

Rivers of Empire, Daniel Worster, Oxford University Press, 1985
A Report by Steven Olson

What did I get out of this book?

Rivers of Empire provided a comprehensive view of attempts to manage rivers in the West and throughout the world. I found there to be a fair amount of intrigue and I was interested to read of some of the individuals who had made a considerable impact on the United States water irrigation effort. While the contributions of Colorado were addressed, much of the book was devoted to the experiences in California. The impact the conquering of the rivers had on acres irrigated and the billions of dollar of crops exported outside California also impressed me.

Would I recommend it to class members?

I had a fair amount of difficulty with this book, particularly in the early chapters. I had a hard time grasping the organization. This was not a chronological record of man's effort to control the rivers in the West as the dates often crossed. Nor was the section structure meaningful as key players appeared multiple times throughout the book. Perhaps because of my recent exposure to the culture of water, I may have missed some of the points the author was attempting to make. For me this was not an easy read. Reader beware.

Key points I gleaned from the book.

First, the book summarized mans attempt to bring the rivers under control which has spanned centuries and virtually every continent. The ability to harness the rivers has evolved as civilization has evolved from one of Local Subsistence, to an Agrarian State and finally to a Capitalist State.

Second, as the West was settled, the question of who had the right to the water was presented as an ongoing battle. The riparian principle of the East was inadequate for the needs of the West. Union Colony in Greeley was largely responsible for the doctrine of prior appropriation, often referred to as the Colorado Doctrine. While some recognition was given to the role of Colorado in the development of water law, the main focus of the book was on the evolution of irrigation in the West; the development of the Empire of Water.

The author wove a theme throughout the book that the limitation of local capital often resulted in the making of a deal with the devil, meaning that once the irrigator had gone as far as they could go, they (the irrigators) ultimately turned to the federal government for help in accomplishing local irrigation projects. Help came with strings, with the local districts often being pushed out by the federal government. Federal involvement grew, as did the organizations that were established to assist local irrigators. The government entities that were supposed to assist irrigators often used the power of the federal government to intimidate local water districts into submission. For instance, In the case of the Salt River Project, despite that there was not a single acre of irrigated land in public domain, the reclamation service assumed command of the entire valley.

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As I read of the involvement of the federal government in local activities I was reminded of what President Ronald Reagan often said: government is not the answer, government is the problem. The Bureau of Reclamation made classic blunders several times over the years – failure to follow the rules established by Congress, poor/improper construction resulting in dam failures, massive cost overruns, poor business practices and others. Often the right hand of government didn't know what the left was doing. For example, while the Bureau of Reclamation was intent on expanding the amount of land under irrigation, the Department of Agriculture was on a mission to discourage crop production throughout the country. Federalization worked to enrich speculators and enhance the holding of established owners, not to furnish inexpensive new homes for homeless folk from overcrowded cities. The question that comes to my mind is that since not one major water authorization bill has been passed by Congress from 1972 until at least 1982 when this book was written and in view that the inept practices of the Bureau of Reclamation are well documented, why is it still in existence? Self preservation? There was considerable intrigue on the bureau's part as it attempted to wipe out all irrigation enterprises as far as the Colorado River and Colorado Desert was concerned so that they might have a free hand to construct the largest irrigation system in the United States. The bureau was not above overtly undermining or discrediting individuals or organizations that were perceived to be obstacles to the objectives of the bureau.

History shows that the Federal government's loyalty lay with the producers and not with the small independent farmers, nor with various people groups. Laborers were imported from several countries over the decades – predominately from India, China, Japan, and Mexico – until the number caused concern that Americans were losing to foreign labor. Few of those laborers benefited from the massive investment in conquering the river. The American Indians also largely lost out as their land was taken from them and sold to white irrigators or flooded by the dams created to hold back the water. No one, no entity looked out for the interests of anyone else. If one didn't get in the fight for water, they were simply left out.

While this book provides me with a much better grasp of the evolution of the water rights and the effort to control the mighty rivers of the West, I was struck more by the level of effort individuals and organizations would go through to protect their interests. If it is true that all is fair in love and war, the history of water in the West is clearly one of war.