

*Steamboat Rock on the  
Green River would have  
been two-thirds under water  
had Echo Park Dam been  
built. USHS collections.*

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# Bernard DeVoto and His Forgotten Contribution to Echo Park

BY GLENN SANDIFORD

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ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIANS REMEMBER THE ECHO PARK controversy of the early 1950s as a major turning point for natural resource policies. The successful campaign to prevent construction of two dams in Utah's Dinosaur National Monument brought together assorted preservationist groups for the first time in decades and climaxed with the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act. Much of the credit was given to David Brower and the Sierra Club, and rightly so. But Brower himself is the first to admit that there was another figure just as important to Echo Park, someone whose contribution has so far gone unrecognized—Bernard DeVoto.<sup>1</sup>

DeVoto was a writer best known for his “Easy Chair” column in *Harper's Magazine*, a periodical “addressed to the best educated audience in the United States. . . [such that] this audience gives it public influence altogether disproportionate to the size of its circulation.” The “Easy Chair” was almost as old as *Harper's* itself, dating back to October 1851. DeVoto described it as “a column of personal comment,” and he certainly lived up to that tradition. An instinctive desire to go against the grain and support the minority, coupled with complete editorial freedom, elicited opinionated commentaries on a wide variety of issues that included the FBI, book censors in Maine, and his native Utah. But DeVoto also won a 1948 Pulitzer Prize for his history of the West, and thus he was more than just a social critic.<sup>2</sup>

Conservation had become his favorite cause following a summer trip out West in 1946. The tour had given him first-hand experience with the “landgrab” that western livestock interests were attempting against the Forest Service and sparked off a whole series of “Easy Chair” columns and other articles on the subject. Two years later, having forced the stockmen to retreat, DeVoto had accepted an honorary position on the National Parks Advisory Board, a civilian group advising the

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<sup>1</sup>Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 209-19; Dyan Zaslowsky and the Wilderness Society, *These American Lands* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986), pp. 303-4; David Brower to author, December 10, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard DeVoto, *The Easy Chair* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1955), pp. viii, ix. DeVoto's *Across the Wide Missouri* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1947) won the Pulitzer Prize for history. The book is part of a trilogy, the other two being *The Year of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1943) and *The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1952).



Bernard DeVoto.  
USHS collections.

secretary of the Interior on conservation matters.<sup>3</sup> This merely enhanced his abilities as one of the most well informed conservationists of the period and gave him access to some of the highest levels of decision-making in natural resource policy.

It also brought DeVoto into the Echo Park controversy. His fellow members of the board were among the many conservationists closely monitoring the Bureau of Reclamation and, in particular, recent efforts by the agency to win support for a proposed series of dams in the Upper

Colorado River Basin. For decades bureau engineers had quietly admired the Colorado's deep, narrow canyons that would yield dams with smaller surface areas than those in wide, shallow valleys.<sup>4</sup> In 1943, after several hydrological studies, they had decided to claim three of the sites as part of the Upper Colorado River Basin Storage Project that was to provide water for the four states of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming.<sup>5</sup> The move came as a complete surprise to the National Park Service, whose own mission was to manage the country's national parks and monuments so as to "leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Since two of the sites, Echo Park and Split Mountain, were located within Dinosaur National Monument, NPS staff had understandably thought their sister agency in the Department of the Interior might have at least consulted with them before making a move. By late 1949 a major rift had appeared between the two agencies. Relations continued to worsen when Secretary of the Interior Oscar Chapman announced his support for the project on June 27, 1950.

The National Parks Advisory Board had correctly predicted Chapman's decision at a meeting two months earlier. Hoping to rouse some public concern the board had suggested DeVoto attempt to publish an article *before* Chapman made his announcement. DeVoto

<sup>3</sup>Wallace Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1974), p. 297.

<sup>4</sup>Small surface areas were an important requisite for dams in the western states where significant volumes of water were lost to evaporation during the hot, dry summers.

