Conservation reconsidered: Environmental politics, rhetoric, and the Reagan revolution

Calvin B Short
Communication, School of

Abstract
Most analysts do not consider the Reagan presidency as a high point in the study of environmental politics. But the eight-year legacy of the Reagan administration has a significant place in the study of environmental history. Reagan presented a powerful vision that countered the conservation consensus of the previous twenty years and offered an alternative ideological paradigm to understand nature, wilderness, natural resources, and public land management. Although the candidate Reagan seemed uninformed about many environmental issues during the 1980 campaign, President Reagan and his advisers presented an agenda that challenged the core values that had guided environmental politics in the 1960s and 1970s. To casual observers, Reagan's status as the Great Communicator explained his rise to power, his election to the presidency, and his efforts to dismantle "big government" and "return" power to the people. But in dealing with Reagan, deeper forces are at work than wit and eloquence. While many have called Reagan a master in using "symbolic politics," they often fail to address the depth and scope of Reagan's discourse. It is "not enough to delineate Reagan's issue and ideological coalition in strictly political terms," argued Combs. Instead, scholars must identify and evaluate the "broader political context of mythological themes in American culture that Reagan embodies."1 Reagan's environmental agenda, most forcefully articulated by himself and his first secretary of the interior, James G. Watt, provides a useful vehicle to consider the Reagan revolution in American politics. In this chapter I discuss Reagan's ideological rhetoric and how it shaped his environmental agenda. I also consider the historical and cultural forces that guided Reagan's environmental rhetoric and follow Combs' charge to evaluate the cultural myths that gave Reagan's discourse both substance and meaning. The significance of public advocacy in shaping environmental policies in American history seems self-evident. Thoreau, Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Leopold, Carson, Abbey, and many others demonstrate a tradition of advocacy in public efforts to define nature, landscape, and wilderness. The importance of rhetoric, however, becomes even more salient when considering another fact. There is "one glaring omission" in the Constitution according to historian Donald Worster: "Nowhere in all the sections, articles, and amendments is there any mention of the American land and our rights and responsibilities pertaining thereto. I find the word 'land' appearing only once, and then it refers to the capture of prisoners 'on Land and Water.' Otherwise, the subject is never mentioned: no reference to any role the government has in acquiring, holding or regulating the use of land."2 On the other hand, the Constitution provides for the protection of private property in the Fifth Amendment. The writers of the Constitution, concluded Worster, had two distinct ideas regarding land in the new country. First, they believed that land should be owned by as many people as possible and second, "to make the nation grow in richness and power the land and its products should be treated as commodities, put up for sale to the highest bidder in the marketplace."3 Of course, the framers did not envision the vast western public lands that would alter the nature of private property and generate a new role for the federal government. The silence of the Constitution, coupled with cultural assumptions promoting property and economic privileges as the highest good, defy the need to study the rhetorical constructions of the American landscape and its relationship to government. I contend that Ronald Reagan's environmental discourse fused two powerful American myths, the Puritan errand and the frontier thesis, into a unified ideological statement of how the nation's public lands should be defined, managed, and owned. This vision of landscape provided a means of assessing environmental issues beyond property and wilderness, such as hazardous waste, acid rain, and pollution. To more fully understand Reagan's environmental discourse, I consider three topics: Wrst, reviews of the Reagan administration's environmental record; second, Ronald Reagan's orientation toward nature and the environment; and third, Reagan's environmental discourse and its place in environmental history.

Original language: English (US)
Title of host publication: Green Talk in The White House: The Rhetorical Presidency Encounters Ecology
Publisher: Texas A and M University Press
Pages: 134-153
The Reagan Revolution & Environmental Policy

**Administration Orientation**

Prometheans

Natural resources exist for human exploitation

Mans destiny is to conquer nature

**Environmental Regulation**

Stifles the economy

Violates property rights

Environmentalism is an anti-capitalism, anti-business ideology

**Economic Growth and Development**

Taking Precedent over Environmental preservation

Environmental Policy

Impact of Political Appointees

EPA Operating Budget 1975-1998

Billions of $ (1997)


Budget Authority

Personnel. The golden age of political environmentalism came to an abrupt end in January 1981 with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as Carter’s successor and the seating of twelve new Republican senators, which gave the GOP control of the Senate. In earlier years a change of administration would have had little impact and virtually no immediate effect on conservation legislation or policy. But Reagan was different; he had won by mobilizing opponents of activist government, including the western interest groups that had been on the defensive as Congress and the federal conservation agencies chipped away.