planning is but a phase of the larger process of politics.

The idea that planning is somehow above politics because planners are assumed to be experts providing scientific answers which purport to avoid the irrationalities of pressures and interests and to resolve conflicts and struggles of politics is here rejected.<sup>33</sup> But it should be noted that this rejected position has been strongly held in conservation circles, where an abounding faith in supposed scientific and engineering certitude (as already discussed) has served to obscure political, economic, and social value choices. To be sure, in so far as systematic attack on problems may provide knowledge in lieu of ignorance, to that extent, planning may mitigate conflicts arising from misinformation. Planning based on logical analysis and rational calculation may also contribute to clarification of goals and an understanding of consequences. But it cannot select goals nor determine value preferences.

With respect to river basin development, a considerable amount of conflict among

<sup>32</sup> Cf. ROBERT A. DAHL AND CHARLES E. LINDBLOM, *POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND WELFARE* especially pt. I (1953).

<sup>33</sup> For a more extended discussion of this view of planning, see WENGERT, *op. cit. supra* note 1, c. 1.

competing bureaucracies can be explained in terms of the struggle over who shall plan, rather than mere competition for power and advantage. The strength of the Army Corps of Engineers lies, in part, in its lack of enthusiasm for public power and its inclination to subordinate other basin programs to navigation and flood control. These biases of the Corps assure that its programs will involve a minimum disturbance to the *status quo*, for by their very nature, flood control and navigation are not likely to stir up much organized opposition at the points where the crucial decisions will be made.

In this connection, it is significant to note that pressure seems to be developing for turning the entire job of basin planning and development over to the Corps, especially in eastern basins, and a concomitant reluctance to use an interagency approach is evident. While at one time this might have meant that economic development, land-use, recreational potential, and other factors would have been ignored, it now seems to mean merely that the Corps will employ its own specialists in these fields and will fit their findings and recommendations into final plans in accordance with values and goals held by the Corps.<sup>34</sup>

The same type of issues, as well as others, are involved in the struggle to create a new agency to handle basin problems. One of the strengths of existing agencies, which contributes to the preference for the interagency committee approach to basin planning, lies in the fact that their objectives are known. In contrast, the planning goals of any new agency responsible for a river basin would be unknown. This uncertainty effectively stymies experimentation with new institutional devices and forces reliance upon coordinating committees, interstate compacts, and similar traditional techniques, experience with which has often been less than satisfactory.<sup>35</sup>

A special aspect of planning politics illustrates some of these generalizations; this is the cost-benefit situation. In recent years, Congress has usually required that benefits must equal or exceed the costs of river development works. This has caused intensive effort among water agencies to make cost-benefit studies and to refine techniques for these calculations. Yet, all who are involved in cost-benefit work readily admit numerous technical and conceptual difficulties which limit the accuracy and precision of these studies. But, as a result of the inclination of Congress to attribute a pseudocertainty to cost-benefit determinations, and because of the uncertainties in the calculations, it is not surprising that an intense struggle frequently arises over who shall do the cost-benefit calculating. The importance of controlling this phase of the planning process was indicated, for instance, in the report of the Missouri Basin Survey Commission, which reported:<sup>36</sup>

While the Corps claims \$11,795,000 annually as a benefit from erosion control on agricultural land, this study estimated these benefits at \$964,000. . . . The total benefits are estimated at \$11,096,000 compared to \$26,576,000 estimated by the Corps. This makes a

<sup>34</sup> See MAASS, *loc. cit. supra* note 11.

<sup>35</sup> See the critical analysis of these devices in MISSOURI BASIN SURVEY COMM'N, *op. cit. supra* note 28, especially pt. 8; see also WENGERT, *op. cit. supra* note 1, c. 4.

<sup>36</sup> MISSOURI BASIN SURVEY COMM'N, *op. cit. supra* note 28, at 122.



change in the benefit-cost ratio from 1.9 to 1 as calculated by the Corps to 0.8 to 1 based on the Commission's study.

A problem in the area of planning politics which may become particularly significant in the near future is that of relating river basin development expenditures to the needs of the national economy generally and the regional economies more particularly. As yet, neither techniques nor institutions are adequate for dealing with this problem, and the political struggle has not been very active. Recognizing the important role that total public investment plays in the economic growth of the nation, the problem here would seem to be to fashion a mechanism by which the public share of total investment can be determined within limits and then allocated among the range of investment opportunities (*e.g.*, schools, highways, hospitals, parks, flood works, etc.) and among regions.

Proponents of water development sometimes argue that water development is entitled to a more-or-less fixed share of public funds or to a fixed share of the gross national product. But this approach misses the important point of the shifting character of public needs and consequent public investment. It assumes the composition of the public investment portfolio and begs the question that is of paramount importance for public fiscal policy, namely, how much water development is desirable in the context of other economic goals.<sup>37</sup>

Other political struggles that arise in the context of who shall plan and to what ends might be referred to, but perhaps this brief review suggests the types of forces and factors involved in this category of river basin development politics.

## VII

### CONCLUSION

Since its beginnings over fifty years ago, the conservation movement has portrayed basic policy issues as important, but essentially simple, choices between good and evil, between the public interest and greed and personal gain. This conspiratorial approach has characterized much of the discussion of river basin politics too. As Richard Hofstadter has suggested, this was the mood of the Progressive Era, in which the political struggle over resource policies and programs first became self-conscious.<sup>38</sup> And it continues to color much of the discussion of resource questions today.

To some, the pluralist approach developed in this article may verge on a kind of nihilism. Certainly, it lacks the assurance and security of pat answers and simple formulas. But it has the strength of realism, and it provides a structure within which the political struggle takes a legitimate place, rather than one for which apologies are necessary. In recognizing the diversity of values, it would seem also to avoid moral absolutism and intellectual dogmatism, providing rather for a free trade of ideas in the pattern of democratic traditions and tenets.

<sup>37</sup> The pressures that drive all public works programs to seek a fixed floor under their appropriations are great. The desire to secure dedicated funds illustrates this; and in this connection, the fiscal impact of the new billion-dollar federal highway aid program needs deeper analysis than it has yet received.

<sup>38</sup> RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *THE AGE OF REFORM* (1955).

In this context, then, this article will have served its purposes if it will have contributed to a broader understanding of the complex factors involved in river basin politics, if it will, to a degree, have dispelled common misconceptions as to the nature and role of the political struggle, and if it will have suggested a framework for further analysis of that struggle in the total political process.