<sup>5</sup>*Federal Register*, 8:146 (July 24, 1943): 10370-71.

tried his best but it was too close a deadline, and when the *Saturday Evening Post* finally printed his piece on July 22, 1950, Chapman had beaten him by almost four weeks.<sup>6</sup>

It didn't matter, though. "Shall We Let Them Ruin Our National Parks?" immediately sparked an entire movement to unite and fight the proposal. The piece drew national attention not only to the Dinosaur dams but also to the larger issue of a declining national park system,<sup>7</sup> and when *Reader's Digest* carried a reprint in November 1951, his battle cry resounded even more loudly across the nation:

If it is able to force the Echo Park project through, the Bureau of Reclamation will build some fine highways along the reservoirs. Anyone who travels the 2000 miles from New York City—or 1200 from Galveston or 1000 from Seattle—will no doubt enjoy driving along those roads. He can also do still-water fishing where, before the bureau took benevolent thought of him, he could only do white-water fishing, and he can go boating or sailing on the reservoirs that have obliterated the scenery.

But the New Yorker can go motoring along the Palisades, boating in Central Park, sailing at Larchmont and fishing at many places within an hour of George Washington Bridge . . . . The only reason why anyone would ever go to Dinosaur National Monument is to see what the Bureau of Reclamation proposes to destroy.<sup>8</sup>

DeVoto proceeded to dissect one-by-one the arguments put forward by proponents of construction projects like Echo Park. In each analysis he displayed his intimate understanding of how the issues affected both the nation and those communities more immediate to the proposed dams. An effective information network developed over many years in the "Easy Chair" had kept his finger firmly on the pulse of the nation and was now proving very useful for this campaign.<sup>9</sup>

DeVoto's journalistic abilities, coupled with a national readership, proved to be of enormous benefit to the conservationists. The *Saturday Evening Post* article brought Echo Park right into the homes of millions of people who annually enjoyed a visit to the national parks and thus emphasized that the controversy affected *everybody*, not just those in Utah and the surrounding states. Presumably this was one reason why DeVoto had written for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which enjoyed a larger

<sup>6</sup>Owen Stratton and Phillip Sirotkin, *The Echo Park Controversy*, Cases in Public Administration and Policy Formation No. 46 (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1959), p. 48; DeVoto "Shall We Let Them Ruin Our National Parks?" *Saturday Evening Post*, July 22, 1950, pp. 17-19.

<sup>7</sup>At that time, Echo Park was only one of several prospective dam sites within national parks. Glacier View Dam in Montana and Mammoth Cave in Kentucky were two others, as DeVoto noted in his article. Information on these proposals can be found in John Ise, *Our National Park Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961), pp. 171-82, 262-67.

<sup>8</sup>DeVoto, "Shall We Let Them," p. 42.

<sup>9</sup>Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair*, p. 307.

circulation than *Harper's*. He could write similar articles for the "Easy Chair" anytime, but it was important to open the controversy with as large an audience as possible. The *SEP's* four million-plus circulation had allowed him to do so without compromising his desire to write only for quality periodicals. It had also taken Echo Park from a relatively low-level issue confined principally within the conservationist groups and turned it into a hot public debate around the country. Horace Albright, a former National Park Service director, described the piece as "one of the finest national-park articles that has ever appeared."<sup>10</sup>

Other writers followed DeVoto's lead. In-depth articles began appearing regularly in *National Parks Magazine*, *Audubon*, *Nature*, and the *Sierra Club Bulletin*.<sup>11</sup> But these were read mostly by those already "converted," and DeVoto was one of the few writers with access to a national audience largely ignorant of, or disinterested in, conservation.

In addition to campaigning through the magazines, conservation group leaders urged their members to get personally involved. The most common reaction was to send letters to Congress—hundreds of them. Over the summer of 1950 mail poured into Washington, nearly all protesting the inclusion of Echo Park. DeVoto knew that "genuine public opinion" was needed more than anything else, but even he did not foresee just how large and vocal this opinion would become.<sup>12</sup>

Westerners did not take kindly to the assault on their desperately needed water supply and launched a series of counterattacks. Utah's Democratic Congresswoman Reva Beck Bosone questioned the logic of the public's reaction by pointing out that Dinosaur was inaccessible. DeVoto acknowledged the accuracy of this statement but then added that all western parks and monuments since Yellowstone had started out inaccessible. Indeed, remoteness was one of the strongest reasons for preserving a resource like Dinosaur. He also pointed out that the monument's recreational potential could be fulfilled as soon as Congress appropriated sufficient funds, another jibe on behalf of the National Park Service.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Horace Albright to DeVoto, July 21, 1950, Bernard DeVoto Papers, Stanford University Library. Albright congratulated DeVoto for an article that "opens up the fight in a big way and gives strength and encouragement to conservationists everywhere."

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, John Baker, "Dams for Dinosaur," *Audubon* (January 1951): 58; Arthur Carghart, "The Menaced Dinosaur Monument," *National Parks Magazine* (January-March 1952): 19-30.

