

TRIUMPHANT PLUTOCRACY

The Story of
American Public Life
from 1870 to 1920

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from South Dakota



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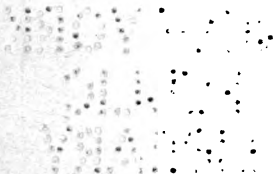
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ASTOR. LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
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II. THE LAND FOR THE PEOPLE

Powerful interests were out to plunder the public domain. I had felt their grip. They were shrewdly advised. I had faced their spokesman in the Senate and the House. They were sinister. Many a man, under my eyes, had tried to thwart them, and not one such had remained an enemy of the vested interests and at the same time continued in public life. Nevertheless, I went straight ahead, trying to save the land for the people. I knew how enormously rich was the public domain; I had an idea of its possibilities. I wanted to have it used in the future, not for the enrichment of the few, but for the well being of the many.

In order to protect the public in their sovereign rights over the remainder of the public domain, I worked out what I believed was a feasible plan for keeping the public domain in the hands of the public. After I had secured the forest legislation and the passage of the law administering forests, I introduced the following bill in the Senate on March 22, 1898 (55th Congress, 2nd Session):

A BILL

To preserve the public lands for the people.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled,

That the public lands of the United States, except reservations, be and they are hereby donated to the States and Territories in which they may be located on the sole condition that all such public lands shall be held in perpetual ownership by such States and Territories to be used by the people residing therein free of rent under such regulations as may be prescribed by the legislatures of such States and Territories each for itself.

This bill had three purposes:

1. To make use and not ownership the criterion in the distribution of nature's gifts to individual citizens.
2. To keep the title to the public domain, including agricultural land, mineral land, timber land, water-

power, and all other natural gifts, perpetually in the whole people, and thus to prevent any greater quantities from getting into the grip of the few.

3. To localize control over the administration of the lands, so as to bring the problem closer to the people.

Could this first step be taken, I believed that we should be in a position to go forward with a general program for the conservation of all resources.

The bill was referred to the Committee on Public Lands, of which I was a member, and to the members of that committee, individually and collectively, and on the floor of the Senate, I presented my arguments. In support of my proposition that the public domain should be leased but never sold, I stated that the public domain in my own state amounted to 20,000,000 acres of grazing land. Then I showed that if these lands were conveyed to the State of South Dakota, with the privilege of leasing, they could be leased to cattlemen for ten cents an acre, which would produce a revenue of \$2,000,000 a year. Then I showed that this money derived from farm leases could be used to build great reservoirs on the heads of all streams and store the flood-water, and thus irrigate and make productive large areas of this semi-arid land.

In my own state, the opportunities for irrigation by means of artesian wells were unusual. I pointed out to the Senate that almost anywhere in the middle half of the state the artesian basin could be tapped at depths varying from 300 to 2,000 feet, each well releasing a flow almost marvelous in quantity. Many of these wells exhibit a pressure strong enough to drive heavy machinery, and from most of them water could be elevated 30 or 40 feet into reservoirs by the force of the head behind the artesian supply. Nature had thus made provision for irrigation on an extended scale in South Dakota, and all that was needed was the money with which to provide for the distribution of the water.

I called the attention of the Senate to the fact that Dakota land was only one part of the public domain,

and that the Dakota problem was only one aspect of the whole problem of conservation. I showed them that the United States had 500,000,000 acres of arid and semi-arid land, large areas of which could be irrigated to advantage, either through stream conservation or through the sinking of artesian wells.

Furthermore, I showed that the Government, through its control of the lakes and streams of the country, had an opportunity to adopt constructive relief measures designed to meet the recurring floods and droughts in the lower reaches of the rivers. Many of the streams are navigable. Successful navigation depends on the maintenance of a steady flow of water. Many were used for the generation of power. Again, there is a need to conserve the spring surplus to cover the needs of the late summer. Each spring this water, so sorely needed later, is allowed to run off from the land, not only wasting the supply but, through floods, overflowing the banks and destroying temporarily or permanently large areas of fertile and cultivated land.

For the purpose of preventing this destruction, particularly along the Mississippi, Congress had for many years appropriated money for the construction of dykes and levees, under the theory that such work was for the benefit of commerce. Here was a twofold problem: Millions of acres of arid land, on the one hand, required only water to make them produce splendid crops. On the other hand, the interests of commerce, of power development and of the dwellers along some of the larger rivers, demanded an intelligent regulation of stream flow.

