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"The Eleventh Commandment" and A Land of Promise: Walter Clay Lowdermilk and the Middle East, 1937-1944

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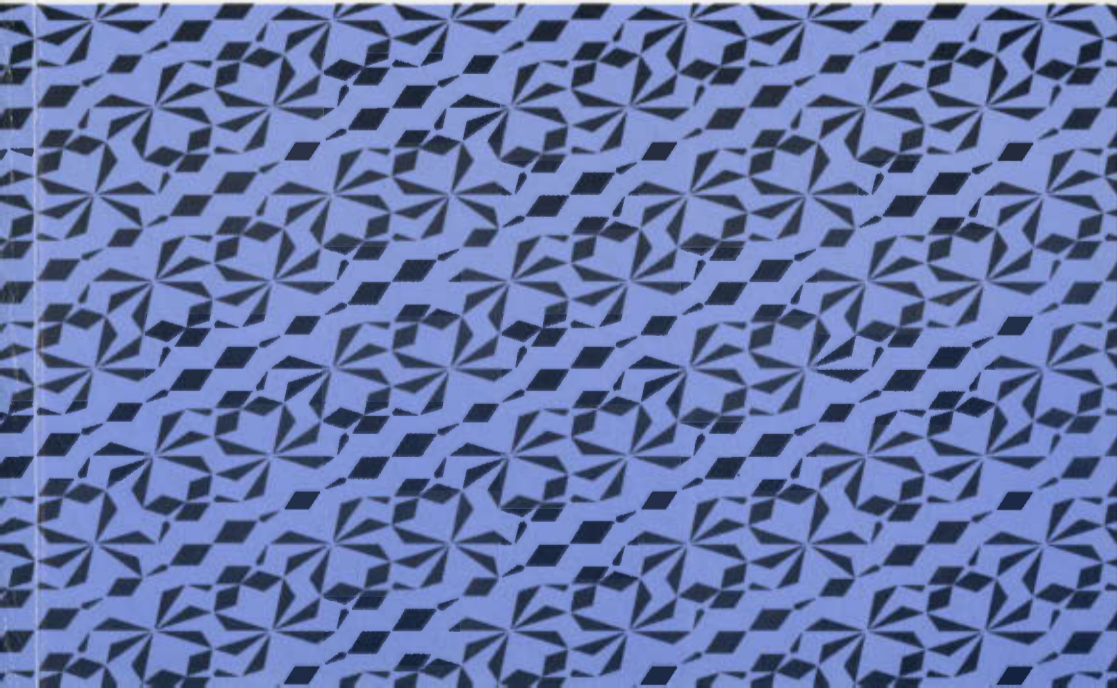
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Walter Clay Lowdermilk and the Middle East, 1937-1944

by

Robert Rook



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Fort Hays Studies

Fourth Series Number 3 Spring 2007

“The Eleventh Commandment” and *A Land of Promise*: Walter Clay Lowdermilk and the Middle East, 1937-1944

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Robert Rook

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About the Author

Robert Rook first visited the Middle East in 1979 as an undergraduate student and returned to live and to work in Tel Aviv, Israel (1984–1987) and Cairo, Egypt (1987–1992). Between 1995 and 2004, Dr. Rook conducted research in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Israel, a portion of which became the basis for this essay. Dr. Rook researched and wrote this monograph as a faculty member of the Department of History at Fort Hays State University. Currently, Dr. Rook is a Professor of History and Chair of the Department of History at Towson University.

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Dr. Walter Clay Lowdermilk shortly after his return to USA in 1939. Photo credit: USDA.