<sup>12</sup>DeVoto to Harry Frank, July 29, 1950, DeVoto Papers. DeVoto ruefully noted how his *SEP* article had appeared *after* Secretary of the Interior Chapman's decision to approve the Reclamation Bureau's report. Now it was up to the public to force a reversal.

<sup>13</sup>Elmo Richardson, *Dams, Parks, and Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), pp. 60-61; DeVoto to John Knight, August 28, 1950, DeVoto Papers.

When the *Denver Post* claimed that the West should be allowed to do as it pleased with its scenery,<sup>14</sup> DeVoto responded sharply:

... the National parks and monuments happen not to be your scenery. They are our scenery. They do not belong to Colorado or to the West, they belong to the people of the United States, including the miserable unfortunates who have to live east of the Allegheny hillocks.

And podner, as one Westerner to another, let me give you one small piece of advice before you start shooting again. Don't snoot those unfortunates too loudly or obnoxiously. You might make them so mad that they would stop paying for your water development.<sup>15</sup>

In Washington, D.C., there was pressure of a different kind. Newton Drury, director of the National Park Service, informed DeVoto that Secretary of the Interior Chapman had ordered all NPS staff to stay clear of the controversy and stick by the decision. Because no such restriction had been placed upon the activities of the Reclamation Bureau, Drury appreciated the conservationists' efforts to sustain public pressure, and he confided in them accordingly. His actions not only helped maintain the long-standing symbiotic relationship between the NPS and its clientele beneficiaries but also allowed DeVoto and others access to information they would otherwise have found extremely difficult to obtain.<sup>16</sup>

DeVoto continued his own campaign with an "Easy Chair" column in August discussing a recent trip on which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had shown him around some water projects along the Missouri River. Was he impressed with the corps' engineering feats?

Yes—but. They have done this with regard to flood-control so nearly exclusively that other values, and especially the conservation values, go howling down the wind. . . . Further projects can—and will—be added . . . the way you add rooms to a pre-fabricated house. Others are now only gleams in the engineering eye, but gleams that could add billions to billions for a total that could hardly be expressed in one line of type.<sup>17</sup>

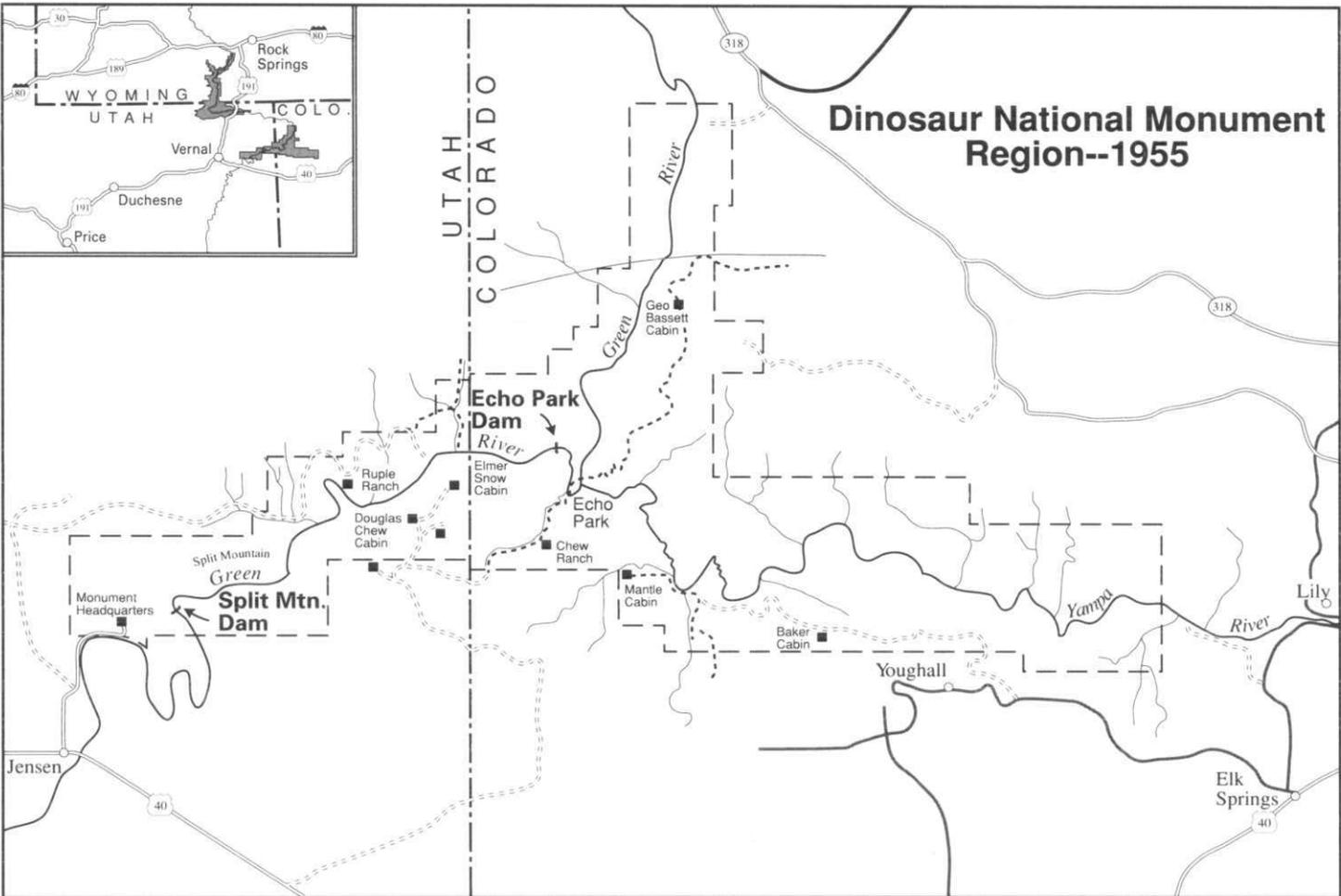
As fall arrived both sides retreated to plan new lines of attack. Most of the activity was kept behind closed doors, and media coverage

