

INTRODUCTION

“Watch the bureaus, not the cabinet. . . The new [Reagan] administration’s real tone will be determined less by those at the top than by the second line.” This quote is from *The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs*, by political scientist Herbert Kaufman. For this 1981 study, Kaufman looked closely at six rather different federal bureaus: the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, the Customs Service, the Food and Drug Administration, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the Forest Service. Kaufman explained, “I decided to include the Forest Service because I had previously examined its field officers in great detail [in *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Management*, 1960] and was therefore familiar with much of its history and operations.”

For a year, he observed these six agency heads “as they did their jobs. By watching them at work, literally spending whole days looking over their shoulders,” he found that the “willingness of all the chiefs. . . to participate in the research is rather remarkable in the annals of government bureaucracies. . . the relative ease of access to the inner working of the federal administrative establishment must be extraordinary compared with the officiousness and defensiveness of administrative officers and agencies in most parts of the world.”

Kaufman concluded that to be effective, bureau chiefs needed to have four basic qualities. The first quality was “a juggler’s disposition.” Many people, such as scientists, are able to excel by focusing on a single topic for a period of time. Chiefs, however, live in a “simultaneous mode,” with many things coming at them all at once, “not in single file. Their days are splintered.” A chief could spend as much time on the problems of a single employee as on a national policy.

A chief must have “patience.” A chief’s time is not his own. “While he can bargain a little over the precise timing of meetings and hearings requested by his superiors or Congress or even by his staff, his schedule is shaped in large part by their demands and needs, and by outside groups as well.” Kaufman noted that it “takes special patience to show deference to people with power who do not inspire admiration.”

“Self-control” is also essential. “These positions call for still another form of tolerance—the capacity to resist the impulse to meddle with things that are going reasonably well.” An overaggressive administrator “runs the risk of disrupting

smooth-running routines, stirring up antagonism, and generating anxiety without producing enough benefits to justify the turmoil.”

Finally, a chief must have “interrogatory skill” because he spends “most of his time receiving and reviewing information. To do so effectively calls for adroitness in putting questions, assessing replies, discerning gaps and inconsistencies, distinguishing soft from hard evidence, and sensing what has been withheld or designed to deflect a line of inquiry.” Kaufman also pointed out that “sharp questioning demands personal security because a chief who engages in it frequently exposes his limitations.” Specialized subordinates generally have superior expertise in their fields. “A chief may sometimes be the only one in the room having difficulty with a concept or an argument or a position that the technicians seem to grasp easily and agree upon.” A chief who forgoes “challenging interrogation to avoid exposing his shortcomings... pays a high cost for his insecurity.”

The narrative that follows presents excerpts from a series of interviews with Forest Service chiefs who generally demonstrated that they possessed Kaufman’s four qualities. John McGuire was chief at the time of his study, but the context applies to all.

Richard E. McArdle became Forest Service chief in 1952, during Harry Truman’s presidency; Edward P. Cliff succeeded McArdle in 1962, John R. McGuire followed Cliff in 1972, R. Max Peterson in 1979, F. Dale Robertson in 1987, Jack Ward Thomas in 1993, and Michael P. Dombek in 1997. Dombek resigned in 2001 at the beginning of George W. Bush’s presidency. Their tenures as chief thus span fifty years, a half-century of rapid change and increasing controversy. It is history’s good fortune that these seven conservation leaders agreed to be extensively interviewed, adding greatly to our understanding of the issues and challenges. This book centers on these interviews.

The interviews capture the recollections of seven accomplished individuals who have different personalities and respond to similar questions not necessarily in similar ways. Too, four people conducted the seven interviews, each asking questions in his own fashion and editing the transcript according to personal views of just what the final copy should look like. The questions themselves show parallels but also reflect changing times, changing controversies, and changing values; the questions asked McArdle are rather different from those posed to Dombek. The narrative in this book, whether paraphrases or direct quotes, reflects what each said about a topic at the time of the interview; the same question asked in a different context on another day may well have yielded a different answer. For the sake of consistency, stylistic differences between the several transcripts have been silently edited.

In the pages that follow, the former chiefs look back at the issues faced during their administrations, as they saw them. The vast majority of Forest Service decisions and actions take place below the chief's level; the interviews tell us what chiefs think about and what they do. There is no attempt here to be complete or comprehensive; instead, this is a fair sample of each tenure. Too, the narrative is present-minded, a historian's term that means the selected topics are those seen as important today, which at times causes a distortion of "pure" history.

