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The Politics of Conservation, by Frank E. Smith

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BOOK REVIEW

THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATION. By Frank E. Smith. New York: Pantheon Books. 1966. Pp. xii, 388. \$5.95.

Conservation goals can be achieved only by mastering "the multiple art that is pork barrel politics — the ever-shifting coalitions, the compromises, the trades, the inter-agency lobbies, the special interests of alliances."¹ Emanating from these lesser evils is the greater good — the preservation of our country's natural resources. The author looks at the history of the American conservation movement and discovers that most of the reforms that have favored the conservation of our resources have been the result of hard bargaining and compromises made by professional politicians. Militant conservationists, he feels, because of their intransigent idealism, are ineffective; it is the pragmatist who succeeds.

The history of the conservation movement is traced from the act of the first session of Congress, in 1789, providing for a lighthouse at the entrance of Chesapeake Bay, to the 1965 Water Resources Planning Act. The claim is made that this is "the first political history of the conservation and development of America's natural resources." This is an exaggeration. *The Quiet Crisis* by Stewart L. Udall (1963) is a better-written volume of the history of conservation, although it is not as detailed a study of the political activities surrounding conservation legislation.

While dealing in general with the history of the conservation movement in this country, the emphasis of the writer makes this book primarily a history of public power and river basin development by the federal government. Nearly one quarter of the book is devoted to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The degree of treatment accorded the various historical developments in conservation is unrelated to their importance. For example, one of the sixteen chapters deals exclusively with the building of the Erie Canal, the first important excursion by a government (state) into the field of resource development. Though vital in the political and economic growth of our country, this canal had but marginal significance in the development of our conservation program. If the history of conservation had been treated in great detail, this peregrination into nineteenth-century history would have been a minor digression. The book, however, gives but cursory treatment

¹ SMITH, THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATION at x (1966).

to the development of the national forests and to mineral exploitation.² The protection and disposal of the public lands, a subject of fundamental significance, receives substantially less attention than the TVA. In addition, the book is devoted almost entirely to federal activity; the state activities, particularly of this century, are ignored. The water-use plans of California, the timber legislation of Wisconsin, the strip mining laws of Pennsylvania, the water pollution controls initiated by the Ohio River Valley Sanitation Commission, the air pollution controls of New York City, and a host of other local and state developments go virtually unmentioned.

This criticism of uneven treatment and omission could be challenged as pedantic — any author must limit the size and therefore to a lesser extent the scope of his work — were it not for the fact that this author writes as an historical advocate for the position that

the saving grace of the pork barrel conservation system that we have developed is that it has often succeeded in spite of itself, thanks primarily to the American philosophy of public service and our ideal of utilization for the public benefit harnessed to the pulling power of self-interest, sometimes enlightened and sometimes wholly selfish.³

By concentrating on power and water development, the virtues of pork barrel politics are most demonstrable. When the federal government takes little and gives much, the political system is capable of providing some reasonably acceptable level of protection. Thus, the author's faith in the political system as a capable provider for the exigencies of flood control seems realistic. Alternatively, had the author concentrated on the history of public lands and minerals, he would have been faced with a history of the rape of the republic — a condition which history has shown cannot be prevented by pork barrel politics. To the extent that improvement in the system has evolved, it is executive leadership, not Congress, which can be credited. It is two Roosevelts and, more recently, President Johnson who are responsible for most conservation legislation.

Pork barrel politics deals in the give and take of political life. It functions more effectively at taking than at giving. If resources can be developed, power provided, and floods prevented by taking federal money, Congress can provide acceptable programs. For this

² For information relating to the history of the national forests, the reader is advised to see FROME, *WHOSE WOODS THESE ARE* (1962).

³ SMITH, *op. cit. supra* note 1, at 310.

reason the building of dams to provide water control, power, and recreation facilities has been successful, perhaps overly successful, for today's problems with dam building involve the prevention of unnecessary projects due to over-zealous government agencies. When non-monetary government assets are involved, they are taken — land, oil, and minerals — as well as anything else that can be seized. The Ballinger public land scandal of Taft's administration and the Teapot Dome oil lease scandal during Harding's administration are but two examples of how the absence of executive interest in resources, when combined with congressional pork barrel politics, can lead to a disposition of public resources for private gain. It is difficult to martial the diffuse interest of the public in their resources so as to prevent local exploiters from using their congressmen to seek public assets for short-term gain. Even today, the use of public lands for mining, grazing, and timber generates great pressure for advantageous private use of government assets. Congressional log-rolling cannot prevent the forests from being leveled or the land from being grazed to the mineral soil. Only the executive branch of the Government has a sufficiently broad political base to prevent such exploitation. It is this type of protection that Congress is inadequately prepared to provide.

In addition, times change. The legislation needed today must deal with environmental controls — water, air, and planning controls. Powerful groups such as industrial water polluters must be regulated to provide for a general common good. Is Congress capable of rising to this challenge of voting against those with power and money in order to protect the diffuse majority? Perhaps it will, but only the most sanguine would believe this could happen without strong executive pressure and guidance.

Perhaps another way of characterizing the author's approach is to say that he is an optimist looking at the legislation this country has enacted. When he contemplates the fine national park system, the commendable work in reclamation and soil conservation, as well as the progress and economic development engendered by the public power authorities, he is pleased; his faith in the basic values of democracy is justified, for, demonstrably, it can function for the greater good. As a warrior reflecting on battles won and lost, knowing intimately the strength of the opposition and the defeats that can be suffered, he indulges in what could be termed the "General's complex." The successes are remembered, the failures ignored. In fairness to the author, of course, it should be remembered

that the battlefield of Congress was prescribed. As a pragmatist, the author is thankful for the successes achieved.

However, a more pessimistic and hopefully objective view of the history of conservation would reveal the weaknesses inherent in the *ad hoc*, unplanned approach of pork barrel politics. The failures are numerous. Many birds are now extinct and mammals nearly so. Land has been used for short-term gain so as to destroy essential ecological balances, while future dust bowls were carved out from the public domain. Mineral and timber lands belonging to all Americans were sold cheaply or given away to be exploited as rapidly as possible for private gain; the land was ravished and later, abandoned.

The author represents a breed of practical conservationists. For the legislation he describes that enhances and protects our heritage, all conservation-minded citizens should be thankful. The thought that pork barrel politics can provide for the greatest good is frightening, although it must be granted that no other reasonable alternative is available. However, by glossing over the areas of congressional failure, the author commits a disservice, for within it is only by recognizing that the "deals" made in Congress do not protect the common good that the nation can protect its resources. Indeed, the author recognizes this, for he concludes:

Pork barrel politics is an inescapable element of the American political structure. The task of executive leadership is to contain and control these impulses, and to utilize them to achieve the broad conservation goals that are a basic responsibility of our national government.⁴

Thus, the author feels that congressional politics can be used to achieve national conservation goals only when harnessed by the executive branch of the Government, which is responsible to a national constituency. A pragmatist to the end, the author says, in effect: we are committed to a system with a capacity for good and evil; by using the available outside controls, we can maximize the good. It is unfortunate that nearly all of his book is utilized to gloss over his conclusion.

The Politics of Conservation is valuable and timely, for not enough work has been done in this important area. The more that is known of past failures, the greater is the chance of making policy decisions in the conservation area which are not based on the fallacy of superabundance. While the definitive political history of

⁴ *Ibid.*

conservation has yet to be written, this book can be of value to anyone interested in the problems of protecting our natural resources.

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