<sup>14</sup>*Denver Post*, July 22, 1950, "There's Plenty of Scenery for Us Western Natives," copy in DeVoto Papers.

<sup>15</sup>DeVoto to Palmer Hoyt, August 1, 1950 (appeared in the *Denver Post*, August 9, 1950), DeVoto Papers. A common thread in DeVoto's arguments was that the western economy was subsidized by the East in the shape of direct and indirect federal payments. DeVoto to Sen. Paul Douglas, April 26, 1955, DeVoto Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Newton Drury to DeVoto, July 19, 1950. Cited in Richardson, *Dams, Parks, and Politics*, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup>"Our Hundred Year Plan," *Harper's* (August 1950): 61-62.



Redrawing by DIGIT Lab, Geography Department, University of Utah, of 1955 map in pamphlet, Will You Dam the Scenic Wild Canyons of Our National Park System?, showing proposed dam sites.

dropped dramatically. DeVoto also eased the pressure, turning his attention instead to such concerns as American history and female beautification. But public interest in Echo Park soared once again in early 1951 when Park Service Director Drury quietly announced his resignation, forced, it seemed, by Secretary of the Interior Chapman.<sup>18</sup>

Drury had been popular among the conservation organizations. Unhappy both with the resignation and the manner in which it had been achieved, they forced a meeting with Chapman in February. In exchange for backing off the Drury affair, the conservationists won permission for the Park Service "to aid them in presenting further facts against Echo Park."<sup>19</sup> Then relative peace returned, and the two sides remained quiet for the rest of 1951. DeVoto's only skirmish that year was a November piece on Forest Service firefighters; he compared the huge cost of the Upper Colorado scheme to the small change needed to improve fire fighting units that saved billions each year.

Meanwhile, other federal agencies were raising concerns of their own about the project, and Chapman was forced to reconsider. When he made his misgivings public in November 1951 conservationists suddenly saw a glimmer of hope. The "not very hopeful chance" of stopping the Echo Park dams that DeVoto had first talked about was now a real possibility.

Proponents did not receive the news quite so well. Michael Straus, commissioner of the Reclamation Bureau, lashed out at "the self-constituted long distance protectors of Dinosaur National Monument . . . [in] their air-conditioned caves overlooking Central Park in New York, Lincoln Park in Chicago, and Boston Commons in the adopted city of a transplanted western writer who has a tendency to forget his heritage . . . ."<sup>20</sup> Despite the rhetoric, the wheels of bureaucracy continued to turn at their usual slow pace and no decision was made. DeVoto focused on other issues, notably the public lands debate, and found time for a return visit to Utah in the spring of 1952. Another trip in 1953 fired him up sufficiently to recommend in a typically blunt "Easy Chair" column that some national parks be closed and staff redistributed elsewhere until Congress appropriated enough money to do a proper job.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>The mystery of Drury's resignation was never fully resolved. DeVoto, who unsuccessfully investigated the matter himself, described it as "an ugly situation" orchestrated so that no one could do anything about it. DeVoto to Eugene Lee, May 17, 1951, DeVoto Papers.

