WALLACE STEGNER'S UNSETTLED COUNTRY

Ruin, Realism, and Possibility in the American West

Edited by MARK FIEGE, MICHAEL J. LANSING, and LEISL CARR CHILDERS

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Returning to the Best Idea We Ever Had

MICHAEL CHILDERS

"Let me bear my testimony, as the Mormons say, and acknowledge the debt I owe to a federal bureau for more than sixty years of physical and spiritual refreshment, and for the reassurance it gives me that despite all its faults, democracy is still the worst form of government except all the others."[1]

So opens Wallace Stegner's 1983 essay "The Best Idea We Ever Had: An Overview." Published in the Wilderness Society's monthly magazine *Wilderness*, it remains one of the most quoted—and misread—treatises on the power of the national parks. And while he later attributed the phrase to Lord James Bryce, Stegner's assertion that "America's Best Idea" offers a cure for our deeply held cultural cynicism and a respite from the competitive materialism we call the American Way continues to resonate with millions of visitors who flock to our national parks every year.[2]

Countless tourists, journalists, and historians (myself included) have cribbed Stegner's title in an attempt to capture the national parks' power. The most recognized? Documentarian Ken Burns in his 2009 series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. The twelve-hour series opens with narrator Peter Coyote proclaiming the national parks "as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence, and just as radical," as images of stunning scenery flash across the screen. Burns builds upon that romance throughout the series in a naked attempt to mirror Stegner's argument from nearly a quarter century before.[3]

But if we read "America's Best Idea" more closely, we see that Stegner was less concerned in extolling the national parks as symbols of

American exceptionalism than bludgeoning the Reagan administration's efforts to reverse decades of environmental gains. Stegner specifically targets Reagan's secretary of the interior, James Watt, a point few contemporary readers note. Thus they understand the essay as a celebration of the national parks rather than one of Stegner's most pointed political statements.

Honestly, for many years I had never read much beyond Stegner's now famous line calling national parks "absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than at our worse. Without them, millions of American lives, including mine, would have been poorer." It is a nifty bit of prose. Which is likely why many have appropriated it over the past several decades. Yet, returning to the essay's specific context and history is worth our while. If we read beyond Stegner's opening stanza, we stand to gain a deeper insight into the writer's personal politics and perhaps even a little perspective on current conversations over the state of our national parks.

In the opening of "America's Best Idea," Stegner confesses to never being a great admirer of the American people. Especially when it came to issues concerning public lands. Too often he watched voters make almost criminally irresponsible choices electing politicians who pushed legislation that placed private (read corporate) interests above their own. It was enough to make anyone deeply pessimistic about the country's future. "But ever since I was old enough to be cynical, I have been visiting the national parks and they are a cure for cynicism," he optimistically declared, "an exhilarating rest from the competitive avarice we call the American way." Stegner often needed that rest to cure his deep skepticism over his fellow Americans willingness to place corporate interests above their own when it came to managing their public lands. That trend remains as true today as it did then.[4]

It would have been easy to become cynical watching the Reagan administration race to erase the environmental achievements of the previous three decades—achievements in which Stegner himself had a hand. Referred to as a reluctant conservationist by one of his biographers, Stegner had become an environmentalist through his deep love

7. Page, Mary, and Wallace Stegner resting on a Yosemite National Park hiking trail, Yosemite National Park, California, probably in the 1950s. Courtesy Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

8. Wallace and Mary Stegner at Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, probably in the late 1930s or 1940s. Courtesy Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

of the American West. Driven by his father's restlessness, he had spent his childhood migrating from one western boomtown to another. The family's constant migration shaped the young Wallace's view of the region, both as a place of eternal hope and spiritual rebirth—themes he spent most of his writing life grappling with. However, it was Stegner's interest in John Wesley Powell that transformed him into a true conservationist.

Stegner's legacy as a conservationist lay in his writings—possibly none more so than *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*. Published in 1953, the biography remains one of Stegner's most beloved books. In it he traced Powell's explorations of the Colorado River Basin and subsequent warnings of the West's finite resources. The book was more than a biography. It was a stirring piece of political writing that sought to warn its readers of the region's limits and the need for stronger government management. In the book's final chapter, Stegner noted that Powell would have undoubtedly argued, "there are values too critical and resources too perishable to be entrusted entirely to private exploitation." That restraint was necessary to ensure the conservation of the West not only for the present generation but for future generations to come. Reading these words, it is easy to see that thirty years later Stegner watched with alarm the Reagan administration's promotion of private interests over environmental concerns.[5]