Introduction

Between August 1938 and November 1939, Dr. Walter Clay Lowdermilk, the Assistant Chief of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), surveyed land usage throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East “in the interest of land conservation in the United States.” Specifically, he was in search of answers from “the old countries” that might help address contemporary American land-use issues. Although Lowdermilk’s official report of his findings was not published for nearly fifteen years because of political, administrative, and personal difficulties, his sojourn produced a series of results that remain significant to contemporary historians in at least two respects.¹

First, Lowdermilk’s analysis reveals scientific and cultural biases that prejudiced his findings. Lowdermilk consistently undervalued the potential consequences of climatic change on the environment. To Lowdermilk, climatic change, while not insignificant, was not as important as human action or, as this monograph will demonstrate, human inaction. Additionally, deep cultural biases prefigured many of Lowdermilk’s conclusions regarding the responsibilities of native peoples for the condition of the natural environment. To Lowdermilk, the further one traveled east, away from western civilization, Christianity, and modernity, the more likely one was to find poor land stewardship, eroded soil, and civilization in decline.

Second, Lowdermilk’s calls for better land management in Palestine and elsewhere in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa also constituted powerful political leverage. Lowdermilk’s specific experiences in Palestine with Zionist settlers validated and reinforced many of his beliefs pertaining to soil conservation and watershed protection. His experiences in Palestine made Lowdermilk a life-long advocate of Zionism and led directly to Lowdermilk’s writing *Palestine: Land of Promise* (1944), a potent blend of conservation science and political propaganda. Not surprisingly, Zionist interests seized upon Lowdermilk’s ideas and credibility as a means

of underwriting Zionist claims to a state in postwar Palestine. Equally important, Lowdermilk suggested that Palestine was an ideal location for a large-scale land-reclamation and economic-development program modeled along the lines of America's Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). His proposal for a Jordan Valley Authority (JVA) captured both Zionist and non-Zionist imaginations. For TVA proponents especially, Lowdermilk's JVA proposal represented badly needed support for an institution that was under constant political assault at home. To TVA advocates, the JVA and its equivalents around the globe would quite literally, according to one *New York Times* correspondent, "dam the floods of war." The belief that American-sponsored postwar international water-resource development would underwrite peace and prosperity represented both the hydraulic foundations of the "American Century" and the literal concrete foundations for the containment of communism. These foundations, to date largely ignored both by historians of American foreign relations and American environmental historians, constitute a missing and valuable link between American approaches to the environment and American visions of the post-1945 world.

This monograph will present only the barest details within the broadest of contexts. But even this brief overview clearly demonstrates the far-reaching power of American natural-resource development and management ideas both during and after World War II. In the American west the adage "water flows uphill toward money" is well known; in the American century, many Americans believed that peace, prosperity, and power flowed from the successful management of land and water resources.

“Gone with the Rain” and “The Eleventh Commandment”

Lowdermilk's survey began in England, proceeded across the northern European mainland, continued along the length of Italy, crossed the Mediterranean to North Africa and ended in the Middle East with an examination of the Tigris and Euphrates river basin. This itinerary greatly facilitated Lowdermilk's initial perceptual, and later conceptual, interpretive framework; his journey was a steady movement away from the new world, modernity, and progress toward the old world, non-western cultures, and decay. Just as Brooks Adams's *Law of Civilization and Decay* (1896) provided an ideological framework for the New World's transcendence (with a particular emphasis on the United States' successes) over the Old World, Lowdermilk's itinerary virtually ensured that his encounters with land use across the ages became a complementary declension narrative.

An additional factor reinforced this reality. Lowdermilk arrived in Palestine convinced that a major prevailing theory on land degradation was incorrect. This theory, articulated most clearly by the Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington, held that climatic change more than human hands shaped physical environments and cultures. According to Huntington, climate was the best determinant of a civilization's prospects. Oppressively hot climates, either wet or dry, prevented cultures and civilizations from developing at the same rate or to the same degree as cultures and civilizations in temperate climates. Additionally, Huntington argued that seasonal variations in climate forced civilizations to adapt and, therefore, lent rigor and vitality to a civilization. Conversely, an absence of variance prevented a civilization or a culture from attaining a very high level of development. That racist and ethnocentric biases shaped, and were shaped by, Huntington's findings is well-established. Indeed these biases and their connotations generated a "backlash" that for decades made it

