

Peter Carrels. Uphill Against Water: The Great Dakota Water War.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

If you want drama, excitement, human tragedy, passion, humor, personal conviction, and other elements of a classic Greek tragedy or a Shakespearian play like Hamlet or King Lear, you will be pleased and richly rewarded with Peter Carrels' account of the saga of the Oahe Irrigation Project as told in his brilliant 1999 book, Uphill Against Water.

Senator George McGovern underscored the fervor and extreme contentiousness of the issue in 1977 when he said, "Perhaps no single issue in the area of water development has created as much interest and has so divided South Dakotans as has the Oahe Irrigation Project."

Carrels' writing is crisp, exciting, authentic, honest, passionate, and provocative. This is a story of epic dimensions that deserves to be told. The author tells it well with flair, feeling, lucidity, and authority. His is a genre of important investigative journalism, taking on important and controversial topics of great relevance to all people—both those in decision-making roles and those who purportedly are beneficiaries of large-scale Federal development projects like the Oahe Irrigation Project. This book casts a bright spotlight upon the world of Federal public works projects and reveals much about how they are planned, justified, authorized, and implemented. You will also be introduced to a wonderful set of characters, political intrigue, how we think about and define progress as a people and a nation, the history of water development projects in the United States (as seen in this South Dakota Oahe model), how political entities like the Oahe Conservancy Sub-District are created, manifold aspects of the nitty-gritty of the political process, warts and all, state versus federal versus rural interests, people of good intent as well as those of questionable intent, and some of the strangest of political bedfellows.

Uphill Against Water is a must read for those interested in the history of South Dakota. It was a "singular twentieth century event" in the history and politics of South Dakota. It not only helped shape the state's history, but it also created a novel political and decision-making paradigm, showing how people view and actively participate in massive public works projects. As logically explained and clearly delineated by Carrels, the Oahe Irrigation Project is also a highly productive model of grass-roots democracy in action.

It was the result of an implicit deal offered to the people of South Dakota in the Flood Control Act of 1944. If state residents were willing to "sacrifice" 500,000 acres of prime Missouri River bottomland behind the four South Dakota main-stem dams (Fort Randall, Gavin's Point, Big Bend, and Oahe), the Federal government would compensate South Dakotans by providing irrigation for valuable cropland to the west and east of the James River in the Lake Plain area near Huron.

Ironically, in the normal course of twentieth century government-backed public works projects, the Oahe Irrigation Project would most likely have come to fruition. It would have been more or less "a done deal." However, that was not to be. The project was de-authorized and essentially killed during the Carter administration. A number of conflicting elements entered the equation, including the notion of "progress."

The 1970s, being quite different from earlier eras, elaborated a set of public works developmental priorities distinct from those of the 1940s. The United States and the world had evolved significantly in the years immediately after World War II and during the halcyon economic growth days of the 1950s and 1960s. As a nation, we had experienced good economic times and had developed new economic criteria for evaluating public works projects

First, many citizens began to question the economics of massive public works projects. Would the profits of the farmers in the Lake Plain regions of the James River and Great Plains, including the “multiplier effects” of greatly increased crop production, be commensurate with the total financial investment of the Federal government (including costs to all Federal taxpayers like you and me)? In other words, would we the taxpayers be getting a reasonable return on our investment?

Second, during the early 1970s, Congress passed a number of environmentally based laws—the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Clean Air Act of 1970, and the Clean Water Act of 1972. Also, a growing number of people became concerned about the potential limits of our natural resources and how we ought to husband our resource endowment. Thus, with respect to the Oahe Irrigation Project, an increasingly environmentally sensitive public asked the fundamental question: Will the benefits of the project outweigh the environmental degradation and outright ecological losses that the construction and maintenance of an enormous and complex irrigation system that brings water via miles of open ditches to the Lake Plain near Huron from the Missouri River near Pierre would cause? What would be the environmental consequences of hundreds of miles of open delivery canals, water storage reservoirs (Blunt, Cresbard, and Lake Byron), and the fate of the James River basin—an important ecological north-south green corridor—especially when the James River channel was the ultimate receptacle for irrigation return flows from the Lake Plain? Furthermore, today with our newer and more efficient irrigation technology, we would be asking fundamental questions about the overall efficacy of open-canal irrigation versus more efficient water conserving methods. In short, could the overall environment, especially the prairie and riverine ecosystems of South Dakota, be irreversibly compromised as a result of the Oahe Irrigation Project?

Third, the project represented an example of a classic twentieth century public works project. As opposed to the 1940s, the 1970s brought with it changing notions of Federal public works policy criteria both on the part of private citizens as well as Federal employees. In sum, people began asking about the appropriate structure, scale, and overall function of public works projects as our nation and the world evolved in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Fourth, and this is one of the more critical, interesting, and fundamentally profound public policy components: Did the people, all of the people of South Dakota and the nation, really want the Oahe Irrigation Project? Or was it yet another example of an out-of-control Federal behemoth with a leviathan-sized bureaucracy compelled by tradition and self-interest to forge ahead, business as usual, regardless of the attitudes of the local people? Federal public works bureaucracies by nature have the desire to do what they have always done and believe their actions are in the best interests of the people, in this case, of South Dakota and the nation. Plus, this project was considered to be beneficial for the continued growth and well-being of our own Federal agency (in this case the Bureau of Reclamation). Inertia is a powerful force.

