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Water Fights

On October 10th 1893, John Wesley Powell stood before a conference in Los Angeles and said to a stunned audience: "I wish to make clear to you...[that] there is not enough water to irrigate all the lands...[and] it is not right to speak about the area of the public domain in terms of acres that extend over the land, but in terms of acres that can be supplied with water." This is not what the audience wanted to hear. The Director of the U.S. Geological Survey was cut off by an angry crowd and his words drowned out by their clamoring. A Mexican delegate attending the meeting described it as "the only bullfight I have seen in this country."

The meeting came after a long battle over irrigation and the settlement of lands in the West, which had begun to heat up more than five years earlier. The initiating event was a Congressional resolution co-sponsored by Senator "Big Bill" Stewart of Nevada that passed in both Houses. Vaguely worded, it called on the Secretary of the Interior to examine "that portion of the United States where agriculture is carried on by means of irrigation, as to the natural advantages for the storage of water for irrigation purposes." The dry language hid many ambiguities. Where was "that portion of the United States" it referred to? Was it the government's intention to guarantee each farmer access to water? Was Washington promising to construct dams and build canals? And if not, who would? Senator Stewart represented the cattle ranchers of Nevada; what he wanted was for the Federal government to give away lands that were irrigated or could be irrigated. But when Stewart's resolution was enacted in October of 1888 and Powell hired to carry out an irrigation survey, that's not how he interpreted his mission.



Powell had for years been warning of disaster if Washington continued to allow homesteaders to settle land without first ensuring that the land had adequate access to water. He saw his new assignment as an opportunity to rectify the situation. With the public lands closed for further settlement and with

an initial appropriation of \$100,000, Powell set to work immediately by sending teams to do field work in New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and Montana. The following year, Powell was given another \$250,000 in funding and his staff began selecting sites for reservoirs. By June of 1889, Powell was able to certify about 150 reservoir sites and he had isolated only 30,500,000 acres of land that could be irrigated. But under pressure from their constituents, Western Congressman wanted to move more quickly to reopening the land.

To make matters worse, the General Land Office inexplicably failed for ten months to notify its local offices that public lands had been closed to further settlement. In the interim, speculators had staked claims on lands that surveyors were considering for canals or reservoirs. The Land Office in Washington finally responded by ordering its local offices to cancel any claim filed after the public lands were closed, a move that further enraged Congressmen from the region. While tensions mounted, Powell ploughed on with his investigation seemingly unconcerned by the controversy. Of the 1,300,000 square miles under his investigation, he believed about 150,000 could be settled. This he argued was a huge area, "an empire one half as large as the entire cultivated area of the United States." That's not how Powell's adversaries in Congress saw it. To them, the land Powell proposed opening to settlers represented just eleven percent of the land available in the West.

When Powell came before Congress in the summer of 1890, seeking a third appropriation for his survey, he met with hostility. The geologist had spent almost all his initial grants on investigative work, not on the construction of waterways. The Western Senators realized this investigative work could go on for years before irrigation would benefit anyone. In an early session of the House appropriation hearings, Senator Stewart made his views more than plain: "Every representative of the arid region -- I think there is no exception -- would prefer that there would be no appropriation to having it continue under Major Powell."

The following month at a Senate hearing, Powell was attacked for having too much power in suspending settlement in the West. Powell responded by claiming the suspension was necessary while rigorous investigation of the land was conducted. He went on to argue that "it would be almost a criminal act to go on as we are doing now, and allow thousands and hundreds of thousands of people to establish homes where they cannot maintain themselves."

The debate resulted in the biggest defeat of Powell's career. An amendment to the Sundry Civil Expenses Bill of that year threw open the public domain again. All claims on the land made since the area had been closed two years earlier were declared valid so long as settlers could prove they made the claim in good faith. And a drastic cut in the Congressional appropriation for Powell's work practically reduced the irrigation survey to a random mapping of possible reservoir sites.

Powell's warnings of disaster were not without justification. The very summer of his defeat in Washington, a disastrous drought brought misery to the great plains. Those caught in the calamity tried in an ad hoc fashion to ensure it would never happen again. But, as Powell would write, their token measures, prayers and crazy schemes would not protect them from hardship in the future. "There are those who would control the rains and change the clouds by boring artesian wells; there are those who would control the clouds by planting trees and preserving forests...and there are those who would control the rains by bombarding the heavens with popgun balloons.... Barbarians add costly offerings...more civilized people add confessions on belief.... But terpsichorean, sacrificial and fiducial agencies fail to change the desert into the garden.... Years of drought and famine come and years of flood and famine come, and the climate is not changed with dance, libation or prayer."

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