difficult to discuss human development and climate in a scholarly context.² But Huntington's linkage of climate and history remains noteworthy in Lowdermilk's case. During the 1920s Lowdermilk worked in China as a forestry professor and found no compelling evidence of climatic change in China or a climatic influence that sufficiently explained China's soil erosion or its failure to prevent it.³ These early experiences in China greatly influenced Lowdermilk's later analysis of the Middle East. Specifically, Lowdermilk arrived convinced that human action, or inaction, rather than climatic variation or change was responsible for land degradation. Human capacity to engineer and to maintain the landscape implied a corollary responsibility for the condition of land and water resources regardless of the climate. The initial portions of Lowdermilk's itinerary validated these convictions.

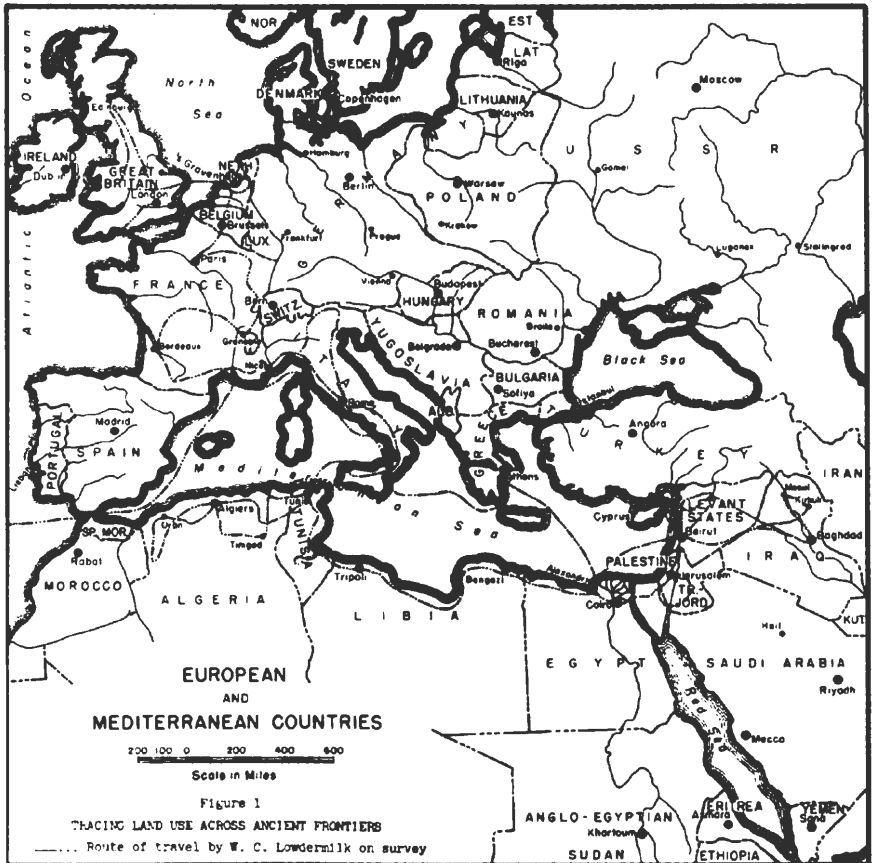
Beginning his journey to the Middle East in the familiar environs of England, Lowdermilk, a former Rhodes scholar and student of forestry at Oxford, praised English conservation methods but allowed that England rarely faced the torrential rains that were the curse of soil conservationists elsewhere. In the Netherlands, Lowdermilk studied massive coastal marsh and seabed drainage programs; polders held back the sea and enabled the Dutch to create an "agricultural heaven on earth." In southern France, Lowdermilk observed French efforts to stabilize sand dunes that threatened nearby fields.⁴ Although deeply suspicious of fascism, Lowdermilk praised Mussolini's successful drainage of the Pontine marshes, a project first begun by Imperial Rome.⁵ From Lowdermilk's vantage, wise land-management practices prevailed throughout Europe and reminded Lowdermilk of New Deal programs at home. Although threatened in the past by overgrazing, poor crop selection, deforestation, ill-considered government policies, and world war, European land and water resources remained solid foundations for western civilization. His examination of numerous large-scale reclamation projects across Europe reinforced his experiences with New Deal conservation and reclamation programs and, more importantly, created a vision of a relatively unbroken line of civilization joining the ancient splendors of Greece and Rome and contemporary European land-conservation policies.

