



# Concrete Revolution: Large Dams, Cold War Geopolitics, and the US Bureau of Reclamation

By Christopher Sneddon

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Water may seem innocuous, but as a universal necessity, it inevitably intersects with politics when it comes to acquisition, control, and associated technologies. While we know a great deal about the socioecological costs and benefits of modern dams, we know far less about their political origins and ramifications. In *Concrete Revolution*, Christopher Sneddon offers a corrective: a compelling historical account of the US Bureau of Reclamation's contributions to dam technology, Cold War politics, and the social and environmental adversity perpetuated by the US government in its pursuit of economic growth and geopolitical power.

Founded in 1902, the Bureau became enmeshed in the US State Department's push for geopolitical power following World War II, a response to the Soviet Union's increasing global sway. By offering technical and water resource management advice to the world's underdeveloped regions, the Bureau found that it could not only provide them with economic assistance and the United States with investment opportunities, but also forge alliances and shore up a country's global standing in the face of burgeoning communist influence. Drawing on a number of international case studies—from the Bureau's early forays into overseas development and the launch of its Foreign Activities Office in 1950 to the Blue Nile investigation in Ethiopia—*Concrete Revolution* offers insights into this historic damming boom, with vital implications for the present. If, Sneddon argues, we can understand dams as both technical and political objects rather than instruments of impartial science, we can better participate in current debates about large dams and river basin planning.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“In this stellar history, geographer Sneddon traces the twentieth-century boom that saw 50,000 big dams built worldwide. The US Bureau of Reclamation presided, from the Great Depression megaproject Hoover Dam to the cold-war export of bureau engineers to more than one hundred countries. Yet by 1969, assistant commissioner Gilbert Stamm saw that doing ‘marvellous things with materials’ does not necessarily meet human needs. Societies and rivers, Sneddon shows, make for a complex confluence.”

(Barbara Kiser *Nature*)

“[One of the Top 20 of 2015] As I read, relished, reviewed and commissioned, I too made discoveries. . . . As always, pulling ‘the best’ out of this flood has been tough. The twenty that stood out for me have an original grain—not going with the flow but creating whorls of their own.”

(Barbara Kiser *Nature*)

“Sneddon makes clear that dams are indeed ‘exceptionally thick with politics’ and charts a fascinating history of technopolitical connections with the hegemonic geopolitical imaginaries of a superpower. . . . The result is a detailed historical examination of the geopolitics of hydropower and river basin development through the global role granted to the Bureau.”

(Carl Grundy-Warr, National University of Singapore *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*)

“A valuable contribution to a number of scholarly fields.”

(James R. Skillen, Calvin College *Environmental History*)

“An interesting and important story about the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s overseas activities.”

(J. R. McNeill, Georgetown University *American Historical Review*)

“As further studies of the historical geography of dams appear, they will be indebted to this rigorous, nuanced history of the networks behind an unanticipated environmental legacy of the Cold War.”

(Daniel Klingensmith, Maryville College *Journal of Historical Geography*)

“*Concrete Revolution* succeeds magnificently in the goal of linking local environmental transformations to particular moments in the historical trajectory of global geopolitics, contributing to our understanding of the long-lasting and complex effects of the Cold War on places and peoples far removed from Washington, DC, and Moscow. Sneddon shows an objectivity of thought in which ideologically driven judgment is trumped by critical analysis. He works to understand the actions of engineers and bureaucrats within the contexts of the geo-historical moment of their lives, humanizing them while neither diminishing the enormity of their technological achievements, nor glossing over the political-ecological folly of many of their endeavors. This is a bold, ambitious, and timely book, theoretically sophisticated, tightly organized, and very clearly written in a strong authorial voice with undertones of humility and humanity, a voice defined by intellectual curiosity and generosity combined with the conviction that critical social science can be not only explanatory, but also socially transformative.”

(Roderick P. Neumann, Florida International University *coauthor of "The Human Mosaic" and "Contemporary Human Geography"*)

“Fresh and insightful. More than any other work I know, *Concrete Revolution* establishes the contours of the US Bureau of Reclamation’s international program and suggests why this agency’s activities were not only important in their own right, but also laid the groundwork for a much wider realm of dam development activity. As with the Bureau at the core of the book, Sneddon ranges across space and time to consider different dam development projects. In each case considered, he argues for the importance of understanding the different elements of the technopolitical networks that produced the dams and were, in a sense, connected or assembled in the unifying object of the water project. As a coda to the work, Sneddon traces forward some of his key questions to address the contemporary scene and lays out some of the ways in which an American-led large dam diplomacy effort in the Cold War has been eclipsed by Chinese dam diplomacy in the twenty-first century. Ranging across a variety of fields—from water policy to water history, environmental history, Cold War studies, diplomatic history, political science, and geography—*Concrete Revolution* is an important addition to the scholarship on large dams.”

(Matthew Evenden, University of British Columbia *author of "Allied Power: Mobilizing Hydro-Electricity During Canada's Second World War"*)

“*Concrete Revolution* is a comprehensive and far-reaching exploration of the global proliferation of dams in the twentieth century. Sneddon brilliantly documents the critical roles of the US Bureau of Reclamation and State Department in promoting large-scale hydroelectric projects throughout the Global South. He argues that Washington relied on such technical assistance programs to stave off the threat of communism. The study illuminates the world of technopolitics and its impact on people and ecologies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Magnificent.”

(Allen F. Isaacman, University of Minnesota and University of Cape Town, South Africa *coauthor of "Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development"*)

About the Author

**Christopher Sneddon** is professor of geography and environmental studies at Dartmouth College. He lives in White River Junction, VT.

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