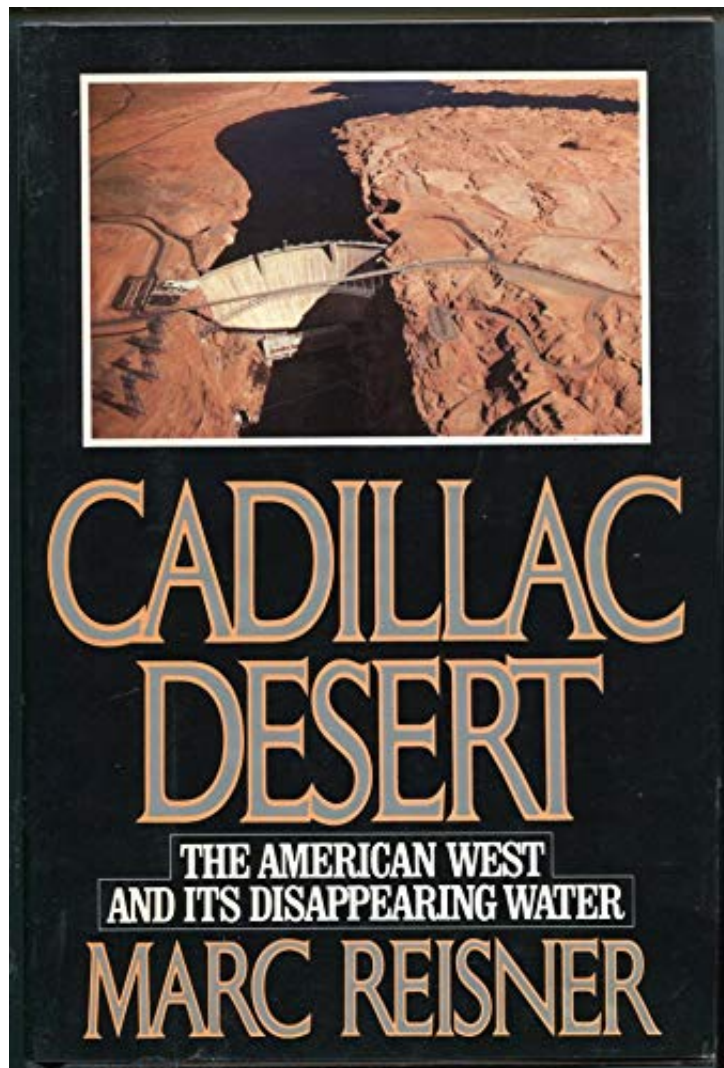


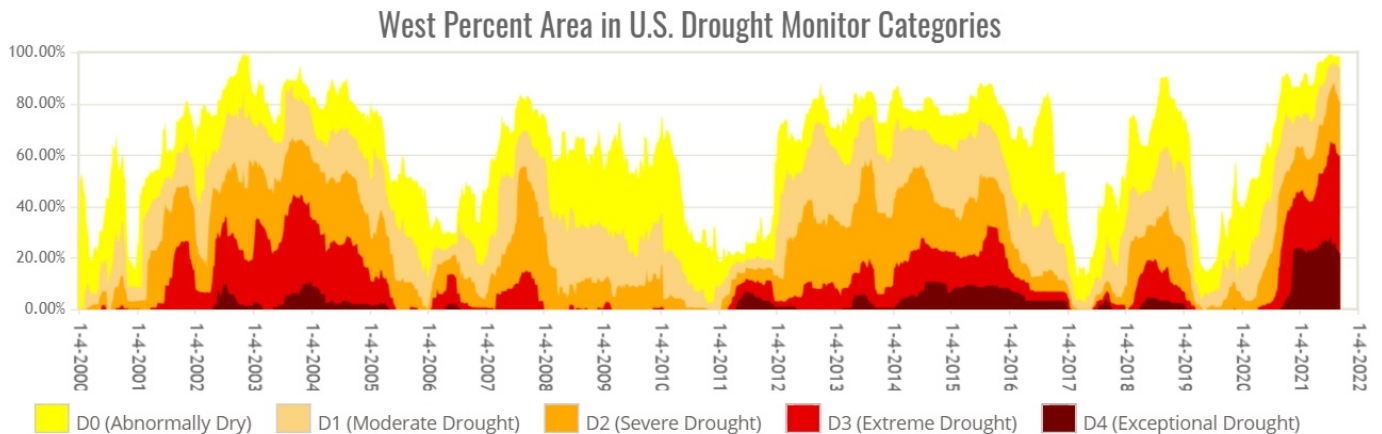
"Water flows toward power and money."



That **water flows toward power and money** is, according to Marc Reisner in his magisterial book, *Cadillac Desert*, "the West's cardinal law." In every chapter, that sad fact is illustrated in abundance. The book, first published in 1986 and revised in [a 1993 edition](#), put a new lens on the American West and the regional and national politics of water. It, like so many chronicles of the abuses of power, and the lies, arrogance, and destruction that accompany them, is both revelatory and maddening.

Dept. of Better Late than Never: A friend gave me the book more than 30 years ago. Given the apocalypse of [wildfires in the West over the past several years](#), and the drought that has been ravaging the region, the critical importance of water and how it's used - and misused - has come into much greater focus. See this time series on drought in the West over the past 20 years.