As Lowdermilk proceeded south and east across the Mediterranean, however, declension began. North Africa reminded Lowdermilk of the tenuous links between land usage and civilization. It also demonstrated to Lowdermilk that the linear ascent of civilization that had proceeded north and west toward America had also left North Africa and the Middle East to suffer the consequences of Arab and Muslim dominion. More than torrential rains and punishing droughts, the Arab conquest had devastated the landscape. In an article written for *American Forests* during his sojourn across the northern Sahara, Lowdermilk noted:

The most surprising revelation of a journey—six months thus far—across Europe and North Africa had not been the huge

land reclamation projects of modern nations, admirable as they are, but the millions of acres of land in North Africa despoiled and denuded by the hand of man and his herds, leaving only footprints of past glory upon the naked landscape.⁶

Lowdermilk's analysis of the North African landscapes placed the blame for the deterioration of both Roman architecture and natural bounty squarely upon Arab shoulders. Although acknowledging that Roman decadence and Vandal invasion were partially responsible, Lowdermilk blamed Arab invaders for completing the destruction of western civilization in the region. In his article to *American Forests*, aptly entitled "Footprints of Roman Agriculture," Lowdermilk indicted Arabs as a nomadic people, caring little for permanent homes and agriculture, wandering about with their herds according to the dictates of drought and pasture, and chopping down trees for firewood to increase forage for their flocks.⁷



Map detailing Lowdermilk's travels, 1938-1939. Photo credit: USDA.

According to Lowdermilk, Arabs cared little for civilization's accomplishments; they were "The Fathers of Desert Lands" more than the "Sons of the Desert." Arab invaders had destroyed Roman "aqueducts, cisterns, wells, tunnels, terraces, paved roads, canals, grist mills, check dams . . . , desilting basins and reservoirs" and many other vestiges of past civilization.⁸ Lowdermilk reiterated this theme of Arab devastation of civilization in a series of articles in *American Forests* and *Forests and Outdoors* throughout 1939 and 1940. He extended his assessment to include non-Arab Muslims. Although Arab invaders destroyed Roman and Byzantine forests in Lebanon, Ottoman Turkish rule completed the "slaughter" of Lebanon's "mighty trees."⁹

In a letter to Bennett detailing his progress to date, Lowdermilk pronounced North Africa and the Middle East a "morgue of civilizations." The Arabs and Islam not only had obliterated Greco-Roman civilization in the region, but also had destroyed the land and water resources that had supported it. Searching for the philosophical underpinnings of such despoliation, Lowdermilk seized upon Islam: "Moslem fanaticism, with its fatalistic belief that what happens is the 'Will of Allah' . . . has this land in its fatal grip." The scope of the devastation left Lowdermilk depressed and longing for the "active, growing, developing forces in the United States" and "the throb of constructive works."¹⁰

Although he would not return to the United States for several months, Lowdermilk's arrival in Palestine during the early summer of 1939 introduced him to the active, growing, and controversial forces of Zionism. Lowdermilk was deeply impressed by Zionist conservation methods that validated many of his most cherished professional beliefs. Lowdermilk later recalled that "in Palestine I had found the finest reclamation of old lands that I had seen in three continents and the most successful agricultural settlements that I had seen anywhere." According to Lowdermilk, Jewish scientists in Palestine joined traditional Arab farming techniques with "scientific methods and modern technology" and produced "Jewish agriculture." This hybrid made it possible "to increase production from the average Arab harvest of seven bushels to seventy bushels to the acre on the same field after modern methods were applied."¹¹ Western civilization had returned to reclaim the east.

