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Politics in Resources Management

The theme of your conference emphasizes administration and administration is a great interest of mine. For the past five years my responsibilities in the Department of the Interior have been related to the stewardship responsibilities given by the Congress to the Department of the Interior in the field, among others, of the public lands.

I am here to discuss not public land policies, but rather its politics. The politics, of course, is of the small "p" variety.

I have many times said that in my opinion making the social decisions to meet the demands of 300 to 400 million people (our population within the lives of many of you in this room) for living space, food and fiber and all of the other resource requirements of a now unimaginable technology is important. Conservation and resources promise to become in our time the most critical domestic political issue.

Success in the tasks of conservation requires mastery of the workings of politics, both internal and external, because elemental conflicts of values are involved.

How these issues are posed, how they are to be resolved is my subject tonight.

For this purpose, let me state a fairly simple thesis--one that may seem grossly over-simplified until you have pondered it awhile. I am persuaded that national conservation emphasis, now and for the future, must be concentrated on two basic, fundamental subjects: land to live on and potable water for survival. All other resource problems can, in the long haul, be met and overcome through wise use of science, more effective utilization of known reserves and greater knowledge of world supplies.

Our land economists point out that the process of urbanization alone--for housing, commercial and industrial development--is consuming the countryside of this Nation at the rate of one million acres per year. This has obvious implications for the long-range future--the prospect of simply running out of living space. We needn't look that far ahead to see its impact. There is already ample evidence that real estate values--raw land values--have increased more than any other commodity since the end of World War II. This is most evident in metropolitan areas, but its effect is being felt even in relatively stable rural
communities. We have seen numerous instances where semi-arid public domain lands were a drug on the market at $5 or $10 an acre in 1945. Now there is avid competition to acquire the same lands at prices ranging from $100 to much over $500 an acre.

Of course, the same kind of competition exists with reference to our water supplies. These public issues—and here I make my first point for you tonight—should not and must not be left for decision by the technical experts, whether lawyers, economists, technicians or administrators. They have such serious implications for the future of our society that the whole public should have a voice.

I think in a major way this conference itself contributes to this process. Particularly is this so if you will recognize how important it is to avoid pat answers and dogmatic solutions.

I think one accomplishment of the last five years is to have moved away from the reactive or simplistic consideration of resources issues. It is easy to manipulate public attitudes by the device of setting up the straw man, whether that straw man is another country's policy (what they want we oppose and vice versa) or another person or group (if the lumber or cattle or mining people are for it, we are against it, if the Sierra Club or the Wilderness Society supports a certain proposal it must be bad per se); or a slogan (Al Sarena and Teapot Dome stir the adrenals). I think this is no longer quite so. Now the issues are mixed, and old alliances are disturbed.

The simplicity which marked a Hells Canyon controversy—public power v. private power; full development v. partial development—was a false simplicity. The difference is that in these days the falseness of the simplicity is being recognized.

For example, take the Intertie agreements, by which federal, private, and municipally owned generating and distributing systems agreed on arrangements mutually beneficial to each.

President Johnson hailed the accomplishment of that agreement with the words "... if we turn away from division, if we just ignore dissension and distrust, there is no limit to our achievements ..." And he hailed the significance of the interties in terms neither governmental nor physical, but as a monument to cooperation.

In the electric power area we have reached a remarkable plateau of political maturity in the last few years.

If slogans still dominated, if reactive rather than positive thinking were the pattern, such accomplishments would not be possible.

The "reactive" process for public opinion formulation is often coupled with a locked-in stereotyped position best dramatized in a recent commencement address in a small Illinois college.
The speaker, a Cook County judge and a woman, told the graduates that if they felt a need to serve their civic or social conscience, but were lazy about it, they could join an extremist group. In this manner, she said, one is free to turn off his thought processes and be carried forward by the "movement"—whether its proclivities be left or right.

The bitter irony of this commentary has real pertinence to our subject. Natural resources issues have economic and social, as well as purely physical, overtones. They are political in character.

As in almost any endeavor that touches a socio-economic or political nerve, extremists on natural resources issues are still heard: those who oppose new dams under any conditions at all times, those who oppose range fencing at any time for any purpose, those who oppose scenic preservation if a nickel of expenditure is involved, those who regard public land retention as a great waste through lack of exploitation and failure to pay taxes.

You can, if you wish, find movements which will think for you along any of these lines—and speak for you with strident voices.

But our Illinois judge offered an alternative: the infinitely more difficult and demanding process of rejecting stereotypes in favor of a dedication to careful, objective individual analysis—even of fundamental assumptions commonly taken for granted. She warned that this choice is not the way to intellectual comfort. The group or the movement will rarely concede the possibility of error; for the individual there is always the nagging suspicion that your facts or premises were wrong or that faulty reasoning led to erroneous conclusions.

