



Unlikely Environmentalists: Congress And Clean Water, 1945-1972

Paul Charles Milazzo

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Environmental activism has most often been credited to grassroots protesters, but much early progress in environmental protection originated in the halls of Congress. As Paul Milazzo shows, a coterie of unlikely environmentalists placed water quality issues on the national agenda as early as the 1950s and continued to shape governmental policy through the early 1970s, both outpacing public concern and predating the environmental movement.

Milazzo examines a two-decade crusade to clean up the nation's water supply led by development boosters, pork barrel politicians, and the Army Corps of Engineers, all of whom framed threats to the water supply as an economic rather than environmental problem and saw pollution as an inhibitor of regional growth. Showing how the legislative branch acted more assertively than the executive, the book weaves the history of the federal water pollution control program into a broader narrative of political and institutional development, covering all major clean water legislation as well as many other landmark environmental laws.

Milazzo explains how the evolution of Congress's internal structure after World War II, with its standing committees and powerful chairmen, ultimately shaped the scope and substance of important legislative policies. He reveals how Representative John Blatnik of Minnesota, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Rivers and Harbors, shepherded the first permanent water pollution control legislation through Congress in 1956; how Senator Robert Kerr of Oklahoma embraced pollution control to deflect criticism of the public works budget; and how Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine used an unwanted pollution subcommittee chairmanship to create a more viable federal water quality program at a time when few Americans demanded one.

By showing that a much more diverse set of people and interests shaped environmental politics than has generally been supposed, Milazzo deepens our understanding of how Congress took the lead in addressing environmental concerns, like water quality, that ultimately contributed to the expansion of government. His book demonstrates that the rise of the environmental regulatory state ranks as one of the most far-reaching transformations in American government in the modern era.

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