UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

For Release to AM's, OCTOBER 14, 1961

ADDRESS BY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR JOHN A. CARVER, JR., AT THE CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF WESTERN AMERICA IN SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, OCTOBER 13, 1961 - 7:30 P.M.

THE WEST AGAINST ITSELF

All of you will recognize the plagiarism in my selection of a title tonight. It was purposeful, and I hope that I may establish my right to speak to the theme Bernard DeVoto developed in those two significant conservation essays he wrote for Harper's fifteen years ago.

The web of cultural peculiarity never entirely frees the Southerner or the Westerner. Bernard DeVoto, the editor of the Easy Chair and of the Saturday Review of Literature, the Harvard don, successful author on that most difficult of all literary themes, How to Make a Good Martini, could have become as un-Western as Ezra Pound, poet from Hailey, Idaho. Undoubtedly he struggled like Thomas Wolfe or Vardis Fisher to separate himself forever from his own inheritance. But he made peace with his heritage of ecclesiastical family and community conflict, and made the West his great study. The West, which saw very little of his adult life, nevertheless owned him.

He told my friend Dick Neuberger, when they were once in camp on the Lolo above the fierce Lochsa, that if he had the power to select a different incarnation, he would like most of all to have been a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Those men, he felt, even the lowliest among them had enjoyed a profound experience and had lived a life of accomplishment given to few men in modern times.

In death the West owned him permanently. DeVoto arranged to have his ashes scattered at the highest point of the Lolo Trail, in the Bitterroots.

Some of the things I want to say tonight DeVoto said better; many were suggested by a rereading of the essays whose title I've borrowed. Those essays had a profound effect upon me when they were published just as I returned to my native West after an absence of years, to begin the practice of law. They threw me into the thick of a resources fight then raging in my State, and my interest in the conservation of the natural resources of the West has continued ever since.

The dimension of the West Against Itself that I want to deal with tonight is the political dimension. But before getting into that I would like to review a little. Both to fix the general boundaries of my bias, and to give to my remarks an historical overtone appropriate to this occasion, I must delineate my own "Westernness" and the starting point from which I wish to talk about Western history.
Westerners who reside out of the West often display a curious self-conscious mixture of attitudes. It almost brands us. For example, we're self-conscious or apologetic about any part of higher education we may have acquired in the West (let me say right now, in self-defense, that for some purposes of this talk I exclude California--only I won't say when I do and when I don't). Sometimes we return to our native States and tell the people quite bluntly that we think it quite impossible to get a good education there.

Yet when the subject turns that way, we speak up for our region, and wrap ourselves in all the virtues which romantic tradition has labelled as Western--rough, tough, plain-spoken, kindly, generous, etc., etc.

Our hindsight about our childhood in the glamorous West is better than our contemporary vision. I remember my own boyhood in Pocatello, Idaho, when a younger brother was asked by some visitor what he planned to be when he grew up. "I'm going out West," he said, "to be a cowboy."

We knuckle under to the older and more sophisticated centers of society. Ortega Gasset said once that Europe had nothing to learn from America. According to him, American civilization is purely colonial and derivative, as empty as a hollow ball, and as totally lacking in that solid internal structure that makes European civilization a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

Eastern Americans reacting to such calumny have found cause to visit the same disdain upon western Americans. Some Westerners, like Thomas Jefferson, have been known to strike back.

"It appears to me, then," he wrote in 1785, "that an American, coming to Europe for education, loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness. I had entertained only doubts on this head before I came to Europe, what I see and hear, since I came here proves more than I had expected. Cast your eye over America: who are the men of most learning, of most eloquence, most beloved by their countrymen and most trusted and promoted by them? They are those who have been educated among them, and whose manners, morals, and habits, are perfectly homogeneous with those of the country." (Chinard, p. 172)

Walter Prescott Webb, on the other hand, accepts and documents the premise that the older society is superior. In "The American West, Perpetual Mirage," (Harper's, May 1957) he says that the desert, unqualified and absolute, is the heart and major force of the West. He uses this premise to find suitable logic out of western history, and to explain it as a land of deficiencies.