It was estimated at that time by the Government authorities that 72,000,000 acres of land could be thus reclaimed and made to produce crops sufficient to support 15,000,000 people. The benefit that commerce, industry and agriculture would derive from such a plan would be incalculable. Therefore, I moved an appropriation of from one to two hundred million dollars to begin the building of such reservoirs as were most ur-

gently needed and the establishment of irrigation projects in the districts that would yield the most immediate results.

I further showed that if the storm water was all stored in these reservoirs, it would reduce the floods on the great rivers—the Missouri and the Mississippi—and obviate the necessity of building embankments to reclaim the lands heretofore flooded by these great rivers. Thus, the leasing of the land held the title for all the people, while it made the land available for such as were able to utilize it.

For my part, I stated that I would prefer to have Congress turn over its arid and semi-arid land, lying within its boundaries, to the State of South Dakota, because I believed the problem would be practically and honestly worked out to the great advantage of the people of that state. The same thing I insisted was true of Idaho, of Montana, of Wyoming, of Colorado, of Nevada, of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Western Kansas, Western Nebraska and North Dakota. I insisted that the nation could not afford longer to neglect this great opportunity for material advancement, which I considered of fully as much importance, if not of more importance, to the future greatness and prosperity of this country than the clearing out of harbors along the small streams of the coast, or even the development of the great harbors themselves.

The arguments fell on deaf ears. These questions arose during the days following the Spanish War and preceding the conquest of the Philippines. We had started upon a career of conquest rather than one of internal improvement. The Administration, backed by many of the people, believed that it was of great benefit to this country that we should annex 10,000,000 people in the Philippines. Instead of spending hundreds of millions in conquering the Philippines, it would have been far better economy and better business judgment to spend it in reclaiming the arid lands of the west.

At the time that I presented these arguments to the Senate, I considered them weighty. I consider them weighty today. I believe that they represented the only statesmanlike approach to the problem of resource conservation and that they suggested a line of action that might have been followed to the advantage of the people of the United States. Yet I was unable to persuade the committee to report the bill back to the Senate in any form.

There was no question of choosing between two policies. The committee had no policy on this subject. On the subject of the public domain they had only one conclusion—that the only way to make a state or territory prosperous was to get the title of the public domain out of the Government and into the hands of some private interest, by selling it, or giving it away, or doing anything to get rid of it.

There was not a single member of the committee on public lands that was in favor of the sovereign ownership of the natural resources. They wanted to deed not only the land, but the minerals underneath the land, and also to convey the water power so that these utilities, of no value except that which the community gave them, could be used to enrich individuals and exploit the whole population. Everyone was opposed to public utilities being used for any other purposes than that of enriching individuals, and corporations were being rapidly formed for the purpose of more thoroughly performing this work of exploitation.

Two-thirds of both houses were lawyers, and they believed that the rights of property, no matter how acquired, were the only sacred thing in connection with humanity, and the only legitimate subjects for the consideration of a well-ordered legislative chamber in an intelligently directed state. The same point of view has prevailed ever since, and therefore no policy of reclaiming and utilizing the public domain for the benefit of the people of the United States has ever been adopted. Instead, the 65th Congress, at its second

session, passed the infamous Shield's Water Power Bill.

The natural resources of the United States, a hundred years ago, were the richest possessed by any modern nation. Like the air and the sunlight, they existed in almost limitless abundance. But the "land-hog," in his multitude of corporate forms, came upon the scene and today the timber (except 170,000,000 of acres embraced within the forest reservations), coal, copper, iron and oil that once belonged to the American people are in the hands of a few very rich men who, with their agents and attorneys and hangers-on, administer these free natural gifts for their own profit. At the present moment, the one great resource remaining in the hands of the whole people—the "white coal" of our streams and rivers—is being gobbled up by the public utility corporations, which plan to charge four prices for a commodity that should go to the people at its cost of production.

I made my fight in the land because it was so basic and so important from the point of view of economic strategy; because it was so rich; because, by holding and using it for their common advantage, the American people might have remained free; because this same land, in the hands of a small and unscrupulous ruling caste, will not only enable the members of that caste to live parasitically upon the labor of the remainder of the community, but will give them the right to decide who among the citizens of the United States shall be able to earn a living and who shall be condemned to slow starvation.

I lost my fight on the land because every branch of the government machinery was manned by the agents and attorneys of the interests which were busy grabbing the public domain; because, through their control of the press, they kept the public in ignorance of the things that were really transpiring, and because the people, lulled by soft words such as "liberty" and "constitutional rights," were busily pursuing their daily

occupations, secure in the belief that the Government would protect them. So I lost the fight because those who wanted the land were keen and powerful, though few in number; while the many, from whom the few stole it, were basking in the belief that they were citizens of a "free country."