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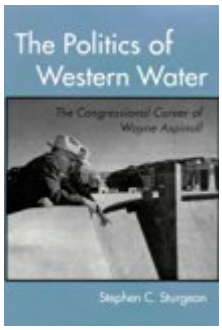
Stephen C. Sturgeon. *The Politics of Western Water: The Congressional Career of Wayne Aspinall.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002. xxii + 243 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8165-2160-9.



Reviewed by Kathleen Brosnan

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An author once described Wayne Aspinall, the congressman from western Colorado and the long-entrenched chair of the House Interior Committee, as an "imperious old schoolteacher" (p. 1). In this new political biography, Stephen C. Sturgeon does little to dispel such character assessments. Instead he places Aspinall and his career in the context of the larger political, economic, and environmental debates that enveloped the American West following World War II.

In recent years, historians have reconsidered the far-reaching power of the nation-state in the creation and management of environments as diverse as Levittown and Yosemite National Park. Through exhaustive research and in densely detailed prose, Sturgeon reminds us of the political ambiguities and persistent local interests that shaped these national policies. Few politicians wielded as much federal power to control a regional issue as Wayne Aspinall. "He mastered parliamentary methods and cold war rhetoric not as political ends unto themselves, but rather as tools for a larger purpose: to secure economic prosperity for his district by protecting its share of the Colorado River through federal reclamation projects" (p. xvi). Aspinall understood his job as protecting his constituents' interests and, to the chagrin of his congressional opponents and environmentalists such as David Brower, he performed his duties with the vigor and discipline of a religious zealot. Ironically, at the zenith of his power in the late 1960s, his own personality, political gerrymandering, and the changing nature of environmental activism worked together to undermine his authority, culminating in his reelection loss in 1972.

When Wayne Aspinall began his rise to power, Colorado's Fourth Congressional District encompassed the twenty-four counties of the state's Western Slope. This region possesses 70 percent of the state's water, while the Front Range, or the region just east of the Rocky Mountains, holds 80 percent of the population. Sturgeon deftly uses the Western Slope to explain the persistent battles over water that have defined the arid west in the post-war era: agricultural priorities versus urban majorities, Colorado's command of its water supply versus the demands of the surrounding states,

and a dependency on Bureau of Reclamation ("the Bureau") projects versus the presumed tyranny of the federal government. Believing that diversions from the Western Slope inhibited their economic potential, local residents long resisted water projects that did not serve their needs. And they increasingly perceived the city of Denver, the state of California, and the Bureau (when it worked for other areas) as their enemies. Aspinall, Sturgeon asserts, shared his constituents' suspicions when he first took office in 1949.

Sturgeon only briefly covers Aspinall's life before he entered Congress, although the author suggests a number of factors that influenced the congressman's view of politics and natural resources. Aspinall was born in Ohio four years before the twentieth century began, but in 1904, his family relocated to Palisade, a small farming town on the Western Slope, where his father owned an orchard dependent upon irrigation water from the Colorado River. There, Sturgeon argues, Aspinall grew up "convinced that he was always in the political and economic minority of society" (p. 17). An active member of the Methodist Church, Aspinall became evangelistic in enforcing his belief that God created the world for human use, a theme that dominated his congressional career. Upon completing his law degree at the University of Denver, with a specialty in irrigation law, Aspinall returned to the Western Slope and almost immediately began his political career. After two unsuccessful campaigns, he entered the state House of Representatives in 1930, serving there for six years and in the state Senate for another ten years.

In 1948, Aspinall entered the race for the Fourth Congressional District and, according to Sturgeon, soon became "an accidental congressman." He had believed that a Democrat could not win the strongly Republican fourth, but hoped that by running, he might build a broader base for his anticipated bid for the governorship in 1950. Aspinall lacked a congenial style, but in an era before television dominated political campaigns, his ability to remember names and faces in one of the country's geographically largest congressional districts served him well. Riding on President Truman's coattails, Aspinall upset his Republican opponent. Having campaigned on the issue of water development, he assumed the obligation to work aggressively for the extension of water projects to his district. To that end, he secured a seat on the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee and nurtured a friendship with Floyd Dominy, then just one of many Bureau officials. Over the next twenty-six years, Sturgeon argues, as Aspinall faced re-election challenges in his Republican-dominated district, the one thing that drove his congressional agenda was the "politics of water." The congressman saw himself as the literal representative of a forgotten backwater region rich in natural resources but at the economic mercy of outside forces. Aspinall decided to remain in Congress because his seat on the Interior Committee allowed him to help shape federal policies regulating natural resource development in western Colorado" (p. 27).