Stegner's biography of Powell struck a chord with many concerned with the West's environmental future, including David Brower. The Sierra Club director recruited Stegner after reading the biography to edit *This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* as a part of the club's campaign to halt the Bureau of Reclamation's damming of the Green River within Dinosaur National Monument. Soon afterward, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall recruited Stegner to work within Interior as an adviser, a stint that lasted for all of four months but helped yield Udall's *The Quiet Crisis*. Stegner would go on to hold positions on the National Parks Advisory Board, as well as the governing boards of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society. But he often

found himself ill-suited for such work, later confessing to wanting to spend his time writing books rather than advocating for legislation.[6]

His writing issued a clarion call for environmental action. In 1960 Stegner published his "Wilderness Letter." Composed over a month in collaboration with Brower and David Pesonen, a forester in Berkeley's Wildland Research Center, the letter captured Stegner's deeply held sentiments toward the nation's wild places. Pesonen had reached out to Stegner for help after being tasked to consider recreation's place within wilderness for the Outdoor Recreation Commission. Stegner agreed and set to work on one of his most popular pieces of writing. Addressed to Pesonen, the letter argues that wilderness has as much to do with recreation as churches. He concluded: "We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope." Stegner would spend the rest of his life attempting to define the meaning of that hope.[7]

Which gets us back to "The Best Idea We Ever Had." In it Stegner confessed to becoming a national park addict when his family first visited Yellowstone National Park in 1920. A few short years later, they visited Zion, Grand Canyon, Bryce, and Capitol Reef. And by the time he sat down to write "America's Best Idea," Stegner reckoned he had toured more than a hundred units within the national park system, rejoicing in the sheer wonder the parks represented.

Like Stegner, I too am a park addict. Having grown up in the shadow of Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, I have spent years visiting national parks. I have watched the sunset from the Point Reyes Light House, stood atop Half Dome, watched wolves frolic in Yellowstone's Lamar Valley, smelled the cherry blossoms along the Washington Mall, and stood in contemplation of the burial mounds at Effigy Mounds National Monument. And yet, I too find it too easy to become cynical about the future of our national parks.

I have watched powerlessly as friends and family who work for the National Park Service (NPS) struggle to simply do their job while being buffeted by changing administrations, anemic budgets, and unrelenting

crises. Morale within the NPS plummeted under the Trump administration as it slashed park budgets, undercut all efforts to confront climate change, and dramatically reduced the size of Bears Ears and Escalante National Monuments. While the Biden administration seeks to address some of the national park system's nearly $12 billion backlog in deferred maintenance, it has been silent on the severe labor shortage that has crippled the agency for decades. All the while, growing numbers of visitors inundate the most popular parks, wreaking havoc on the natural and built environments.

Such worries underline that the national parks are more than simply sublime landscapes and historical monuments. They are an idea, one that has captivated generations for its promise of both respite and beauty, with the possibility that we all can share in our country's most striking places. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead first framed this ideal in 1865, arguing that the Yosemite Valley should be set aside for "the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character," to provide visitors a needed respite from daily life. That idea, of nature's aspirational power, laid the foundation for the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916, with the mandate to conserve the parks in a manner that they would be enjoyed not just for this generation but for all future generations.[8]

What this meant was often open to debate. The NPS's first director, Stephen Mather, sought to secure the public's embrace of the national parks by promoting the parks' recreational and scenic values to the American public. And the public responded, buying into the ideal that the national parks were theirs to enjoy. But by the middle part of the century, growing numbers criticized this interpretation of the NPS's mandate, arguing instead that the Organic Act required the park service to prioritize the preservation, not the conservation, of each park's natural resources above all else and to allow all visitors to enjoy the contemplation of nature's sublime beauty, and in doing so find the same respite Stegner found within the parks.

There were, of course, problems with both of these interpretations. First, the Organic Act's authors saw the national parks through a very

distinctive class and racial lens. It would have been impossible for Mather or others of his generation to foresee the numbers of Americans who would join the middle class and embrace his consumeristic view of the national parks. Even by 1916 few had the means to travel to the few national parks scattered largely across the American West—particularly people of color, who remained largely excluded from the social wealth needed for such ventures. Worse was the NPS's long history of excluding Native peoples. Many of the early parks had in fact been vehicles of imperialism that removed all Native peoples from within their borders. This removal of Indigenous people became synonymous with the view of the national parks as natural, a core value that remained a part of the environmental movement of the mid-twentieth century.[9]