"Western history" according to Webb, "is bizarre because of the nature of what it has got. The historians and other writers do what men have always done in the desert. They make the best of what little they do have. Westerners have developed a talent for taking something small and blowing it up to giant size, as a photographer blows up a photograph."
"They write of cowboys as if they were noble knights, and the cowmen kings. They do biographies of bad men, Billy the Kid, the Plummer gang, and Sam Bass, of bad women like Calamity Jane, of gunmen like Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickock, of cowmen like Goodnight, of miners like Death Valley Scotty and Silver Dollar Tabor. They blow the abandoned saloon up into an art museum, and Boot Hill into a shrine for pilgrims. In Montana Charlie Russell is better than Titian, and in the Black Hills Frederick Remington is greater than Michelangelo. Custer, who blundered to his death, taking better men with him, found a place in every saloon not already pre-empted to that travesty on decency and justice, Judge Roy Bean."

For most of us here, I think, the West is synonymous with the frontier, in the traditional American sense. Frederick Jackson Turner is the patron saint of those who find in the West, whether the trans-Appalachian, the trans-Mississippi or the transcontinental, the seeds of American greatness. The central feature to Turner was "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward." Ray Allen Billington, a colleague of Professor Webb as a regional editor of American Heritage, accepts the Turnerian premise: "To a degree unknown among Europeans, Americans do display a restless energy, a versatility, a practical ingenuity, an earthy practicality." (American Heritage, April 1958). Billington sounds somewhat like Thomas Jefferson, and both of them, I think, impart the idea that the frontier experience is the key, the force that makes America superior to Europe.

So perhaps we're not at odds with Professor Webb. Maybe it is all a matter of dynamics--the process of expansion, and the interaction of area upon people and people upon area.

But whether we accept or reject Frederick Jackson Turner, or whether we accept or reject the "desert theory" of Webb, the premise of our discussion is that the West is one region.

TV has homogenized the Western type, aided by the American mania to categorize everything and everybody, but everyone here tonight knows that diversity, rather than unity, characterizes our region.

There is no need to cite examples, but I never pass up the opportunity to emphasize that the most American of all symbols, the American Indian, represents multiplicity, not unity, of culture. American exposure to Oriental and other Pacific culture, was through the Western door. That the migrants found something when they got here besides sage and desert is evidenced by the community property laws that still survive in New Mexico, California, Idaho, and Washington--checkerboarded, as it were with States whose married women have to look to the less generous common law system.

I've attended several regional political conferences. Such conferences hang together pretty well in the Midwest, and in the South and Northeast. In the West, conflict crops out in every agenda item--upstream v. downstream; industrial v. agricultural; public v. private; water-long v. water-short; high interest v. low interest.
Yet for the purposes of his essays of fifteen years ago, Bernard DeVoto assumed a unified regional economy and psychology to document a convincing essay whose title was "The West Against Itself". Neatly and with finality he summed up:

"Economically the West has always been a province of the East and it has always been plundered . . . The East has always held a mortgage on the permanent West, channeling its wealth eastward, maintaining it in a debtor status, and confining its economic function to that of a mercantilist province." (Harper's, January 47, pp. 1, 2).

In his vigorous prose, Bernard DeVoto generalizes:

"A typical Republican editorial page in the West is written out of the economic and social assumptions of avalanche capitalism just after the Civil War. The point is that these conceptions, assumptions, and values are improperly labeled when they are called Democratic or Republican. They are Western."

DeVoto's article was written in 1946. In that immediate post-war period he thought the West had its emancipation from the East within its grasp by reason of the acceleration of the region development in World War II. It had then the opportunity to revolutionize and reintegrate its economic structure, and to seize control over its own economic destiny.

Its big obstacle was one of which it was itself unaware, a basic split in the Western psyche—a division in the Western mind.

He speaks of the:

"West's attitude toward the federal intervention which alone was powerful enough to save Western natural resources from total control and quick liquidation by the absentee Eastern ownership. For that preservation the West is grateful to the government. But there was and still is a fundamental defect: federal intervention has also preserved those resources from locally owned liquidation by the West itself. So, at the very moment when the West is blue-printing an economy which must be based on the sustained, permanent use of its natural resources, it is also conducting an assault on these resources with the simple objective of liquidating them. The dissociation of intelligence could go no farther but there it is—and there is the West yesterday, today, and forever."

