



washington dc update

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John F. Kennedy Speech on the Future of the West

On February 7, 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy travelled to Albuquerque to give a speech at a Western Water Conference. It was almost five months before the Democratic National Convention would nominate him as their candidate for President and more than nine months before he would be elected President.

We find it interesting that he felt it important to travel to Albuquerque and share his vision of what the arid west should be in the late 20th Century. You can easily Google the speech if you wish to read it in its entirety. But here are some highlights.

Kennedy began the speech by apologizing for the remarks of one of his predecessors in the Senate from Massachusetts who had asked his colleagues, "What do we want with this vast, worthless area? This region of savages and wild beasts, of shifting sands, dust, cactus and prairie dogs? To what use could we ever put these great deserts, or those endless mountain ranges? What can we ever hope to do with the West Coast of three thousand miles, rock-bound, cheerless, uninviting and not a harbor on it? What use have we for this country?"

The speaker was Senator Daniel Webster, orating on the Senate floor well over 100 years before President Kennedy gave his speech. Senator Webster was voicing his opposition to funding a mail route from Missouri to the settlements along the Columbia River.

Kennedy went on to articulate his vision for the arid west:

"In the next 15 years our population will continue to expand. By 1975 there will be 230 million Americans, with the west growing four times as fast as the rest of the country. And for this growing America, we will need a growing supply of resources. By 1975 we will need twice as much water, water for growing cities, our farms and our industry. We will consume twice as much food and we will need 3 and one half million more acres on which to grow this food, acres which must be reclaimed now if they are to feed a nation in the future. We will need three times as much power to drive the machinery and light the homes of our expanding economy."



Kennedy ended his speech by quoting another Senator who in 1843 spoke in opposition to a proposal for a trans-continental railroad: “.....to talk about constructing a railroad to the western shore of this continent manifests a wild spirit of adventure which I never expected to hear broached in the Senate of the United States.”

Kennedy used this comment to rise to his peroration:

Today we must again call upon that ‘wild spirit of adventure,’ for we are confronted with dangers and challenges greater than any man has ever known. To meet these challenges we must be strong—we must summon all our resources—resources of mind and spirit, and the resources which lie beneath our earth, and in our mountains and in our rivers—those resources on which we have built a great nation; those resources on which her continued greatness depends. And for these resources, we must look as Americans have always looked—westward.”

Once the November elections are over, and certainly no later than next year, the Presidential campaign for 2012 will begin in earnest. Can you imagine a Presidential candidate coming to the arid west and making a speech like Senator Kennedy did in 1960? It would be worthwhile for WESTCAS members to contemplate how much of the particulars and the spirit which Kennedy evoked in his speech could find relevance in the present.

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