After sharing his connections with the national parks in "The Best Idea We Ever Had," Stegner turned to telling their history. The national parks were inevitable as soon as Americans learned to confront the wild, not with fear but with delight and wonder, he wrote. The idea spread from explorer and artist George Catlin to the nature philosophers of the Concord School, to the cession of the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove in the final days of the Civil War. Nearly a decade later, President Ulysses Grant signed the Yellowstone National Protection Act into law, creating the nation's first truly national park.[10]

More parks followed, including Sequoia, Yosemite, Rocky Mountain, and Lassen. The passage of the Organic Act in 1916 established the National Park Service and charged the new agency with protecting the natural and historic treasures within each park for the public's enjoyment, leaving them unimpaired for future generations. The addition of the national monuments, battlefields, and historic sites in 1933 expanded the national park system even further. Congress continued to add new national parks, expanding the number of national parks to forty-eight by 1982. Visitation also grew. Stegner pointed out that while the nation's population had grown an astounding 50 percent since the end of World War II, visitor numbers to the nation's parks grew by a jaw dropping 800 percent, underscoring Americans' embrace of the national park idea.[11]

The essay then takes an interesting turn, becoming overtly political. Stegner points to a series of laws that have helped preserve the parks, starting with the General Authorities Act, the Antiquities Act, the Wilderness Act, and finally the Land and Water Conservation Act. Each piece of legislation helped "the steady advance of a splendid idea through more than a century and throughout the world." None was more important than the Land and Water Conservation Fund, or LWCF. Established by Congress in 1965, the LWCF sought to "preserve, develop, and ensure access to outdoor recreation facilities to strengthen the health of U.S. citizens."[12]

Stegner had politics in mind when he emphasized the LWCF. First suggested by the Outdoor Recreation Resource Review Commission some seven years prior, the idea behind the LCWF was simple. The federal government would create a pot of money collected from user fees, the sale of surplus lands, and a tax on motorboat fuel to pay for the management and acquisition of federal lands while also providing grants to state and local governments for recreational planning and building recreational projects both large and small. The LWCF quickly became so successful that within three years Congress amended its funding sources to include a share of oil and gas receipts from drilling on the Outer Continental Shelf. Later, the entirety of the fund would come from royalties taken from offshore drilling. Cities large and small built new parks and facilities. Birmingham, Alabama, built nine new swimming pools in 1967. Reno, Nevada, purchased land along the Truckee River as open space. And Montpelier, Vermont, used LWCF funds to build facilities in the Dog River Recreation Area.[13]

Stegner knew that the federal program was a win-win for legislators looking to both prove their conservationist credentials and send some money home for popular projects such as city and state parks, roads and trails, and golf courses and reservoirs. All were for the American public's recreational use. But it was the funds used by the National Park Service where the LWCF fell into controversy. The agency used the funds in two ways. One was the acquisition of inholdings within national parks that the NPS felt threatened their ability to

manage those parks. Testifying before Congress in 1968, NPS director George B. Hartzog Jr. argued inholdings posed "a serious and growing threat to the integrity of our National Park System." For this reason, Hartzog directed superintendents to remove all inholdings from within the parks. Inholders across the country erupted in opposition, helping spark the property rights movement of the 1980s. Stegner knew that, too.[14]

The second use of the LWCF involved purchasing land for the creation of new national park units. Following World War II, growing national affluence, corresponding leisure time, and a new interstate highway system drew millions of Americans to their national parks. Seeking to meet this growing demand, Congress established new national recreation areas, national seashores, national lakeshores, and national rivers. Second-generation parks such as Point Reyes National Seashore, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore marked an important expansion of the national park idea. Many of the new units lay either in or near the country's growing metropolitan population centers. And like the LWCF, such new national park units were political winners for both sides of the political aisle. The public loved the national parks, local communities loved the revenues the national park arrowhead brought, conservationists loved the preservation of more open space, and so Congress continued to add more and more units to the system.[15]

Not everyone agreed that the continued expansion of the national parks was a good thing, however. Fiscal conservatives such as Watt argued that the costs of adding new park units meant there was less money to maintain existing parks. Others viewed the NPS's attempts to purchase inholdings as federal overreach. And many critics contended that many of the new park units of the past two decades failed to meet the standard of holding national historical importance or stunning scenery equal to that of existing parks. Watt asserted that newer urban parks such as San Francisco's Golden Gate National Park were little more than "city playgrounds," and federal dollars would be much better spent in maintaining existing park units.[16]