<sup>19</sup>Stratton and Sirotkin, *The Echo Park Controversy*, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup>Michael Straus, speech, July 20, 1951, cited in *Nature* (October 1951) in "Let's Be Fair, Mike," p. 425. His references were to John Baker, New York, National Audubon Society; Bill Voight, Chicago, Izaak Walton League; and DeVoto.

<sup>21</sup>"Let's Close the National Parks," *Harper's* (October 1953): 49-52.

While his latest article gave no mention of Echo Park, it certainly demonstrated the extent to which DeVoto could arouse public opinion and make his presence felt in the higher echelons of federal government. A flood of letters expressing concern over the decline of the park system soon reached President Dwight D. Eisenhower, including one from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.<sup>22</sup> The mail prompted Eisenhower, who had only been in office since January 1953, to send a memo to the new secretary of the Interior, Douglas McKay:

Recently I have been getting communications from people who seem to be genuinely concerned with what they believe to be the deterioration in our national parks. I must admit to a very considerable ignorance in this field—but I am of the opinion that if we are actually neglecting them merely to save a relatively inconsequential amount of money, then we should take a second look.<sup>23</sup>

McKay, a former Chevrolet dealer, had served in two wars before moving on to public office and the governorship of Oregon. Conservationists were wary rather than concerned about him, for they knew little about his politics. But any hopes raised by the length of time he took to consider the Upper Colorado report were dashed in December 1953 when he finally recommended that President Eisenhower approve Echo Park and submit the bureau report to Congress.

Conservationists immediately launched a second publicity campaign. This time they focused on economics and also expanded their target to include the entire Upper Colorado project. At the back of their minds was a forthcoming congressional election, which they hoped would force candidates to pick sides and either back down or join them. By the time the White House announced presidential backing for the Upper Colorado plan on March 20, 1954, the campaign was well underway with such notables as the *New York Times* now lending support to the conservationists.<sup>24</sup>

The protests also brought DeVoto back to the forefront after an absence of two years. During that period he had restricted his Echo Park campaign to behind-the-scenes activities, writing letters and lobbying on Capitol Hill. His return started off quietly with a February “Easy Chair” that simply informed the public of Secretary of the Interior McKay’s decision to approve the Dinosaur dams. But DeVoto was never

<sup>22</sup>Rockefeller to Eisenhower, December 10, 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

<sup>23</sup>Eisenhower to McKay, January 9, 1954, Eisenhower Papers.

<sup>24</sup>Stratton and Sirotkin, *The Echo Park Controversy*, pp. 79-85; “No Dam at Dinosaur.” *New York Times*, December 22, 1953, p. 30.

a man to do things by half-measure. The following month's column, entitled "Intramural Giveaway," contained a far more in-depth and critical analysis of how the federal government had reduced the Park Service to an agency "too weak to make itself felt." He concluded by questioning some recent internal revisions that threatened the job security of all policy-making staff. In his mind this was clearly an attempt to gag NPS protesters.<sup>25</sup>

DeVoto never gave up his defense of the National Park Service. For him, the Echo Park issue appeared to be less about what Dinosaur was and more about what it *represented*, namely the national parks and monuments. If Dinosaur was threatened, then so was the entire system; he maintained this standpoint throughout the controversy. Indeed, it is worth noting that while he visited a number of Park Service sites on his 1953 trip there is no record of him ever having visited Dinosaur National Monument.

"Intramural Giveaway" and related articles by other journalists with the popular news weeklies prompted a second deluge of mail to Congress. By the beginning of 1955 some ten thousand letters had arrived, even more than when the controversy had first peaked in 1950. The margin was 80:1 against Echo Park, an impressive sign of support for the conservationists. It must also have strengthened DeVoto's resolve, for despite having once been tarred as a leftist by Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, he was an ardent fan of American democracy and knew full well the influence a fully aroused public could exert on government conservation policies.<sup>26</sup>

He also understood the agenda-setting function of the press. News media can play an active role in sketching an individual's daily picture of the world, and, though they may have limited impact on attitudes and values, the media can certainly influence personal views of what is important and what is unimportant. This directs public interest toward or away from an issue or event. DeVoto chose to lead public attention toward Echo Park and in the process taught conservationists a lesson they never forgot, for the media has since become an invaluable, though sometimes abused, weapon in their arsenal.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "Parks and Pictures," *Harper's* (February 1954): 12-17; "Intramural Giveaway," *Harper's* (March 1954): 10-16.