I set out to put a political dimension into this. The political dimension is implicit in the issue around which he framed his conflict of the West Against Itself. Were he alive today, I think DeVoto would measure the West's progress toward realizing its potential in political terms. The activities and quality of the politicians as well as the nature of the political issues currently debated would be accepted by him as a fitting basis for comparison.
Mr. DeVoto described various legislative assaults which were being mounted to wrest control of the natural resources of the West from the public, and devote them to the benefit of selfish private interests, numerically insignificant and owned or dominated by the East. The bills he described were hardly perennials, coming up in Congress after Congress, to distribute the Taylor Grazing Act lands directly to the livestock interests; to turn over to the States the public domain and mineral rights, as a preliminary to ultimate transfer to the exploiters; to reclassify national forest lands suitable for grazing as grazing lands, looking to eventual disposition; and the like.

Such legislation no longer pends. Indeed some of the special interests depicted as having such power, and having Congressmen and Senators in their pockets, now feel themselves very much on the defensive, and deserving of sympathy and help -- consider the shock to the mining and lumbering and cattle groups of the passage by the Senate of a Wilderness Bill, 78 to 8.

Far more significant than the happy circumstance of relative absence of special interest legislation is the relative merit of the West's current crop of politicians. I don't mean just those recently elected -- when DeVoto wrote the halls of Congress were graced with several great fighters for the public interest, who worked hard for conservation of the resources which belong to all the people.

But if you will let me speak especially about that segment of the West's political representation which is found in the United States Senate, I think you will see a really striking change. The election of Dick Neuberger to the Senate in 1954 as much as any one political event signalized the fact that the West's struggle against itself was being resolved in the people's favor.

Dick Neuberger was an historian of the West, and a colleague well known to most of you. I'm glad his election came while Mr. DeVoto was still alive. These two men fought for the same causes with the same tools and with equal skill. Senator Neuberger too has passed on -- but modern Westerners are on his side and the side of DeVoto: that is to say, on the side of the public interest.

Before reminding you of some of the other names in the company of Westerners, let me remind you that just as we've been apologetic about our Western education, some of us have had to be defensive, apologetic, or painfully amused when some of our past political figures have been brought into the conversation.

Promise of Utopian panaceas to cure economic and social problems has elected Senators, Congressmen and Governors whose grounding in history, economics and sociology has been deficient to say the least. Do you remember "Thirty Dollars Every Thursday" and "Ham and Eggs"? Some eccentricities are expected from all public figures, but one man of my acquaintance celebrated his election by shedding his clothes before taking a stroll through the streets of a city. Another, who became a United States Senator, told a public meeting that he'd only read one book, King Gillette's "The Corporate State".

We've no more expected statesmen from the raw West than we've expected finished symphony orchestras or first-class art galleries. And when we have
discovered an exception in any category—a fine Community Symphony in Seattle or Salt Lake, or an Art Gallery of distinction in Springville, Utah, or a Chairman or brilliant member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—we have viewed them as curiosities as much as anything else.

Notwithstanding our own origins, we haven't really believed that any good could come out of Nazareth.

I submit that this is no longer valid in the political field. In DeVoto's standard, the Westerners present an imposing array, not just for being on the side of conservation, but for their leadership, their knowledge, their toughness when the fighting gets rough.

It is appropriate that we should be discussing this subject here in New Mexico—for this State is represented in the Senate by one who truly represents the new West—a leader among the "new breed". Clinton P. Anderson has achieved a level of statemanship which marks him as a giant among all Senators, not alone those of the West. His record as Chairman of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee demonstrates an unwavering devotion to regional self-sufficiency and the preservation of its material and spiritual heritage. Senator Anderson seeks to achieve the Western dream in DeVoto's terms—"the establishment of an economy on the natural resources of the West, developed and integrated to produce a steady, sustained, permanent yield." Yet he suffers from no regional myopia, for he was a staunch defender of the national interest as Secretary of Agriculture and has struggled with the international implications of nuclear energy.