Immediately after taking office, Watt halted the acquisition of new lands for the addition of national parks—the first secretary of the interior to do so within living memory. Testifying before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Public Lands and National Parks, he noted, "It is perfectly obvious that the national park system has grown in the past several years far beyond its capacity to manage what Congress has forced it to acquire." This "park-a-month program" had led to the degradation of the entire system. And according to the General Accounting Office (GAO), the national parks were in deplorable condition. "The park visitor and employee may be subjugating himself or herself to conditions which do not meet Federal or State health and safety standards," Watt told the subcommittee, noting the GAO reported a needed $1.6 billion to bring the park system's infrastructure up to the needed health and safety standards.[17]

Conservationists rejected Watt's claims, believing them as little more than smoke screen to gut the National Park Service. "The national parks have never been as threatened as they are today," executive director of the National Parks Conservation Association Paul Pritchard wrote, attacking Watt's emphasis on infrastructure over natural resources. Additionally, the Wilderness Society countered that in the face of overcrowding within the national parks, it was wrong to stop the purchase of more parklands. Most of the threats to the conditions of the parks presented in the GAO report were external, and the $1.9 billion backlog was little more than a "wish list" of possible future construction projects by concessioners.[18]

On its face, the fight between the Interior Department and conservationists was a continuation of the decade's long struggle over the national parks' fundamental purpose. Should it be for the enjoyment of visitors or the preservation of each park's natural and historic wonders? But what made Watt's actions so divisive was that for a little more than two decades conservationists had largely had their way when it came to the national parks. Watt embodied the wholesale rejection of those efforts, if not an outright reversal, making him enemy number one to environmental groups such as the Wilderness Society.

The casting of James Watt as an unremorseful enemy of the environment is a narrative so accepted that few of us ever question its validity. He admittedly enjoyed them as much as Stegner. Tales of his driving his advisers bonkers by quickly naming Grand Teton as his favorite park were well known during his tenure as secretary. So why did he target the national parks? This question haunted me as I reread "America's Best Idea." Seeking an answer, I traveled to the American Heritage Center archives on the University of Wyoming's campus. There, within the center's archives, I began digging through the James G. Watt Papers for an answer. Consisting mostly of materials related to his twenty-one-year governmental career, the collection includes some fifty-two boxes of letters, media coverage, speeches, and photographs. But one box was of particular interest, and the reason I had driven north to Laramie: Box 17 and its copy of the Wilderness Society's "Watt Book."

Published in 1981, the Watt Book was the Wilderness Society's opening salvo in its efforts to remove the secretary from office. In a letter commenting on an early draft of the book to its authors Rebecca Leet, Meg Maguire, and Chuck Clausen, the Wilderness Society's councilor Gaylord Nelson noted, "The dismissal of Watt as Secretary is, without question our principal present objective." To meet this goal, he argued, the book's evidence must be overwhelming. The four spent nearly a year culling through newspapers, speech transcripts, the *Congressional Record*, and correspondence in laying out the case against Watt. Finally satisfied, the Wilderness Society mailed hundreds of copies of the Watt Book to reporters, activists, and politicians.[19]

Actually composed of two large red binders, the Watt Book details Watt's pro-development policies and questions the legality of the secretary's actions in managing the nation's public lands. I am greeted with the words "Watt's Wrongs" written in bold letters across the first page of volume 1. Quickly scanning the two brief opening paragraphs I pause on the sentence, "Mr. Watt is systematically failing to implement, or proposing to alter radically, some of the most significant conservation legislation of the past two decades, including the BLM Organic Act of 1976 (FLMPA), the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act

of 1980 (ANILCA), the Surface Mining Act of 1977, and the Land and Conservation Act of 1965 (LWCF)." A list of Watt's failings, at least in the Wilderness Society's eyes, then followed.[20]

It is an extended litany of wrongs, including the secretary's moratorium on the acquisition of additional national parklands—a decision that promised to lead to further development within existing national parks, increased overcrowding, and ensuring higher costs when Congress did approve the purchase of new lands for the national parks. Furthermore, the authors warned that the secretary was proposing to give popular national parks in metropolitan areas to state and local governments, placing those parks at risk and burdening state and local agencies with the financial costs of operating those parks. Sitting back in thought, I realize I have read this argument before. It is the very same case Stegner used against Watt in "America's Best Idea."[21]