<sup>26</sup> "Sounds of Anguish from Echo Park," *Life*, February 22, 1954, pp. 45-56; "Dam and Dinosaurs," *Newsweek*, January 25, 1954, p. 84; "Republican TVA for the West," *U.S. News and World Report*, April 2, 1954, pp. 30-31.

<sup>27</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Summer 1972): 176-87; James McEvoy III, "The American Public's Concern with the Environment," *Environmental Quality Series No. 4* (Davis: Institute of Government Affairs, University of California, Davis, 1971). McEvoy discovered that the number of environment-related articles in periodicals rocketed after 1953.

Of course, the publicity was not always in the same vein as “Intramural Giveaway.” Working hard at proving DeVoto to be Public Enemy Number One, the *Denver Post* claimed that he was being paid by the state of California in exchange for his opposition.<sup>28</sup> This was complete fabrication, for although Californians had joined DeVoto in opposing the dams, their concerns centered on the likelihood of a shrinking water supply. What the *Denver Post*’s repeated attacks did reveal was grudging respect for the effectiveness of DeVoto’s campaign.

Amused by the claim, DeVoto was also disappointed with the newspaper’s lack of insight and informed its publisher, Palmer Hoyt, that Echo Park was more than just a local or regional squabble—it was a national emergency. He repeated his concern for the high subsidies that would be paid by taxpayers in the East and Midwest for the project. Sen. John F. Kennedy expressed similar sentiments a few months later, for which DeVoto was extremely grateful.<sup>29</sup>

By the summer of 1954 attention had moved to a new topic: evaporation. When Secretary of the Interior Chapman had first justified Echo Park on the basis of its evaporation savings, figures put forward by the Reclamation Bureau claimed that up to 350,000 acre-feet of water would be saved annually. In late 1950 these figures were disputed by Ulysses S. Grant III of the American Planning and Civic Association. By May 1951 a figure of 300,000 acre-feet was being quoted. It then dropped to 114,000 acre-feet in March 1954 when a text error in a statement prepared by another bureau employee was revealed. One month later, it was down to 25,000 acre-feet, *less than ten percent of the original figure*. The blame once again was placed upon a bureau engineer’s hasty calculations. Such consistent inconsistencies offered an irresistible target to DeVoto, who later applauded the critics for “pointing out what must be oversights, faulty slide-rules, or someone’s inability to pass the semester exams for the Fourth Grade.”<sup>30</sup>

With the bureau’s humiliation only adding to the controversy Congress was forced to adjourn for the summer without a vote. DeVoto, though, still had much to write about and produced a scathing article for *Harper’s* on the current state of conservation in the country. The title—“Conservation: Down and on the Way Out”—summed up the effects of

<sup>28</sup> Richardson, *Dams, Parks, and Politics*, p. 139.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; DeVoto to Kennedy, September 15, 1954, DeVoto Papers.

<sup>30</sup> DeVoto, “And Fractions Drive Me Mad,” *Harper’s* (September 1954): 11. Marc Reisner recounts the story of how Olie Larson, the Bureau’s regional director in Salt Lake City, was later presented with a rubber slide rule by some of his fellow engineers, for “stretching the truth at Echo Park,” Reisner, *Cadillac Desert* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), pp. 294-95.

what he felt was an attempt by the administration to reverse national conservation policies developed over seventy-five years. The “business men in office,” he claimed, were only interested in appeasing the industrial corporation, and federal responsibility for the conservation of natural resources had now fallen into the hands of private enterprise.<sup>31</sup>

Not surprisingly, he reserved his heaviest criticism for the Interior Department and especially Secretary McKay whom DeVoto saw as leading the policy reversal. This role later earned McKay the title of “giveaway emcee” from DeVoto.<sup>32</sup> More recent bones of contention between the pair included McKay’s reference to conservationists as “punks” and an announcement that the Reclamation Bureau was to spend \$21 million on new roads and recreational facilities for Dinosaur. That decision constituted “a pique of cynicism,” wrote DeVoto, when one compared it to the 1955 Park Service appropriations, which totalled less than \$30 million. But while the decline of the park system was “a national disgrace,” it was still

