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The Environmental Legacy of Harry Truman

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Jon E. Taylor

Karl Boyd Brooks, noted environmental historian and now Director of Region 7 of the Environmental Protection Agency, has edited an interesting volume of essays written primarily by environmental, political, and legal scholars, mostly by historians, that, in part, grew out of a 2007 symposium held at Key West, Florida, titled ?Truman and the Environment: Los Alamos to the Everglades?. The symposium, which was sponsored by the Truman Little White House, the Southeast Region of the National Archives, and the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs hoped to understand how the actions of President Truman impacted how his successors have ?discharged their constitutional duty ?to promote the common welfare?? (p. xiii). This book is the fifth volume in Truman State University?s Truman Legacy series, which has previously examined national security, civil rights, Israel and the Middle East, Native Americans, and immigration topics.

In the opening preface and introduction Brooks sets the tone for some of the essays that follow. He argues clearly that American environmental history did not begin in the 1960s, but rather that scholars should look back further in American history to see the roots of America?s environmental experience. Brooks concludes: ?The years between 1945 and 1956 contributed no less to American environmental history than did the dozen years after *Silent Spring*? (p. xix). The other point that Brooks argues is that because Truman?s environmental legacy ?endures as a tangible heritage of concrete and steel and asphalt throughout the

nation? (p. xxvii) which resulted in the destruction of untold numbers of ecosystems, then it served as the catalyst that ignited the environmental movement in the 1960s.

?The Environmental Legacy of the Truman Presidency? section features four essays. In ?Taking the Postwar Seriously,? Mark W. T. Harvey clearly agrees with Brooks that environmental history has not received the attention it deserved and makes a compelling case that environmental history research has not made it into the larger narrative of American history because American history textbooks have bought into the myth that the American environmental movement began in the 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson?s *The Silent Spring*.(1) Harvey then embarks on a tour de force of some of the most significant environmental history scholarship within the past ten years but does not provide the reader with a remedy for getting environmental history prior to Carson into the textbooks. Paul Milazzo follows Harvey with the essay, ?From Truman to Eisenhower: Rethinking Postwar Environmental ?Consensus?? in which he examines the water development and water pollution control policies of both presidents. However, Milazzo, who is the author of *Unlikely Environmentalists: Congress and Clean Water, 1945?1972* (2) spends more time talking about the Eisenhower administration?s policies rather than Truman?s policies, which this reviewer found strange even when Milazzo warns his readers not to believe that he hoped they would not think they have ?fallen victim to some sort of presidential bait and switch? (p. 20). Furthermore, this essay does not explain why Truman signed the Water Pollution Control Act of 1948, which was the nation?s first water-quality law (p. 53) and the author?s bibliography does not reflect he had conducted research at either the Truman or Eisenhower libraries. The third essay in this section by Thomas Robertson, ?Conservation After World War II: The Truman Administration, Foreign Aid, and the ?Greatest Good??, was the only essay in this section that significantly examines Truman?s environmental legacy. Within an international context, the author probes how Truman?s foreign policy intertwined with natural resource issues by looking at the administration?s role in encouraging a world conference on conservation and how natural resources were treated under the Marshall Plan and in Truman?s Point 4 program, which was designed to help underdeveloped areas of the world pursue economic prosperity. What is compelling about Robertson?s essay is that he describes how Truman?s advisors believed that their programs practiced conservation, but were challenged by other conservationists, usually from outside government, who disagreed. Robertson concludes, ?While many Truman administration officials began to equate conservation with economic development, a small but important minority of conservationists began to articulate criticisms of economic and population growth? (p. 44). The concluding essay, Christopher H. Schroeder?s ?Administrative Law Reform and Environmental Lawmaking?, is interesting because he chronicles how the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) was signed into law by Truman in 1946; however, its connection to Harry Truman?s environmental record could have been strengthened by case studies that explain how the law was applied in environmental situations and by an essay that included footnotes and a bibliography.

The second section of the book, ?Harry Truman?s Continuing Legacy,? features two essays; however, like Schroeder?s piece, these are not accompanied by either footnotes or a bibliography. ?The Importance of Executive Leadership to Environmental Progress? by Christine Todd Whitman, who served as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency under George W. Bush from 2001 to 2003, discusses her disappointment that George W. Bush refused to recognize global warming as a serious issue, but concludes by making the observation that she hopes George W. Bush?s legacy on the environment would not be same as that of Harry Truman, which (articulated by Karl Brooks) ?ignited the constructive creativity that finally forced a reckoning of the costs? (p. 74). Michael Grunwald?s ?Swamped: Harry Truman, South Florida, and the Changing Political Geography of American Conversation? recounts Harry Truman?s dedication of the Everglades National park in Florida in 1947 and discusses the preservation of the Everglades up to the present. The author considers Truman to be a ?people-first conservationist? ? someone who put the use and development of the resources ahead of assessing how the use would impact on the resources.