[caption id="attachment_3068" align="aligncenter" width="1279"]



for "area type" use "geographic regions" and for "area" type "West" at the link:
[https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/DmData/TimeSeries.aspx\[/caption\]](https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/DmData/TimeSeries.aspx[/caption])

Note that more than 98% of the West was **at least** "abnormally dry" as of Sept. 14 this year. See also this excellent [NY Times interactive](#) (from Sept. 2020) on a decade of wildfires in California. There are nine active fires in California as of this morning, burning nearly 1.9 million acres - about 3,000 square miles, bigger than Delaware.

It would take an ostrich with its head buried very deep in the sand indeed to not see the influence that climate change is having on the West, particularly [the Southwest](#). Elizabeth Kolbert's [Field Notes from a Catastrophe](#), essential reading on the climate crisis, recounts a talk given by a NASA climate scientist to water-resource managers in California. The scientist was giving them the bad news on drought projections for the future. The reaction of the managers was along the lines of "Well, if that happens, forget it. We won't be able to deal with that." Those projections have been holding true.

But even without the droughts that the American West has been experiencing, exacerbated by climate change, water has always been the key resource there. *Cadillac Desert* is a history of how cities, states, Big Ag, politicians, and federal agencies, principally the Interior Dept.'s [Bureau of Reclamation](#), have spent hundreds of billions of dollars, most of it from the American taxpayer, over more than a hundred years to bring water to a part of the world that is desert. One of the great ironies in all of this is, as Reisner identifies, while espousing the virtues of deep conservatism (think Reagan, Goldwater, Nixon, the [Sagebrush Rebellion](#), etc.), "...the American West quietly became the first and most durable example of the modern welfare state." When confronted by a chief executive, Jimmy Carter in this case, who wanted to cut away the enormous fat in the pork barrel that was and is water projects, Congress, to quote from the "New Republic" in 1978, began "breaking out the high-minded rhetoric that Congressmen reserve for their grubbiest and most cynical undertakings."

The book chronicles the machinations of the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal water and power agency that was responsible for massive pollution from strip-mining coal and the subsequent burning of it, as well as the self-destructive behavior of farmers above the Ogallala Aquifer, pumping far more groundwater than can be safely recharged by rain, but its main

emphasis is on the American West.

Aside from Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, Tucson, Phoenix, and the other cities of the Southwest that depend for their survival on the dams and aqueducts built by the Bureau of Reclamation and other agencies, the main recipient of all the water diversions is agriculture. Globally, [farming uses 70% of the freshwater supply](#). In California, agriculture accounts for [80% of overall use](#). *Cadillac Desert* documents how, throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, farmers - in large part enormous growers (including oil companies and the Southern Pacific Railroad) - have reaped huge profits because of the flow of cheap, taxpayer-subsidized water to their crops.

Not surprisingly perhaps, safety was not always of paramount importance in building dams. In 1889, the South Fork Dam in Pennsylvania collapsed during heavy rains and over two thousand people died. In 1928, the Saint Francis Dam, 40 miles north of downtown Los Angeles, collapsed without warning in the night and killed over 450 people. William Mulholland, the driving force behind the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's acquisition of water in the region, had ignored the advice of his own engineers and filled the reservoir beyond what it could safely contain. Two generations later, in 1976, the Bureau of Reclamation's \$100 million Teton Dam in Idaho, defying the local geology and ignoring standard engineering rules, collapsed with the loss of 11 lives and damage estimates of \$2 billion - \$9.6 billion in today's dollars. However, had the collapse happened at night, the death toll could've been in the thousands. Only a rapid mobilization of an emergency evacuation prevented a much higher death toll.

The balance between the costs and the benefits are discussed in the book for several projects. In many cases, the taxpayer lost. Reisner acknowledges the benefits in spawning vast farmland claimed from the desert and the growth of cities. He also, however, looks at the losses: "The cost of all this, however, was a vandalization of both our natural heritage and our economic future, and the reckoning has not even begun. Thus far, nature has paid the highest price. Glen Canyon is gone. The Colorado Delta is dead. The Missouri bottomlands have disappeared. Nine out of ten acres of wetlands in California have vanished, and with them millions of migratory birds. The great salmon runs in the Columbia, the Sacramento, the San Joaquin, and dozens of tributaries are diminished or extinct." The list goes on. He talks about "financial vandalism of the future" in the form of the costs of permanently salt-poisoned land, trillions of tons of silt to be dredged from behind dams, replacement water for the aquifer resources that have been relentlessly mined, the restoration of wetlands and wild rivers, and the bankruptcy of thousands of small farmers and their communities because of the unfair advantage that the big landholders had with their cheap, government water. *Cadillac Desert* is, in many ways, an immensely depressing history. It is also a superbly well documented and eloquently told story. It is, in a word, a classic, and should be read by any student of political or environmental science, or, for that matter, anyone who takes their citizenship seriously. So many of the stories here are about how power and money have swept away civic values, economic rationality, and scientific reason.

(In a post to follow, I will look at what is being done to address the ills wrought by the dam builders. In the Anthropocene Age, epitomized by the arrogance of the water and power

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engineers and the political and economic interests that empowered them, there are good stories to tell about water and energy conservation, among other things.)