



Bonneville Dam

Primary Documents

*President Franklin D. Roosevelt's address at the opening of
Bonneville Dam, September 28, 1937*

TODAY I have a feeling of real satisfaction in witnessing the completion of another great national project, and of pleasure in the fact that in its inception, four years ago, I had some part. My interest in the whole of the valley of the great Columbia River goes back to 1920 when I first studied its mighty possibilities. Again, in 1932, I visited Oregon and Washington and Idaho and took occasion in Portland to express views which have since, through the action of the Congress, become a recorded part of American national policy.

Almost exactly three years ago, I inspected the early construction stages of this dam at Bonneville.

The more we study the water resources of the Nation, the more we accept the fact that their use is a matter of national concern, and that in our plans for their use our line of thinking must include great regions as well as narrower localities.

If, for example, we had known as much and acted as effectively twenty and thirty and forty years ago as we do today in the development of the use of land in that great semi-arid strip in the center of the country which runs from the Canadian border to Texas, we could have prevented in great part the abandonment of thousands and thousands of farms in portions of ten states and thus prevented the migration of thousands of destitute families from those areas into the States of Washington and Oregon and California. We would have done this by avoiding the plowing up of vast areas which should have been kept in grazing range and by stricter regulations to prevent over-grazing. At the same time we would have checked soil erosion, stopped the denudation of our forests and controlled disastrous fires.

Some of my friends who talk glibly of the right of any individual to do anything he wants with any of his property take the point of view that it is not the concern of Federal or state or local government to interfere with what they miscall "the liberty of the individual." With them I do not agree and never have agreed because, unlike them, I am thinking of the future of the United States. My conception of liberty does not permit an individual citizen or group of citizens to commit acts of depredation against nature in such a way as to harm their neighbors, and especially to harm the future generations of Americans.

If many years ago we had had the necessary knowledge and especially the necessary willingness on the part of the Federal Government to act on it, we would have saved a sum which, in the last few years, has cost the taxpayers of the Nation at least two billion dollars.

Coming back to the watershed of the Columbia River, which covers the greater part of the States of Oregon, Washington, Idaho and a part of Montana, it is increasingly important that we think of that region as a unit, and especially in terms of the whole population of that area as it is today and as we expect it will be fifty and even a hundred years from now.

I appreciate and I understand fully the desire of some who live close to some of the great sources of power in this watershed to seek the advantages which come from geographical proximity.

More than eight years ago, when I became Governor of the State of New York, we developed plans for the harnessing of the St. Lawrence River and the production of a vast amount of cheap power. The good people who lived within a few miles of the proposed dam were enthused by the prospect of building up a huge manufacturing center close to the source of the power, another Pittsburgh, a vast city of whirling machinery. It was a natural dream, but wiser counsels prevailed and the government of the State laid down a policy based on the distribution of the proposed power to as wide an area as the science of the transmission would permit.

We felt that the Governor and the Legislature of the State owed it to the people in the smaller communities for hundreds of miles around to give them the benefit of cheap electricity in their homes and their farms and their shops. And while the St. Lawrence project is, I am sorry to say, still on paper, I have no doubt of its ultimate development, and of the application of the policy of the widest possible use when the electric current starts to flow.

That is why in developing electricity from this Bonneville Dam, from the Grand Coulee Dam and from

other dams to be built on the Columbia and its tributaries, the policy of the widest use ought to prevail. The transmission of electricity is making such scientific strides today that we can well visualize a date, not far distant, when every community in this great area will be wholly electrified.

It is because I am thinking of the Nation and the region fifty years from now that I venture the further prophecy that as time passes we will do everything in our power to encourage the building up of the smaller communities of the United States. Today many people are beginning to realize that there is inherent weakness in cities which become too large for the times and inherent strength in a wider geographical distribution of population.

An over-large city inevitably meets problems caused by oversize. Real estate values and rents become too high; the time consumed in going from one's home to one's work and back again becomes excessive; congestion of streets and other transportation problems arise; truck gardens become impossible because the backyard is too small; the cost of living of the average family rises far too high.

There is doubtless a reasonable balance in all of this and it is a balance which ought to be given more and more study. No one would suggest, for example, that the great cities of Portland, and Tacoma and Seattle and Spokane should stop their growth, but it is a fact that they could grow unhealthily at the expense of all the smaller communities of which they form logical centers. Their healthiest growth actually depends on a simultaneous healthy growth of every smaller community within a radius of hundreds of miles.

Your situation in the Northwest is in this respect no different from the situation in the other great regions of the Nation. That is why it has been proposed in the Congress that regional planning boards be set up for the purpose of coordinating the planning for the future in seven or eight natural geographical regions. You will have read here as elsewhere many misleading and utterly untrue statements in some papers and by some politicians that this proposed legislation would set up all powerful authorities which would destroy State lines, take away local government and make what people call a totalitarian or authoritarian or some other kind of a dangerous national centralized control. Most people realize that the exact opposite is the truth - that regional commissions will be far more closely in touch with the needs of all the localities and all the people in their respective regions than a system of plans which originates in the Capital of the Nation. By decentralizing as I have proposed, the Chief Executive, the various government departments, and the Congress itself will be able to get from each region a carefully worked out plan each year, a plan based on future needs, a plan which will seek primarily to help all the people of the region without unduly favoring any one locality or discriminating against any other.

In other words, the responsibility of the Federal Government for the welfare of its citizens will not come from the top in the form of unplanned, hit or miss appropriations of money, but will progress to the National Capital from the ground up - from the communities and counties and states which lie within each of the logical geographical areas.

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Truly, in the construction of this dam we have had our eyes on the future of the Nation. Its cost will be returned to the people of the United States many times over in the improvement of navigation and transportation, the cheapening of electric power, and the distribution of this power to hundreds of small communities within a great radius.

As I look upon Bonneville Dam today, I cannot help the thought that instead of spending, as some nations do, half their national income in piling up armaments and more armaments for purposes of war, we in America are wiser in using our wealth on projects like this which will give us more wealth, better living and greater happiness for our children.

Center for Columbia River History