The volume is complimented by two sets of primary documents that were selected from the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum archives, a photo essay at the end of the book, and by several appendices. The first set of documents describes Truman?s ?booster? mindset that stressed development, progress, and growth. These documents are fine, but one would have thought this collection of essays would have at least one

article that could have utilized these documents to define his ?booster? ethic. Furthermore, Harry Truman was a farmer and this volume does not mention his experience as a Jackson County farmer, which seems to be a glaring omission. Could it be that his ?boosterism? stemmed from his experiences as a farmer from 1906 to 1917 in Grandview, Missouri? It was on the farm where Harry Truman most closely interacted with the environment and this volume completely glosses over this. The second set of documents are directly related to some of the essays written in the book; however, this set also introduced the reader to new material, leaving him wanting to know more. One photo caption notes that in 1948 Congress passed the Water Pollution Control Act and in April 1950 Truman?s Interior Secretary Oscar Chapman hosted the nation?s first air pollution conference (p. 53). For a president who seemed to single handedly usher in the environmental movement of the 1960s through his destructive environmental policies, it seems to be disingenuous to not talk about how the Water Pollution Control Act and the 1950 Air Pollution Conference might be considered as achievements for Truman?s environmental legacy. Perhaps these are discussed in greater detail in Brooks?s *Before Earth Day: The Origins of American Environmental Law, 1945-1970*.(3) The photo essay demonstrates Truman?s destructive environmental legacy by featuring photographs that showed Truman?s love for roads and dams by including pictures and captions that showed him and his ?public-power zealot[s]? (p. 104)dedicating the Grand Coulee Dam and the McNary dam on the Columbia River. The appendices include a couple of articles written about how to research Truman?s environmental legacy in the holdings of the National Archives and the concluding appendix features a brief chronology of ?Harry S. Truman and the Natural Environment.?

The book misses an opportunity to engage with significant environmental issues. Brooks discusses the development of nuclear power in his opening chapter, but not one essay in this volume is devoted to this topic. Also, the National Trust for Historic Preservation was chartered by Congress in 1949 and the book does not even consider why or who was behind the push to create the Trust and whether or not the push to preserve America?s historic resources was linked in any way with those who spoke out against Truman?s environmental record. Furthermore, the book does not give the reader a clear view of how Truman?s secretaries of the interior viewed natural resources. Three Secretaries of the Interior, Harold Ickes, Julius Krug, and Oscar Chapman, respectively served during Truman?s tenure as president and some overall comparison/contrast of their views would have been tremendously helpful. Harold Ickes, as Robertson notes in his article, was very active in supporting a world conference on conservation. However, Ickes resigned in 1946 to protest Truman?s appointment of Edwin Pauley to serve as Secretary of Navy. Pauley was president of an oil company that specialized in off shore drilling on continental shelf lands located off the coasts of the United States. At the time, it was debated whether the federal government or the states had jurisdiction over these lands. Pauley and Ickes had gotten into a battle and Ickes threatened to file suit. Ickes resignation seemed to indicate a distinct difference in how the secretary and Truman viewed natural resources and yet none of this story makes its way into this volume. Finally, while Brooks mentions the dams that were constructed during Truman?s presidency there is never any analysis given to how these dams were received by the local communities and what their reaction is to their placement. In all fairness, Brooks covers some of this in his first book (4), as does Mark W. T. Harvey in *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (5); however, it would have been good to draw these voices into Truman?s environmental legacy.

Overall, I found the focus of this book challenging. The individuals selected are qualified to weigh in on Truman?s environmental legacy; however, it seems that most get hung up on the fact that the president?s environmental legacy was dismal at best and despite reaching to find a legacy the Water Pollution Control Act of 1948 and the air pollution conference of 1950 are seemingly dismissed as achievements. While Truman deserves the environmental criticism offered him in this volume, the real environmental story should not be centered around Harry Truman, but instead around those individuals who spoke out against Truman?s policies. One of the arguments of the book was that Truman?s putrid environmental legacy led to the environmental movement of the 1960s; however, the book never really gave me a good sense of how the contemporary criticism of Truman?s environmental legacy was connected to the environmental movement of the 1960s. If the book could have given more scholarly attention to those of Truman?s contemporaries who were speaking out against his policies at the time and demonstrated the connection between their

criticisms and the way the environmental movement of the 1960s drew upon them, then perhaps a more nuanced argument would have emerged, that Truman?s policies played a role in igniting the environmental movement, but so too did a growing opposition to his view of how the environment should be treated that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s in response to his destructive environmental policies. For the most part, Brooks and others have crafted a declension narrative of environmental history in the 1940s and 1950s that can only be corrected by more research or drawing upon recent work, much of which they reference, to better see how this period is connected with the environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s.

Notes

1. Rachel Carson, *The Silent Spring* (Boston, MA, 1962).Back to (1)
2. Paul Milazzo, *Unlikely Environmentalists: Congress and Clean Water, 1945?1972* (Lawrence, KS). Back to (2)
3. Karl Boyd Brooks, *Before Earth Day: The Origins of American Environmental Law, 1945-1970* (Lawrence, KS, 2009).Back to (3)
4. Karl Boyd Brooks, *Public Dams, Private Power: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy* (Seattle, WA, 2006).Back to (4)
5. Mark W. T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Seattle, WA, 2000).Back to (5)

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