I spent the next several hours reading through the two binders, paying particular interest to the sections on the national parks. The Watt Book covers a wide array of issues, from the moratorium on new parks to the current state of park facilities to the role of concessioners within the national parks. On the moratorium, the book's authors note both the LWCF's popularity as well as the need for more parks to meet the public's growing demand. They question Secretary Watt's assertion that the federal government should halt adding new parklands until the NPS can effectively manage the units it currently holds. The authors counter, "In the face of overwhelming popularity and overcrowding in some parks, it is wrong to stop the purchase of more parkland, including thousands of acres already approved by Congress." Once again, it was an argument Stegner wrote nearly word for word two years later, concluding the only solution to the secretary's intransigence was the hope Congress would soon intervene or replace Watt with "someone friendly to the laws he is sworn to uphold."[22]

Watt took a dim view on the Wilderness Society's efforts to remove him, refusing to even sit down with members of several conservationist organizations he believed were out to get him. "These groups are after my hide," Watt told reporters in November 1981. "They have

9. Secretary of the Interior James Watt with Yosemite National Park superintendent Robert Binnewies in the Yosemite Valley, October 31, 1981. Courtesy the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

the assumption that we cannot combine environmental protection and development of our resources. They are wrong." Believing that conservation groups such as the Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth, and the Sierra Club were conspiring against him, which they were, the secretary saw little use in engaging in any conversation with them. Philosophically, Watt differed greatly from conservationists on what role the Department of the Interior played in the management of public lands, especially national parks. National parks were to be enjoyed, not set aside as nature preserves, he argued. While members of the Wilderness Society, like Stegner, were aghast at such views coming from the secretary's office, Watt did have a valid point.[23]

The millions visiting the national parks every summer expected that they would be able to find adequate parking, camping, and concessions. These expectations came from generations believing the promise that their enjoyment was the fundamental purpose of all national parks. Such expectations had led to the NPS's ambitious Mission 66 program thirty years before. Focusing on the construction of visitor centers, roads, parking lots, and other infrastructure, the program did help modernize visitor facilities throughout the parks.

But to conservationists, such modernization came at an unacceptable cost to the ecological health of the national parks. Believing the parks should be managed as "vignettes of primitive America," environmentalists railed against the commercialization of the national parks. Most pointed to the Organic Act, which directed the park service to conserve the natural scenery while providing for visitors' enjoyment. Environmentalists tended to focus on the act's conservation mandate, framing any development or commercial use within the national parks as antithetical to their purpose.[24]

Watt emphatically disagreed with this interpretation. Believing rather the purpose of the national parks was to provide recreational opportunities, a viewpoint garnered from his three-year stint as director of the Outdoor Recreation Commission. This combined with his conservative politics that valued public lands for their economic potential and use, and his fundamentalist religious beliefs, shaped Watt's

environmental ethos. While he intensely disagreed with preservationists over the fundamental purpose of the national parks, Watt certainly embraced the belief that our national parks were indeed America's best idea. He just had a much different view of what that idea was.

Watt lamented that the agency had failed to meet its mandate to serve visitors in recent years. "No agency in Government has a clearer mandate," he wrote to his newly appointed National Park Service director, Russell Dickenson, setting his agenda for the national parks as secretary of the interior. Stating that he believed the system was largely rounded out, he ordered newly appointed Director Dickenson to emphasize bringing old-line parks up to a standard rather than look to add any new park units to the system.[25]

Watt often cited a 1980 General Accounting Office report in supporting his argument that the system needed to focus more on maintaining existing units than adding more. The report noted conditions within many parks failed to meet federal and state health and safety standards, requiring $1.6 billion in repairs. In testifying before the House Subcommittee on Public Lands, he argued, "The GAO report documents a park system that is quite literally falling apart because past administrations and past Congresses have been so intent on grabbing more land that proper concern for stewardship has been neglected." Likewise, he saw little use for the federal government to manage park units in and near the country's urban areas. Such parks were "wonderful parks . . . good playgrounds" but should not be sustained "at the expense of the federal government." Conservationists noted that Watt's use of the GAO report was little more than a gambit to shift policy within the national parks away from natural resource protection toward a more visitor-friendly model. In fact, within a year of the GAO's report, most of the problems mentioned within the report had been addressed.[26]

By 1983 the public's opinion had soured against the secretary. Political cartoons lampooned Watt as willing to go out of his way to stomp on wildflowers, strip-mine Mount Rushmore, and use Smokey the Bear as a rug. Journalists attacked Watt's policies, pointing out the court's continued rejection of the Interior Department's attempts to circum-

navigate environmental legislation. Watt's tendency toward offensive public remarks did not help. While his allies chuckled at statements such as, "I never use the words Democrats and Republicans. It's liberals and Americans," most voters did not. This reality was not lost on President Reagan, who finally asked Watt to resign after the secretary's comment, "I have a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple. And we have talent," to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on the department's embrace of affirmative action became public.[27]