In the middle five chapters of the book, Sturgeon delves into the copious details of Aspinall's congressional career, offering a wonderful window on the processes of policy formation in the U.S. Congress. After arriving in Washington, Aspinall helped to secure federal approval of the Upper Basin Compact designed to primarily distribute Colorado River water to Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico. The plan, which became known as the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP), called for "cash register" dams that maximized the production of hydroelectricity rather than providing irrigation water. In drafting the legislation, Aspinall and other supporters emphasized the value of the project as a whole in an attempt to avoid debate on the economic shortcomings of individual dams. A variety of factors soon complicated the CRSP. In addition to bureaucratic infighting between the Bureau and the Army Corps of Engineers, a new president argued for

fiscal conservatism. Sturgeon explains President Eisenhower's initial opposition to new reclamation projects in this light, but when the author mentions that the administration eventually endorsed the CRSP, he fails to explain what prompted the policy change. Indeed, throughout the book, despite Sturgeon's careful attention to detail, we learn little about the complex motives that influenced other political actors in debates over water.

More significantly, Sturgeon suggests, the strongest opposition to the CRSP came from postwar conservationists who objected to a proposed dam inside the rarely visited Dinosaur National Park. Launching an effective public relations campaign, these activists put the Echo Park Dam at risk, even as the Bureau argued that only it and the Glen Canyon Dam made the larger project economically feasible. Given Aspinall's competing definition of conservation as "wise use," it might have proven more effective for Sturgeon to refer to these opponents as preservationists or environmentalists, but he nonetheless offers important insights into the interactions between such groups and the government. Failing to recognize the nascent origins of wide-scale environmentalism, Aspinall assumed that the Sierra Club and other such organizations were nothing more than fronts for Southern Californians who wanted to defeat the CRSP and secure more Colorado River water for themselves. When his opponents used both moral and economic arguments against the CRSP, Aspinall turned evangelistic, offering visions of an apocalyptic waterless West. In the end, however, the politician took charge, pushing through a compromise that sacrificed the Echo Park Dam, provided for a small dam to protect Rainbow Bridge National Monument, and reinforced the integrity of national parks, but saved the CRSP. Given his critical role in the passage of one of the largest and most expensive water projects in U.S. history, Aspinall established himself as a (if not the) national voice on reclamation. Nonetheless, when he spoke on such issues, "he always based his support for a particular position on whether it would benefit his district, or at least not harm its water interests" (p. 51).

While Aspinall massaged the CRSP through the House, the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project ("Fry-Ark") came to the attention of Congress as well. The Fry-Ark proposed diversions from the Fryingpan and Roaring Fork Rivers on the Western Slope, through tunnels in the Rockies, to the Arkansas River on the Front Range. While Aspinall and other residents of the Western Slope had always seen California as their most dangerous opponent, the proximity and growth of the Front Range raised fears that the Fry-Ark only served to confirm. Aspinall also worried that the Fry-Ark might deflect attention from the CRSP and could lead to over-exploitation of the Colorado River. But he was in a difficult position: Colorado's congressional delegation had pledged to support the Fry-Ark. Aspinall turned to his mastery of House procedures to thwart the Fry-Ark. The Fry-Ark languished for many years, suffering from Aspinall's inaction, coming to unsuccessful votes as Congress moved toward adjournment, or facing delays in the Rules Committee. Aspinall subsequently and successfully withheld his final support until the CRSP was passed and the revised Fry-Ark legislation provided a compensatory reservoir for the Western Slope.