Clinton Anderson is beginning his third full term. While he has had such illustrious allies as Carl Hayden, Dennis Chavez, Warren Magnuson and Wayne Morse during all or much of this period, it was for many years a lonely struggle to uphold the reputation of the West in the liberal tradition. But reinforcements were on the way; Mike Mansfield, Scoop Jackson and Alan Bible came early, and more recently the ranks have been filled with the names and deeds of John Carroll, Frank Church, Bob Bartlett, Clair Engle, Lee Metcalf, Howard Cannon, Gale McGee, Ted Moss and Joe Hickey. Now Maurine Neuberger carries on with skill and grace the great conservation work so ably begun by her late husband.

I trust I may be forgiven if, in this context, I point with pride to my own junior Senator as symbolizing the new representation of the West and what it stands for. Frank Church, still years shy of forty, completes a full term next year. He earned his spurs early in a resources fight which would have warmed the heart of Bernard DeVoto and has added new luster each year through similar feats. Recently, he led the Senate brilliantly in its consideration of a bill which brought every vested interest of DeVoto's West into frightening alliance against him. He fought for the West; he did not pit the West against itself.

Whether you may agree or disagree with their politics or with my assessment of any of these men, in Bernard DeWoto's standard of fierce devotion to the public interest and the conservation and management of the public's resources, these Senators collectively and individually measure up to the highest standards of dedicated public service, as great as any group produced by any region at any time in the Republic's history.
As I said before, the region is not unified; the struggles which DeVoto discussed, still go on, with an ebb and flow of partial success and partial failure. But the current uniformly high quality of public service by Westerners is new. It is supposed to characterize only the nature and developed East. In the perspective of history, something is proved in this beyond the obviously political--I admitted to a bias at the outset. To my mind, these men and a great many able Western Republicans with them, establish a coming of age of the region.

I will readily concede that this trend has been in process for only a short decade and that we could revert to Neanderthal morality with respect to our natural resources. But I think there are fundamental reasons for this transition in our political personality--so much so that I am highly optimistic that our coming of age is no transitory phenomenon.

Many reasons could be cited for the trend: better quality of candidates, increased and changing population, influence of communications media and the development of interest groups to contest the control of the old interests. But I think an even more basic ferment is at work and I assume the risk of your professional criticism in a brief development of it here.

I accept in large measure Turner's interpretation of the frontier as an influence in our national development--granting also that other influences were at work. He regarded the frontier as the wellspring of the American character--an ever-moving line which found new stimuli for the enrichment of our democratic institutions. Never stated but implicit in his interpretation is the fact that the frontier society is a marginal one--always just one step ahead of hunger, danger, and the buffeting of nature. Such an environment leaves no time for conservation--land must be cleared even if the forests and prairies must be burned in the process. The abundant land can be used without regard to efficient methods. But now the physical frontier is gone. The remaining public domain survived the onslaught of expansion primarily because it is mountainous, arid or inaccessible. Maturity has come to our West because the luxury of frontier wastefulness can no longer be tolerated. The sophistication of Western statesmen is thus explained in terms that Turner predicted in 1910: "...the age of free competition of individuals for the unpossessed resources of the Nation is nearing its end. It is taking less than a generation to write the chapter which began with the disappearance of the line of the frontier--the last chapter in the history of the colonization of the United States, the conclusion to the annals of its pioneer democracy."

Thus the "New Frontier" is by no means a mere political allusion. It has fundamental meaning for the whole Nation. It means that we can no longer look to a geographical expanse of unappropriated resources for our values and a higher plane of national character. If our society is to remain dynamic and democratic, we must seek our stimuli within ourselves, within the social body which we comprise, and in the new worlds of science which our intelligence creates. The West, being closer to the lessons of the Old Frontier, is in a position to make the major contribution to the philosophy of the New. You are
the professional custodians of that responsibility. To discharge it, you must rise to the highest standards of your craft to wring the last full measure of meaning out of our very meaningful traditions.

The late Gary Cooper's caricature of the Westerner has become fixed in the American mind. We are condemned to be laconic, quiet, tight lipped. Having long since exceeded my quote of words by that standard I will further presume upon your attention only to the extent of expressing sincere appreciation for this opportunity of discussing a subject very close to my heart.

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