Justice Holmes voiced this hazard when he said that the test of a truly civilized man was his ability to doubt his own first principles. Walt Whitman took it to be an ideal of national character that we could tolerate differences among men and as a community from one time to another when he wrote:

Do I contradict myself?  
Yes, I contradict myself.  
I am large. I contain multitudes.

This group is capable of generating multitudinous ideas. Your discussions will, if they are to be productive, lead to conclusions. Conclusions are the basis of action, whether individual or collective. But let your conclusions preserve as many options as possible. Consider that conditions may change. Do not fear modification when new facts or better reasoning dictate.

Two things must be comprehended in considering the politics of resource management. One is that pluralism is the dominant feature of our society. This pluralism, as the demand for coordination and cooperation has increased, has not so far slowed the march of improvements in services to the American people.

The second is that the nature of the technological revolution must be understood, and communicated to the people, lest it destroy our freedoms.

In simple terms, we must remember that our concern must not be only with the materialist results of technological advance—which contribute to both our comfort
and our discomfort—but with the methods by which we arrive at rational judgments as citizens of a democratically organized society.

If the issues are technological, Admiral Rickover suggested just the other day, we have the doubly important task of seeing that we approach them in humanistic terms.

Let me quote him:

"Technology is tools, techniques, procedures, things; the artifacts fashioned by modern industrial man to increase his powers of mind and body. Marvelous they are, but let us not be overawed by these artifacts. Certainly they themselves do not dictate how we should use them nor, by their mere existence, do they authorize actions that were not anteriorly lawful. We alone bear responsibility for our technology. In this, as in all our actions we are bound by the principles governing human behavior in our society. Ethics, I hardly need say, are not only personal but social as well.

"This surely must be obvious to any reasonable man. Yet it cannot be overemphasized, for a considerable body of opinion propagates what comes close to being the opposite view. The notion is widespread that, having wrought vast changes in the material conditions of life, technology perforce renders obsolete traditional concepts of ethics and morals, as well as accustomed ways of arranging political and social relationships. Earnest debates are currently taking place as to whether it is possible to act morally in the new technological society, and proposals have been made—quite seriously—that science must now replace traditional ethics! We have here a confusion of means with ends that should be cleared up."

This debate rages beneath the surface in most resource management issues, and as the choices become harder and harder, the debates will break into the open more often.

It is a political task to see that the decision-making power doesn't pass to any particular elite group—whether it be the aesthetic elite, the technical elite, or the industrial or business elite.

We must constantly and consciously work to see that the political system which must manage all these forces remains responsive and responsible—that elected officials have a real, not a shadow role, in the process; that the nature of resource issues is accurately and understandably stated to the public, that local and regional governmental units are not ignored or downgraded.

How this is to be done is not so easy to state.

One approach which holds much promise is the investigation in depth of the effectiveness of public land policies by the Public Land Law Review Commission.
Under the chairmanship of Wayne Aspinall, the Commission is structured to accommodate the complexity of the subject and interests in it, and it will operate in public. The Commission members know that the public rarely speaks with one voice and that it is critically important that all segments of interested, responsible and informed opinion be heard.

Another approach is found in the intensive re-examination of the process of making resource decisions. More and more, we are grappling with the problems of choosing between a dam and a park, or between a dam and no dam—between a "wild river" and a "developed river".

One problem is to improve the methods of measuring values which are other than economic; another is to frame alternatives early enough so that the affected public can have a meaningful choice.

To take an extreme case, the official who decides to go ahead to build the superhighway to the boundary of the wildlife refuge or natural areas has made the real decision, even though that particular official may be completely insulated from the social and political pressures—which are central to our system of free government. The duly elected officials who are faced with the responsibility for the waste involved in abandonment of the completed section have in fact no choice at all.

Planning which generates alternatives for consideration by the people and their representatives must be accompanied by broad public discussion, and this is a political act. It must be conducted responsibly, so that it will bring out the values that all segments of society place upon the uses involved—production of food and fiber, generation of electricity, recreation or wilderness values, and all the rest.

This process may well establish that the key element is timing. The Wild Rivers Bill which the Senate Committee recommended to the Senate has in it a wise provision for a continuing surveillance of the potential of the wild rivers. The option is preserved only as long as construction does not start.

And last, and most importantly, private, local, state and national groups have to be fully involved.

President Johnson stated the challenge for our time in his outline of the Great Society to the students of the University of Michigan:

"The solution to these problems does not rest on a massive program in Washington, nor can it rely solely on the strained resources of local authority. They require us to create new concepts of cooperation, a creative federalism, between the National Capital and the leaders of local communities."

What faces us in the management of our resources for the national good is a managerial task of unprecedented proportions. In undertaking it, we must assure that the governmental system which has brought us so far so well is not weakened or eroded.

Such a task is a political one. It is a worthy one. It calls for the best that is in us.