Lowdermilk's admiration for Zionist efforts in Palestine was further enhanced by two prominent, pro-Zionist archaeologists who were instrumental in shaping Lowdermilk's assessment of Palestine's current problems and future prospects. Dr. Nelson Glueck, the director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, and P.L.O. Guy, the director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, accompanied Lowdermilk on several expeditions throughout Palestine and into the Transjordan. Glueck showed Lowdermilk numerous sites that supported claims that the region once held a much larger population than it did in 1939. He also educated Lowdermilk on the many water management

tools that ancient civilizations employed to survive in arid areas. In the Transjordan, Lowdermilk was struck by two realities. First, the fertile soil and abundant water resources Lowdermilk found in many areas stood in sharp contrast to the impoverished Arab populations he encountered. To Lowdermilk, Palestine and the Transjordan—areas then under British control—were capable of providing a better standard of living for the native population. Better management of land and water resources both would conserve precious resources and would alleviate poverty. Second, Lowdermilk became convinced that Palestine and the Transjordan existed as a single economic unit joined by the Jordan Valley. The British decision to create the Transjordan in 1922 violated the integrity of the region’s most vital resource, the Jordan River, and disrupted an economic union without which the Transjordan was no longer economically viable.¹²

P.L.O. Guy accompanied Lowdermilk on several field trips into Palestine’s Judean hills to study soil erosion and guided him through the ruins of the ancient Nabatean capital of Petra in the Transjordan. Both experiences deepened Lowdermilk’s by-then firmly held belief that the Arabs and Islam had destroyed ancient Roman, Nabatean, and Byzantine conservation regimens which subsequently doomed the land and its future inhabitants. Again, the declension narrative is significant because, as the historian of archeology Neil Asher Silberman has observed, by the early twentieth century archeologists had evolved a detailed interpretive framework that not only synchronized biblical history with the history of western civilization but also validated the grand arc of western cultural development and eventual global dominion.¹³ According to this framework, the pre-Islamic Middle East was the foundation of western civilization; the seventh century A.D. rise of Islam and the subsequent Arab conquests destroyed that foundation but left enough archeological evidence to validate the cultural and technological superiority of the pre-Islamic ancient world. Moreover, such evidence appeared to create a *prima facie* case against Arab and Muslim invaders. Building on this evidence and his examination of Zionist settlements, Lowdermilk developed a complementary belief that Jewish colonists in Palestine could restore the region to its former capacities through the application of modern conservation techniques.

Lowdermilk’s reading of the circumstantial evidence deepened his admiration of Zionist reclamation efforts, but also led him to conclusions that differed from authorities and sources that, ironically, Lowdermilk admired and respected. Moreover, it placed him at odds with archeological findings that, while not available until twenty years after Lowdermilk’s journey, nonetheless illustrate both the true complexities of Middle Eastern environmental history and the narrowness of Lowdermilk’s interpretive framework. For example, in 1864 diplomat and historian George Perkins Marsh correctly surmised that the region’s physical decline began long before the arrival of Islam or Ottoman Turkish government.¹⁴ Later discoveries validated Marsh’s suspicions. One hundred years after Marsh’s journey