Yet by the time Stegner sat down to write "America's Best Idea," it appeared Watt would remain in office. Armed with the Watt Book, Stegner had all the ammunition he needed to take on the increasingly unpopular secretary of the interior. From slicing budgets to ending the policy of purchasing new lands for parks, Stegner provided a litany of the secretary's wrongs. Among them was the backing of concessioners in further commercializing the parks, the promotion of motorized boats within the Grand Canyon, and the allowance of snowmobiles within Mount Lasson and Grand Teton National Parks. Watt was failing the best idea, Stegner argued, and in doing so was failing the American people.

The West is still haunted by Watt's tenure as secretary of the interior. Nostalgia for Reagan-era policies continues to shape federal policy. Conflicts over the designation of parks and monuments remain as heated, if not more so, as they were nearly four decades ago. Rural communities historically reliant on ranching and mining continue to rage against what they believe to be the federal government's callous disregard of their opinion on the establishment of national parks and monuments in their backyards. Environmental groups remain ever vigilant against what they deem as inappropriate development within the parks, often viewing national parks as wilderness preserves rather than recreational spaces. Fears over the country's insatiable appetite for energy endures, driving a bonanza of oil and natural gas development across the region, and threatening national park units such as North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park and Colorado and Utah's Dinosaur National Monument. All the while, record numbers of vis-

itors continue to flood the national parks, monuments, recreational areas, seashores, and historic sites, causing alarm that we are loving our parks to death.

Furthermore, the same arguments over the expansion of the NPS remain. In 1994 former director of the National Park Service James Ridenour published *The National Parks Compromised: Pork Barrel Politics and America's Treasures*, in which he argued Congress's continued addition of new park units were taking away from the agency's ability to maintain the hundreds of units they were already responsible for managing. Nearly two decades later, Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma employed the same argument in his 208-page report condemning the continued addition of park units, writing, "With each new park and program diluting limited resources, Congress has been effectively sequestering our national parks for decades. As a result, the NPS is now being asked to do more with less." More recently, the free market environmental think tank the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) has put forth a similar argument that decades of neglect and misplaced priorities have contributed to the ever-growing backlog of deferred maintenance throughout the national park system.[28]

Solutions to these issues feel elusive, as ideological debates over the federal government's role have only intensified. In 2020 President Donald Trump signed into law the Great American Outdoors Act. Fully and permanently funding the LWCF and providing $9.5 billion to address the backlog of deferred maintenance, it was largely acclaimed as the most significant piece of conservation legislation of the last half century. However, within months, Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt announced that state and local governments would veto any land acquisition made through the LWCF, making a similar argument as Secretary Watt's forty years prior. President Joseph Biden's rescission of the decision felt like little more than a temporary reprieve in the political tug-of-war over national parks.

It is easy to be cynical about the future of the national parks. They are all too often overcrowded and underfunded, and yet we still adore them. This is why we need to return to Stegner's "America's Best Idea"—

not just its opening paragraphs but Stegner's strident defense of the national parks. "America's Best Idea" was not just a celebration of the national parks. It was a call to arms. While we may not agree with Stegner that the national parks are an occupied country, we do need to remain vigilant that their ideal remains in place. This vigilance will no doubt continue to fuel debate over how best to manage the parks, but that is the point. Like our nation, the national parks are meant to be a conversation. And it is in that discussion over their fundamental purpose that will keep them both relevant and protected for future generations to come. We will always not agree, but we all must remain engaged.[29]

Notes

1. Wallace Stegner, "The Best Idea We Ever Had: An Overview," *Wilderness* 46 (Spring 1983): 4.
2. Alan MacEachern, "Canada's Best Idea? The Canadian and American National Park Services in the 1910s," in *National Parks Beyond the Nation: Global Perspectives on "America's Best Idea,"* ed. Adrian Howkins, Jared Orsi, and Mark Fiege (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 51–53.
3. Ken Burns, dir., *The National Parks: America's Best Idea, Episode One* (Arlington: PBS Home Video, 2009).
4. Stegner, "Best Idea We Ever Had," 4.
5. Brett Olsen, "Wallace Stegner and Environmental Ethic: Environmentalism as a Rejection of the Western Myth," *Western American Literature* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 130; Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 362.
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