The first multiple-use and wilderness bills were introduced in Congress in 1956 while McArdle was chief; the Multiple Use–Sustained Yield Act became law in 1960, and the more controversial wilderness bill was debated four additional years and passed in 1964. It is fair to say that Multiple Use–Sustained Yield ratified Forest Service management practices that had evolved to 1960, but the Wilderness Act can be seen as only the beginning of congressional prescriptions that reduced the agency's management options. Both wilderness and multiple use remain major issues today. Also an issue is just how much timber should be sold from the national forests, and McArdle narrates his proposal to increase the cut to twenty billion board feet by the year 2000, a proposal that was adopted by both the outgoing Eisenhower administration and the incoming Kennedy administration. By the 1990s, such cuts were politically inconceivable.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared in 1962, the same year that Cliff became chief. Publication of *Silent Spring* with its clarion call for safer pesticide use provides a convenient—if arbitrary—beginning point for the environmental movement. The Forest Service and all other agencies and institutions during the 1960s struggled to cope with an avalanche of changing values that included civil rights and its closely related mandates for nondiscriminatory hiring practices. During his final year as chief, Cliff observed that the Forest Service had been poorly prepared to deal with the suddenly new world in which it operated.

On New Year's Day 1970, President Richard Nixon announced to the nation that he had signed the National Environmental Policy Act and that the 1970s would be the "environmental decade." NEPA authorized creation of the Council on Environmental Quality, required preparation of environmental impact statements that included public involvement in projected activities, and mandated an "interdisciplinary approach" to planning. Nixon then used presidential authority to create the Environmental Protection Agency to be the nation's "cop" for enforcing the ever-lengthening list of environmental laws. It would be some time before the Forest Service and other agencies realized the full significance of NEPA and EPA.

When McGuire became chief in 1972, wilderness and clearcutting were vexing issues, coupled with a growing workload caused by NEPA-related litigation. Courts frequently agreed with plaintiffs that the Forest Service's environmental impact statements, including those prepared for proposed wilderness areas, were "inadequate." Clearcutting, long a controversial practice, was attacked with increasing success; a court decision in 1973 declared that clearcutting violated the 1897 Organic Act, the cornerstone of agency policy until supplemented by the 1960 Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act. The judge also admonished the agency to seek to change the law, if clearcutting was desirable, rather than dispute his decision. The 1976 National Forest Management Act, which permitted clearcutting on national forests under prescribed conditions and substantially revamped the planning process, was a result. For all too brief a period, it seemed that the Forest Service and its critics had found common ground.

Shortly after Peterson became chief, Ronald Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter as president. The immensely popular Reagan had promised to reduce the size of the federal government, to restrict federal involvement in local issues, and to increase commodity use of public lands. The increase in resource use included moving the allowable cut beyond McArdle's earlier target of twenty billion board feet. Thus, Peterson faced the task of reducing the Forest Service workforce by twenty-five percent while the agency was preparing detailed plans for more timber sales and aggressively recruiting women, minorities, and specialists in nonforestry disciplines. Alarmed by Reagan administration policies, environmental groups mounted hugely successful membership drives and implemented a broad range of strategies to safeguard and extend their past successes. Increasingly, they used endangered species as a lever, citing the 1973 Endangered Species Act but mainly the diversity section of the National Forest Management Act. The northern spotted owl would shortly become an icon of environmental concern.

Robertson had been Peterson's associate chief, so he was familiar with the issues at the chief's level. By now the spotted owl—jobs versus owls—controversy was nearing the boiling point, and the pressures on the chief were great indeed; President George H. W. Bush's chief of staff even directed that he be fired. In the midst of all this furor, Robertson came to realize that traditional forestry practices had "hit the wall" and that multiple-use management of the national forests had created endangered species. Material changes were in order; the incremental policy shifts of the past were no longer adequate. Ecosystem management—an overlay for multiple use that required a much broader context—became official Forest Service policy. Robertson was removed from office

during the early months of the Bill Clinton administration, but ecosystem management would continue to guide the agency.

Thomas was the lead scientist of the committee charged with studying the spotted owl and developing options for protecting the species while also allowing a degree of traditional forestry practices to continue. The Clinton administration named him as Robertson's successor, a controversial selection in that he was not a member of the Senior Executive Service and thus was ineligible to head an agency except via a direct presidential appointment. The nature of his appointment troubled Thomas, as did the blatant politics of day-to-day agency life in Washington, D.C.

Thomas gave priority to a fuller definition and adoption of ecosystem management. He also addressed increasingly uncertain lines of authority, including direct White House intervention in field-level decisions, and overlapping and conflicting legislative mandates. Closure of an Alaska pulp mill, protection of Columbia River salmon, and an unusual number of firefighting fatalities also demanded much of the chief's time.

Dombeck, a fisheries scientist for the Forest Service, was invited to transfer to the Bureau of Land Management while Robertson was chief. Later on he was appointed acting BLM director and worked closely with Chief Thomas on shared issues, such as fire suppression and protection of endangered species. During his final months at the Forest Service, Thomas had repeatedly recommended to the secretary of Agriculture that Dombeck be the next chief, and the secretary, who had also interviewed other candidates, agreed.

Dombeck placed a moratorium on entering fifty-eight million acres of roadless areas for commercial purposes, which was made official by presidential order. He worked to build better ties to the Department of Agriculture, the White House, and Congress. Favorable reaction to those better ties included the largest budget increase in the agency's history. His three-year tenure as acting director of the Bureau of Land Management makes him uniquely qualified to compare Forest Service and BLM cultures, and the contrast he draws will surprise many readers.

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