The Last Conservationist: Floyd Dominy and Federal Reclamation Policy in the American West

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Abstract
Historians of the American West have long identified the federal government's important role in shaping the region's physical and social landscapes, especially concerning water development. The Bureau of Reclamation, which built most of the West's major dams and water projects, traces its origins back to the 1902 Reclamation Act and since then has seen its share of political upheavals and colorful personalities. But one figure towers over all: Floyd Dominy, who served as commissioner from 1959 to 1969. By following the career of this one influential bureaucrat from the Great Depression to the end of the Great Society, I show that the federal government's relationship with the West—and thus the relationship of westerners to their government—cannot be isolated from national political and social trends. My dissertation connects the literature of American state building with the insights of the New Western History and argues that the Bureau of Reclamation's true role in shaping the twentieth-century American West can only be understood in the context of a Washington bureaucracy struggling to survive through a turbulent period. "The Last Conservationist" traces the arc of American liberalism from the New Deal to the final fracturing of Western political solidarity over water issues in the late 1960s. From this perspective, federal reclamation policy is less of an imperial endeavor than a largely unsuccessful effort to hold together various western factions in the face of diminished budgets and changing social priorities. This view also highlights the control and participation of local groups, often at the expense of federal desires.

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Floyd Elgin Dominy (December 24, 1909 Adams County, Nebraska – April 20, 2010 Boyce, Virginia) was Commissioner of the United States Bureau of Reclamation from May 1, 1959 to December 1, 1969. Dominy joined the Bureau in 1946. He was the Assistant Commissioner from 1957 to 1958. He was responsible for building Glen Canyon Dam and the creation of Lake Powell behind it. 

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