

A Look at the Corps of Engineers In the 1930s

by George Canning

This short summary of the book Lucius D. Clay, An American Life, by Jean Edward Smith (Henry Holt and Company, 1990), provides a useful view of the role of the Army Corps in the period of the Great Depression.

As a young officer, Lucius Clay was assigned in 1933 for duty with the Washington office of the Army Corps of Engineers. The book explains that the rivers and harbors section of the Corps civil program had been the “center of Washington’s public works activities for over a hundred years.” In the matters of rivers and harbors or flood control, the Corps was a creature of Congress, not reporting either to the Army Chief of Staff or the President.

Like most government agencies, author Smith says, the Corps was initially dumbfounded by the New Deal’s first hundred days. “Accustomed to the careful, leisurely consider-

ations of congressional projects, often years in maturing, to time-honored cost-benefit ratios, and to the Army’s ancient red-tape bureaucracy, the Corps soon found itself out of step with the new administration.” Nonetheless, the Corps adapted itself and took on a major aspect of the public works program because it had major projects on the drawing boards; under the impetus of the New Deal, they picked up the pace of implementation.

Clay worked with Works Progress Administration (WPA) head Harry Hopkins, assigning experienced Corps administrators to various regions of the country to channel and apply government money to the public works programs. The book includes a transcript of an interview with Clay concerning this period. Clay is asked his views on the WPA, and he remarked:

“I think the WPA did a very fine job. We did many projects for them in the Corps of Engineers. We made work. We did the regular job, but to get the proper work percentage in it we really had to go out and make work. For example, if we were building a dam that was to be faced with stone, which we would have ordinarily placed with a crane, we’d place the stone by hand. This way we would quadruple or quintuple the amount of labor required. Under normal conditions we could not have afforded it, but this was a combination of trying to provide employment and at the same time trying to make the work of the employment useful.

“General Pillsbury [the head of the Corps civil programs], of course, bent over backwards to try to stop such projects unless the ratios of return were extremely good. But this didn’t fit the times. Here were projects that had great value, maybe not in accordance with the standards applied by the Corps in the past, but, nevertheless, should you turn them down at that critical stage in American history? In other words, it was my view, and it still is, that we had to take cognizance of the fact that the government wanted to spend money on construction to provide jobs. I don’t think we would have ever had a flood control program if it hadn’t been for that fact. The United States was not ready to move into a comprehensive, national flood control program at that time. But the need for projects to provide employment was such that I felt it ought to be expedited. Looking back, I think we were right.”



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One of hundreds of government structures built by the Works Progress Administration. Here a site is being inspected, where concrete is being poured on a storage unit in Ogden, Utah in 1936.