through the valley, archeologist Kathleen Kenyon persuasively argued that deforestation in Palestine led to a decline in the water table and an eventual collapse of civilization during the Early Bronze Age or third millennium B.C.¹⁵ Kenyon's discovery along with other archaeological evidence further validated Marsh's suspicions that the roots of western civilization were in part responsible for Palestine's decline and present state. Civilization and the Palestine's environmental demise were parallel rather than sequential phenomena. Greek, Roman, and Phoenician civilizations fostered political stability, extended commerce, and improved agricultural productivity throughout the region, enabling population increases that could not be sustained. Population growth increased the rate of deforestation, hastened soil erosion, and escalated demands on fragile soil and water resources.¹⁶ During the fourth and fifth centuries, rapid population growth in the Jordan River Valley quickly outran the land and water resources and initiated a prolonged period of decline centuries prior to the arrival of Arabs, Ottoman Turks, and Islam.¹⁷ Based on Marsh's analysis and later archeological evidence, history's march out of the fertile crescent led to western civilization, but it also exacted a price from the land and water resources that eroded the opportunities of those peoples and cultures not fortunate enough to have been included in the march west.

But Lowdermilk believed that those peoples and their cultures could be rescued by enlightened land management and water-resource development. Indeed this belief led to a revelation during an airplane flight with P.L.O. Guy over the upper Jordan Valley. While flying over the Yarmouk River, one of the Jordan River's northern tributaries, Lowdermilk first conceived the ideas that eventually coalesced into the Jordan Valley Authority (JVA) years later. Following the model of America's Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Lowdermilk suggested that dams on the Yarmouk and Jordan Rivers could generate the power necessary to pump water throughout Palestine and the Transjordan. The lower Jordan River which emptied into the Dead Sea could be diverted to irrigate the deserts of southern Palestine. A canal from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea would replenish the Jordan's fresh water with sea water and also generate power for industry throughout the region.¹⁸ The JVA could remake Palestine and return it once again to land flowing with milk and honey.

Lowdermilk became increasingly convinced that Palestine harbored vast, underdeveloped natural resources and that Arab invaders had destroyed a land that had once supported much larger populations. Lowdermilk increasingly painted the Middle East as a land of sharp and unnecessary contrasts. Syria contained a "hundred dead cities." Lebanon was a land of denuded hills and broken terraces standing in sharp contrast to the unharnessed power of the Litani. Iraq, cradle of civilizations, was an "empty bread basket." Throughout his travels in the Middle East, Lowdermilk found evidence of ruined biblical and classical landscapes. And everywhere, Lowdermilk found evidence of Arab, Muslim, and Turkish

culpability. The lands beyond the Jewish colonies only reinforced the stark contrast between peoples Lowdermilk chose to characterize as "tent-dwellers and house dwellers."¹⁹ This contrast ultimately led to Lowdermilk's promulgation of "The Eleventh Commandment" in which Lowdermilk not only railed against soil erosion but also sanctified Jewish land-reclamation efforts in Palestine. In mid-June 1939, Lowdermilk delivered an address in simplified English via the Palestine Broadcasting Service. The speech, "Gone with the Rain," explained "the tragedy of soil wastage." Lowdermilk suggested that if Moses had only known of "ignorance and negligence of man in wasteful cultivation . . . he would have written an ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT" (capitals in original).

Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its fertility from generation to generation. Thou shalt protect thy fields from erosion and thy hills from over-grazing by thy herds, so that thy descendants may have abundance forever. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, his fertile fields shall become sterile stones and gullies, and his descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or vanish from the face of the earth.²⁰

Lowdermilk outlined methods of preventing soil erosion and stressed the need to act promptly, intelligently, and cooperatively. Citing examples of SCS successes in the United States, Lowdermilk praised American farmers for their efforts "in the conservation of the nation's productive soil and beneficent rains." He concluded with similar praise for Zionist reclamation efforts in Palestine. Lowdermilk proclaimed, "Palestine has exceptionally good possibilities . . . of being remade into a land of abundance." With good stewardship, this land would become available for "sustained and profitable use."²¹ Lowdermilk's speech was a watershed event in that he publicly endorsed Zionist reclamation efforts and aligned them with methods employed in the United States. Jewish colonists in Palestine were the chosen people using methods proven in America. Speaking from a radio studio and wielding a ten-page script, Lowdermilk forged a subtle but important link between the Zionist agenda in Palestine and the New Deal in America, a link that held powerful, and problematic, political dynamics.