... a smaller evil than Mr. McKay’s approval of Echo Park Dam. Opening the parks to exploitation by the Bureau of Reclamation—which in the semantics is “co-operation between federal and state governments”—makes only a matter of time their exploitation by any corporations which may want their water, water power, timber, minerals, or grass, and which have sufficient capital to impress a businessman in office.<sup>33</sup>

The article was a major statement on American natural resource policies. Well written, up-to-date, and *well informed*, it accurately synthesized the previous eight years’ problems and issues, and especially those raised during the last eighteen months. DeVoto’s comments on the “Business Administration” also revealed a president sadly lacking any real direction for or awareness of conservation.<sup>34</sup>

September’s “Easy Chair” attacked the planning, or lack thereof, for the Upper Colorado project. The conservationist in DeVoto was never motivated purely by instinct and emotion — as a westerner he very

<sup>31</sup> DeVoto, “Conservation: Down and on the Way Out,” *Harper’s* (August 1954): 66-74.

<sup>32</sup> DeVoto, “One-way Partnership Derailed,” *Harper’s* (January 1955): 13.

<sup>33</sup> DeVoto, “Conservation: Down and on the Way Out,” p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> Grahame Smith, Henry Steck, and Gerald Surette, *Our Ecological Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 115. The Upper Colorado attracted few words from Eisenhower. Indeed, some believe he was personally unaware of the Echo Park controversy until very late in its development (Stratton and Sirotkin, *The Echo Park Controversy*, p. 69). On the rare occasion when he did offer an opinion it was usually a simple statement supporting “the great dams in the mountains” (*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* [Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1955], p. 331). A letter from Eisenhower to Everett Hazlett discusses Dinosaur National monument in terms of visitors—only 500 in 1953—which made the controversy seem ridiculous to the president (Robert Griffith, ed., *Ike’s Letters to a Friend, 1941-58* [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984], pp. 128-29).

well understood the need for a sustainable natural resource base. But technology had grown so powerful that schemes employing such technology were becoming permanent and irreversible. If a dam already constructed and in operation was later deemed unnecessary, the affected environment would take decades to return to its former condition, if it ever could. Planners must therefore use caution and wisdom. Unfortunately, he argued, the Echo Park planners had not.<sup>35</sup>

The fall of 1954 was Congressional election time. Conservation proved to be an important political issue, with the Upper Colorado River Basin Project one of many such schemes generating public debate. The performance of the Democrats, who gained majorities in both houses, instilled great hope in DeVoto; and he was especially pleased with the victories of two conservation allies, Richard Neuberger and Adlai E. Stevenson. His "Easy Chair" of January 1955 brimmed with confidence. The election results were as

complete a repudiation of the Administration resources policy as could be achieved at a mid-term election . . . . We may reasonably expect that the forays against the national forests by the cowboys and the trade associations of the lumber manufacturers will be stopped even colder than they have been up to now, that the Bureau of Reclamation will be kept out of Dinosaur Monument, and that a half-dozen other current or planned raids on various national parks will get nowhere . . . . We know now both where the Administration stands and where the voters stand. It is possible to abandon the defensive policy of merely holding the line and to plan positively.<sup>36</sup>

The conservationists took up his challenge. They too could sense victory, despite President Eisenhower's 1955 budget that called for appropriations for the dams. In April every congressman received a copy of *This Is Dinosaur*, a collection of essays published by Alfred Knopf that described the monument's natural splendors. DeVoto's "Easy Chair" in May responded to criticisms that the conservationists were depriving Navajo Indians of a livelihood. He described the Reclamation Bureau's successful attempts to win Navajo support for the dams in exchange for guaranteeing water for their lands while, in the meantime, another Interior agency was looking at ways to relocate them in order to gain access to uranium recently discovered on the reservation.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> DeVoto to Wallace Bennett, August 15, 1950, DeVoto Papers; DeVoto, "And Fractions Drive Me Mad," pp. 10-19.

<sup>36</sup> DeVoto, "One-way Partnership Derailed," pp. 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> Wallace Stegner, *This Is Dinosaur* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). Knopf was another member of the National Parks Advisory Board. See also DeVoto, "Current Comic Strips," *Harper's* (May 1955): 9-15.