In that year, 1959, Aspinall assumed the chair of the Interior Committee. In assessing Aspinall's tenure as chair, Sturgeon describes a stern, disciplined, and meticulous captain who ran a tight ship. Aspinall carefully reviewed all legislation, attended subcommittee meetings, and courted Secretary Stewart Udall for favors. Through hard work, an unbending commitment to his district, and the rigidly enforced authority of committee chairs, Aspinall established a power base that allowed him to dominate the reclamation agenda in the 1960s.

Aspinall's power became particularly evident in the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court deci-

sion in *Arizona v. California* in 1963. The decision upheld Arizona's claim to a larger share of Colorado River water each year, and gave the Secretary of the Interior the discretion to apportion water among different states as well as the users within those states in years that involved surpluses or shortages. This ruling proved problematic to California, which had regularly siphoned off the excess water. The decision also highlighted the inherent flaw of the original Colorado River Compact of 1922; its allotments were based on studies for a year with a higher-than-average flow. With this flaw and the projects that had followed, the Colorado River remained at risk for over-allocation. Rather than proposing plans to reduce water usage, "reclamation promoters concluded that the solution to this problem would be simply to import more water into the river basin. This new water would flow to the rescue, allowing reclamation development to continue" (pp. 73-74).

Following the court decision, Udall responded to an earlier inquiry from Aspinall by suggesting the Pacific Southwest Water Plan. This ambitious proposal involved seventeen separate water projects across multiple western states, including most famously the Central Arizona Project (CAP). Udall, a former representative from Arizona, hoped to secure passage of CAP by offering projects for other districts as well. CAP supporters knew that they needed Aspinall's endorsement to succeed. As always, Aspinall's chief concern remained the integrity of Colorado's allotment of upper-basin water. He eventually forced Commissioner Dominy to concede that the new lower-basin projects would require upper-basin water unless other projects imported water to the Colorado River. In explaining the intricate negotiations and shifting positions in the debate over CAP, Sturgeon weaves a complex but understandable web of information, integrating the political manipulations and the potential manipulations of nature into one coherent picture.

Aspinall recognized, however, that his failure to support CAP would undermine his congressional power in the long run. In an effort to realize a compromise, Aspinall audaciously added five new projects to the legislation and renamed it the Colorado River Basin Project (CRBP). All five dams were in his district. While this compromise provided Aspinall with the means to achieve his ends within the House, he increasingly faced challenges from outside. "[David] Brower [of the Sierra Club] and other conservationists represented an outside power base, similar to the civil rights or student protest movements, that viewed its demands as nonnegotiable and compromise as failure" (p. 93). Whatever deals Aspinall tried to work with his fellow legislators, these activists continued to resist the CRBP generally and the dams it proposed for the Grand Canyon in particular. Aspinall and the other supporters of the CRBP argued that the dams would enhance the recreational experiences by allowing tourists who could not hike to the floor to see the Canyon's beauty from a boat. Deeply entrenched in a human-centric conservationism, Aspinall grew increasingly frustrated with Brower and other environmentalists who placed aesthetics ahead of economic growth. In turn, they used Aspinall's own comments to launch an effective publicity campaign against the CRBP; advertisements asked "should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer to the ceiling?" (p. 97).

At the same time, conflicts among the congressional supporters of the CRBP caused the legislation to flounder. Arizona's legislators, particularly Senator Carl Hayden, chair of the Senate's Appropriations Committee, became increasingly frustrated with Aspinall's repeated delays on the CRBP. But it was only when Aspinall secured the simultaneous construction of the five Colorado projects and CAP that the bill moved to the House floor where it passed by acclamation in 1968. Throughout the years of deliberation on this legislation, Aspinall warned that the CRBP might be the last chance for Colorado to secure new recla-

mation projects. In certain ways, Aspinall was correct. Only two of the five projects were ever built. The federal government launched no major reclamation projects thereafter, but not because of the old conflicts between upper- and lower-basin states that dominated previous debates. "Although the battle over the CRBP demonstrated the considerable power Aspinall had acquired in water issues, the political tide was rapidly turning against him" (p. 122).

