



**David Ekbladh, “Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 26, Issue 3 (Summer 2002): 335-374.**

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For many observers of the U.S. power industry, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the name of David Lilienthal are inseparable. Since TVA’s inception nearly seventy years ago, David Lilienthal has come to embody the idealistic vision once associated with the former New Deal agency. The lanky Indianan emerged during the 1930s as a leading spokesman for public power and an outspoken advocate for democratically-based regional planning. Later, as the reputation of TVA spread around the globe, Lilienthal became an international figure in the realm of economic and community development. Yet, as David Ekbladh points out in “Mr. TVA’: Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933-1973,” Lilienthal’s plans and accomplishments often fell short of his stated ideals and ultimately left the TVA discredited as a model for regional planning overseas.

Lilienthal came to TVA in 1933, a wunderkind from Harvard Law and protégé of Felix Frankfurter. Already well-established as an activist for public power, he was appointed to the new agency’s board by Franklin Roosevelt and, along with fellow director and Chairman, Arthur E. Morgan, crafted a Panglossian vision for the distressed region. An important element in Lilienthal’s plan was a recognition of “grass-roots” participants. The TVA was to be a decentralized organization, responsive to local needs “close to the lives of the people.”<sup>1</sup> In Lilienthal’s mind, the TVA would reconcile regional planning with local democracy and create, in Ekbladh’s words, a model for “inclusive development.”

As word of TVA’s success spread, the agency emerged as a model for international development. As early as the 1930s, the TVA approach was being touted as the solution to development issues in China. Later, following World War II, Lilienthal himself became very active in expanding his vision overseas. The TVA’s promise of democratic development became a powerful tool in America’s Cold War economic aid offensive.<sup>2</sup> As

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Lilienthal, *TVA, Democracy on the March*, (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 196-200.

<sup>2</sup> TVA received critical and intensive study by private and governmental organizations throughout the world as exemplified through post-WWII visitation: President Miguel Aleman of Mexico, 1947; Prince Seif Al-Islam, Abdullah Hamiduddin of Yemen, 1947; Abdel Meguid Pasha Saleh, Egyptian Minister of Public Works, 1947; the Khan of Kalat, Ruler of Kalat, Pakistan, 1949, and Prime Minister Pandit

head of his own development firm, Lilienthal attempted to export the TVA model to other nations, including Iran and South Vietnam. These efforts ultimately failed, however, as the nature and scope of planning and development changed. By the time of his death in 1981, the grandiose planning schemes of Lilienthal's youth seemed grossly obsolete and his promise of democratic development appeared to be little more than a hollow phrase.

In "Mr. TVA," David Ekbladh successfully documents Lilienthal's long career and discusses his role in America's post-WWII development efforts. Lilienthal, he points out, often fell short of his stated ideals and his development efforts, particularly in Vietnam and Iran, largely failed due to the limitations inherent in his TVA-inspired vision. The failure of these and other large scale projects, Ekbladh contends, forever tarnished the reputation of the TVA and helped spell an end to similar programs worldwide.

Although Ekbladh's argument is largely sound, his analysis often lacks a sense of historical context. He makes much, for example, of Lilienthal's endorsement of "grass-roots" participation and "democratic" planning processes. He fails, though, to place these terms within the proper frame of reference. The term "grass-roots," associated with political activism today, may have had a different meaning in the 1930s. Likewise standards of democratic planning have changed considerably over the past seventy years. Even today, true participatory planning is still in its infancy. By the standards of the 1930s TVA's methods may have seemed quite democratic. This is especially true when considered in a global context. Compared to similar regional development programs undertaken in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Ethiopia during the 1930s, Lilienthal's democratic posturing appears downright progressive.

Ekbladh demonstrates a similar lack of context in his criticism of many TVA programs. He is quick, for example, to revive the charge that the TVA helped perpetuate the South's racial system without considering the social and political constraints placed on the agency by the prevailing culture. He criticizes TVA's agricultural programs without referencing the obstacles mounted by the region's extensive tenant farming system. Likewise, when discussing Lilienthal's failures in Iran and Vietnam, the author fails to fully address problems brought on by clashing cultures and the detrimental effects of these nations' corrupt and often draconian regimes.

Lastly, though Ekbladh refers to the "definite successes" of the TVA, he never describes them or appreciates their impact on the international planning community. In spite of its perceived failures at the grass-roots level, the TVA still succeeded far beyond the expectations of most of its supporters. It was this level of accomplishment that ultimately brought nations and international developers to the TVA. Lilienthal's democratic idealism, while an important element in the TVA mystique, was secondary to the agency's track record in the minds of most proponents of regional planning.

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Jawaharlal Nehru of India, 1949, to name but a few. TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority Handbook, February 1956, p. 282.

Yet, in spite of these flaws, Ekbladh's article remains a valuable contribution to the understanding of David Lilienthal, the TVA, and their combined impact on global planning and development programs. The piece is well-written and generally well-documented. It should inspire further debate on the lasting role of the TVA, the impact of U.S. international development policy, and the future of regional planning, particularly in economically distressed areas.

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