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“Extremism in the Defense of Nature?:
Barry Goldwater and Federal Environmentalism”

Over the course of American history, environmental protection and federal power have been two peas in a pod. Since the days of the first New England milldams, Americans interested in protecting soil, water, air, timber, wildlife, and scenery have turned to government, especially at the federal level, to achieve their environmental goals. This was especially true after World War II, as economic prosperity created a growing middle class which demanded environmental “beauty, health and permanence” (in Samuel Hays’ words) as an indispensable part of its consumer lifestyle, and which expected the federal government to secure those things for them. The result was the birth, in Adam Rome’s phrase, of the “environmental management state” in the 1960s and early 1970s, where environmental protection took its place alongside defense and social welfare as a major federal responsibility.

Barry Goldwater began his political career in the midst of postwar environmentalism’s birth and growth. As a Westerner, a businessman, and a political conservative deeply mistrustful of the federal government, Goldwater seems an unlikely candidate for any environmental sympathies, especially of the federal-regulatory variety. But a close look at his life reveals a man with a complex relationship with the natural world, environmentalism, and Rome’s environmental management state. Born and raised amid the Sonoran desert, Goldwater developed a profound love for the desert landscape of his native Arizona, especially the Grand Canyon and the Four Corners region, where he forged a reputation as a first-rate nature photographer and rugged outdoorsman. Later, as a politician, he struggled constantly with the tension between his love for nature and his fear of government. He demanded federal reclamation funds, for example, while simultaneously complaining about the Tennessee Valley Authority as a “rogue bureaucracy.” He expressed deep concern about pollution and the need for federal regulation to control it, supporting Richard Nixon’s various environmental initiatives, only to complain later about “excessive” EPA regulations and other forms of federal interference with free enterprise. He was a member of the Sierra Club who voted against the Wilderness Act in 1964 and became a Sagebrush Rebel in the late 1970s, only to use the Act to set aside large numbers of wilderness areas in Arizona in the midst of that Rebellion.

In the end, Goldwater went to his grave without ever fully coming to terms with these tensions and contradictions, but nevertheless his environmental odyssey tells us a lot about the depth and breadth of postwar environmentalism in the United States, as well as the changing conservative movement and the Republican party. While he was in the vanguard of the new postwar Right in so many ways, Goldwater’s environmentalist sympathies were something of a last gasp of an older federally-oriented “conservative conservationism,” embodied by men like Teddy Roosevelt and Pennsylvania GOP representative John Saylor. He might be seen as a symbolic bridge between that older tradition and the current anti-environmental Reagan/Bush conservative movement.