Finally, during the eleven-year Oahe battle (1972-1983), a somewhat unexpected and profoundly important thing happened, i.e., the political process at the grass roots prevailed; democracy worked and worked well. The people, as represented by the Oahe Conservancy Sub-District, had their day in court. Our American Constitution was once again reaffirmed and revalidated as the magnificent blueprint for freedom and democracy that we have come to appreciate and respect.

To summarize, Uphill Against Water provides a constructive and exciting view of the political process at its best. Peter Carrels' gifted and authentic journalistic writing provides a comprehensive view of the many and complex factors that accounted for the origin and ultimate disposition of a singular political and resource event in the history of South Dakota and the nation—the Oahe Irrigation Project. This historical episode would make a great movie.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was the Federal Flood Control Act of 1944, and why was that law so influential in creating large-scale public works projects like the Oahe Irrigation Project? How would the people of South Dakota benefit from this Federal legislation?

2. Who was Ken Holum? Based on the text, provide a brief sketch of Holum and trace his advocacy of the Oahe Irrigation Project. To whom did he appeal, what role did he play in the project, and what was his ultimate fate?

3. Who were Lewis Pick and Glenn Sloan, and what roles did they play in the Oahe Irrigation Project and other federally funded public works projects?

4. What are governmental agencies called “sub-districts”? What was the Oahe Conservancy Sub-District? What role do sub-districts play as “intermediaries” between the local people and the Federal government? How were the officers or members of the sub-districts appointed? What kinds of policy issues were debated as part of authorized sub-district deliberations and proceedings? Trace the history—especially the constituents—of the Oahe Conservancy Sub-District.

5. Who were the United Family Farmers, and what role did they play in the Oahe Irrigation Project?

6. Trace the evolving activities of George Piper throughout the course of this text. What were his positions with respect to the Oahe Irrigation Project? What role did Piper play in the disposition of the Oahe Irrigation Project?

7. What did President Jimmy Carter have to do with respect to the continued authorization of the Oahe Irrigation Project? What ultimate action did he take, and was his action justified?

8. Why is a multidisciplinary understanding of the political, economic, social, physical, biological (ecological), and environmental factors of the Oahe Irrigation Project critical to our appreciation of the course of history in South Dakota and the nation? Why was the deauthorization of the Oahe Irrigation Project a model for the evolution of large complex Federally funded public works projects in the latter part of the twentieth century?

9. Were the positions of Senator George McGovern, Governor Bill Janklow, President Jimmy Carter, and other high-ranking politicians predictable in the context of the nation and their political parties, party policies, and constituency groups? Why or why not?

10. Consider notions of “progress” and definitions of progress. Why did some people believe deauthorization of the Oahe Irrigation Project was an example of progress, while others found it to be the opposite of progress or a kind of reverse progress? What is your definition of progress? Should the Federal government be in the business of promoting projects like Oahe? Why or why not?

11. Could we draw a parallel today between the Oahe Irrigation Project and our continued authorization and support of fossil fuel-fired electricity plants?

12. To what extent is the Oahe Irrigation Project part of the story of westward expansion, our Jeffersonian notions of farming, and the concept of the politically autonomous and democratic gentleman farmer?

13. The Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, often at odds, decided to come together because “they had learned that a clenched fist is not the best instrument with which to dip into the public trough.” Discuss this quotation taken from Albert Williams’ book, The Water and the Power, discussed by Carrels on page 16.

14. Why did the people of South Dakota believe that they were “owed” the Oahe Irrigation Project? What had they “given up” or sacrificed in order to be rewarded with the Oahe Irrigation Project?

15. What do we learn about the physical condition of the soils in the Lake Plain irrigation area? Are the soils compatible with irrigation? What kinds of soil treatments were suggested to make the Lake Plain more readily irrigable? Predict the effects of Lake Plain return flows on the water quality of the James River.

16. Finally, what are the most important lessons you learned from Peter Carrels’ Uphill Against Water?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Born in 1953, Peter Carrels, a very talented investigative journalist, is a 1975 graduate of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is a writer, editor, and traveling exhibit coordinator for American Rivers, Inc. Carrels has a love of rivers and a deep interest and commitment to the preservation and well being of the Missouri River and other rivers. He is a native and resident of Aberdeen, South Dakota. As a journalist, Carrels is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). Recent reports for High Country News include: “Going backwards: Building an oil refinery in South Dakota” (August 18, 2008) and “How long do we wait for clean coal?” (February 19, 2009). Carrels is married and lives with his wife in Aberdeen, South Dakota. He has two sons, Zachary and Jacob.

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