The column continued in the same vein with another reference to the Interior secretary whose “left hand must protect the national parks from invasion while his right hand undermines the law that protects them.” DeVoto clearly had no time for McKay, as his refusal to sit at the same table with him confirms.<sup>38</sup> The repeated attacks directed at him by DeVoto and others were in some ways unfair, for, despite the rhetoric, McKay and his team had not inflicted that much damage. Their numerous attempts to resist pressure from the West “was, unfortunately, smothered by the publicity given to the administration’s proposals and decisions on water and power development.”<sup>39</sup> But slight exaggeration, supplemented with occasional sarcasm, had always been one of DeVoto’s favorite methods of attack, and he was hardly likely to change it just to save McKay’s feelings.

In any case, it seemed the secretary’s left hand was winning. In June the House Irrigation and Reclamation Subcommittee removed the Dinosaur dams from its authorization bill. Although Congress failed again to get a final vote before adjourning for the year, it merely delayed the inevitable. On November 1, 1955, a group of project leaders met in Denver and agreed to drop Echo Park from any further proposals. After five long years of fighting, the conservationists had won their battle.<sup>40</sup>

They also lost a friend. Bernard DeVoto died of a sudden heart attack less than two weeks after the good news, on November 13, 1955. He was 58 years old. “One of the great periodical influences for conservation,” remembered one fellow writer, while another paid tribute to “one of the most illustrious conservationist who has lived in modern times.”<sup>41</sup>

Few, however, even acknowledged his role in the fight against the Dinosaur dams, let alone the importance of it. Instead, they remembered his campaign against the landgrabbers, which gave him first recognition as a conservation writer and won him an honorary degree from the University of Colorado. Even today, historian Wallace Stegner still regards the landgrab fight as DeVoto’s greatest achievement.<sup>42</sup> His

<sup>38</sup>Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair*, p. 439 n. 12. Stegner describes how DeVoto refused a lunch invitation.

<sup>39</sup>Richardson, *Dams, Parks, and Politics*, p. 113.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>41</sup>Howard Zahniser, “Nature in Print,” *Nature* (April 1956): 172; Richard Neuberger, *Congressional Record*, 84th Cong., 2d sess., II (February 16, 1956): 2620.

<sup>42</sup>Stegner to author, November 2, 1987. Stegner argued that DeVoto was forced to concentrate on earning money during 1953-55 and had little time to write any major articles on Echo Park. Even before that he had preferred to lend support to the Forest Service rather than the NPS. Stegner concluded by saying that the Echo Park fight was carried by the Sierra Club and David Brower.

only significant contribution to Echo Park, argues Stegner, was the *Saturday Evening Post* piece, which opened the controversy

with the precise arguments that would finally win it: that dams within a national park area would constitute an “impairment” of the kind specifically forbidden by the National Park Act, and that the cost-benefit figures of the bureaus, the economic justifications of main-stem dams, were open to the gravest doubt. The Sierra Club and other conservation organizations would finally bring those arguments home to the public, and thence to Congress, five years after DeVoto aired them in the *Post*.<sup>43</sup>

It is certainly true that the article set the tone for the ensuing battle. It is also true that David Brower’s Sierra Club helped take DeVoto’s battle cry to the American public at large. But by targeting a different audience, one with education and influence, the “Easy Chair” proved just as effective over the years. A Pulitzer Prize-winning author was far more likely to spark the interest of such readers than a Sierra Club flyer in the mail box, especially since DeVoto regularly devoted his column to the controversy during its most critical periods, with nine “Easy Chair” pieces during 1950-51 and 1954-55. His method succeeded, too, as witnessed by those congressmen who used his articles as part of their debates. Of course, some only presented his articles as evidence of the conservationists’ supposed ignorance, but even this indicates DeVoto’s stature. The Upper Colorado project proponents might not have agreed with him, but they undoubtedly respected him as one of the leading figures in Echo Park.<sup>44</sup>

So would the one hundred and fifty thousand people who visit Dinosaur National Monument today were they to hear the full story about Echo Park. Instead, though, historians continue to ignore the contribution of a transplanted western writer who, some thirty years earlier, had mobilized an entire national movement to save the canyon. But anonymity would never have bothered Bernard DeVoto, so long as at least one Dinosaur escaped extinction.

<sup>43</sup>Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair*, p. 314.

<sup>44</sup>Glenn Sandiford, *Echo Park: The Forgotten Contribution of Bernard DeVoto*, Faculty of Forestry Miscellaneous Publication No. 19 (Syracuse, N.Y.: SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, 1988).