Four years after this legislative victory, Aspinall lost the Democratic primary in his bid for re-election. At age seventy-six he encountered continuous rumors of his imminent retirement and struggled to adapt to a modern style of campaigning heavily dependent upon television. At the same time the Republican-controlled state legislature reconfigured the boundaries of the Fourth District. It included only half of the Western Slope and incorporated large portions of the Front Range. Aspinall had always faced difficult elections, but now found his district home to a few liberal Democrats with strong environmental demands and many more conservative Republicans who, unlike their counterparts west of the Rockies, had never experienced the largesse afforded by Aspinall's powerful position on the Interior Committee. At the same time rule changes in the House undermined his ability to set the agenda for his subcommittees. But it was perhaps the new politics of activism that finally undid him. When a group called Environmental Action targeted Aspinall for defeat, national publications from the *New York Times* to *Reader's Digest* criticized his conservation record and questioned whether his actions as chair had allowed private companies to secure public lands. Aspinall proved prophetic in his predictions about post-CRBP reclamation, although not for the reasons he stated. The political tide had turned. Udall had left office with President Johnson. Dominy lasted but a few months under the Nixon administration. Now, Aspinall had departed the House.

Rather than retire from public life, however, Aspinall joined a number of pro-business organizations, most notably the Mountain States Legal Foundation which he started with Joseph Coors, that hoped to counter the environmental movement. James Watt served as its director and Gail Norton as one of its attorneys. Dissatisfied with President Carter's new criteria for reclamation (although again the author never explains what these criteria were), Aspinall supported Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign. In time, he became disappointed again as the new administration increasingly focused on cost-benefit analyses rather than natural resource development by the government. Aspinall also became involved with Colorado's oil shale industry. In chapter 7, Sturgeon mentions for the first time that the shale industry had, in part, prompted Aspinall's continuous push for reclamation on the Western Slope. Embedded in rocks, oil shale is removed through expensive, inefficient distillation. Hopeful that oil shale might reduce the nation's reliance on foreign petroleum, he believed that its development would secure future regional growth. When oil shale proved too costly to produce, Exxon shut down its facilities in May 1982 and the industry and the region's economy collapsed. Aspinall died seventeen months later. "After spending nearly forty years trying to obtain federally funded development of natural resources as a way to secure the economic growth of the Western Slope, it seems ironic that Aspinall's death occurred at a time when that very development had devastated the region rather than saved it" (p. 148).

But in the end, as Sturgeon highlights in his final chapter, Aspinall's career reveals a series of paradoxes. Aspinall's own political power crested just as the environmental movement gained enough momentum to bring him down. He had attacked environmentalists as elitists, never acknowledging how his own policies benefited a small number of people at an exorbitant cost to the taxpayers. He argued that preservation could only be an acceptable goal of conservation when

it provided access for many people, despite the damage that might occur. Aspinall had successfully secured western Colorado's share of water through a series of dams to provide irrigation and hydroelectricity, but the reservoirs were used by recreationists and to protect endangered fish. And in perhaps the ultimate irony, the very environmental causes Aspinall had eschewed now proved the most effective means for limiting diversions of water to California and the Front Range.

In offering an intricate political biography of Congressman Aspinall, Stephen Sturgeon demonstrates the important role that an individual and his particular peccadilloes played in nation-state resource management. Rather than assuming the existence of a monolithic national conservation policy, he reminds us that archaic legislative processes, the persistence of regional interests, and the influence of nongovernmental organizations often proved equally important in defining legislative objectives. A few times, in addressing the complex interaction of these factors, Sturgeon's work becomes mired in details. The reader also might benefit from more information about Aspinall's pre-congressional career, to understand how his childhood experiences, his work as an irrigation lawyer, or his time in the state legislature shaped his agenda and his personality. Finally, in many instances, Sturgeon provides too few details about the policies of Aspinall's presidential and congressional opponents. In the end, however, these are minor flaws in an otherwise important effort. Although his book is not steeped in state theory, Sturgeon opens to scholars of environmental history the possibilities of applying such analyses to their research and suggests significant new roads for them to pursue.

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