A Land of Promise and the Politics of a JVA/TVA Nexus

Lowdermilk returned to America and the New Deal late in 1939. His first day back at the SCS office was noteworthy and indicative of Lowdermilk's relationship with Hugh Hammond Bennett, a relationship that had never been either comfortable or close. Arriving dressed as an Arab sheik, Lowdermilk found that Bennett had assigned his duties to a subordinate. In addition, Bennett immediately dispatched Lowdermilk on a national speaking tour to share what he had learned in his months abroad. For the next eighteen months, Lowdermilk crisscrossed the country, spreading the gospel of soil conservation and pronouncing the "Eleventh Commandment." In addition, Lowdermilk and his wife also spoke on behalf of Zionism and the crisis enveloping Jews both in Europe and Palestine. Upon his return to the United States in late 1939, Lowdermilk compiled a final report on Jewish reclamation efforts in Palestine and submitted it to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace. Wallace immediately read the report and hand delivered it to Supreme Court Justice and Zionist supporter Louis D. Brandeis saying, "This is the best argument for Zionism that I have ever read."²² After reading Lowdermilk's report, Brandeis encouraged Lowdermilk to have his report on Palestine published by the Department of Agriculture as a special bulletin, an arrangement that ultimately failed because of a departmental proscription against publishing bulletins on foreign agriculture.

At this point a brief explanation of political dynamics is in order. Since the early twentieth century, Zionist officials had sent students and study missions to the United States in an effort to benefit from American expertise in land reclamation and agricultures. Additionally, an equally important sub-text was the recruitment of American experts who would lend not only advice but also political credibility to Jewish efforts in Palestine. For

example, during the 1920s and early 1930s Elwood Mead, an eventual Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, advised Zionist officials on irrigation and farm operations. Mead offered not only valuable technical advice but also endorsed Zionist colonization efforts as Palestine's best chance for economic and social development.²³ Mead's relationship with Zionist officials was the first of many important, informal relationships between Zionist agencies and U.S. government officials. Such relationships became increasingly valuable to Zionism as more formal relationships with the U.S. government generally, and the State Department specifically, became more problematic and unlikely. Thus, for Zionists and Zionist supporters, developing relationships with lower-echelon government officials was necessary and vital strategy in the absence of more open and vigorous support from higher-ranking American government officials.

Lowdermilk's discussions with Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis were indicative of these realities. For example, Lowdermilk used his meeting with Brandeis to query the justice on the possible modification of the "beneficial use" doctrine and its utility in Palestine. Specifically, Lowdermilk proposed extending the doctrine to include land as well as water resources. Under this broader definition, individuals who either actively or passively degraded natural resources would forfeit their rights to those resources. The implications of such an application for Zionists in Palestine were clear and enormous. Additionally, Brandeis used Lowdermilk to publicize Zionism more actively than the Justice's position allowed. He encouraged both Lowdermilks to speak out on behalf of Jewish settlements in Palestine. Inez Lowdermilk was particularly eager to comply with Brandeis's suggestion that she encourage "Christians to give the Jews a new deal" in Palestine; Inez Lowdermilk subsequently spoke to large audiences around the country in support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.²⁴

These subsequent speaking engagements led directly to Walter Clay Lowdermilk's introduction to Emmanuel Neuman, head of the American Zionist Emergency Committee (AZEC), and Lowdermilk's writing *Palestine: Land of Promise*. With World War II raging in Europe and news emerging of Nazi atrocities against Europe's Jews, Neumann asked Lowdermilk to write a book detailing the Jewish settlers' accomplishments in Palestine that would attract support for Palestine's future development.²⁵ Although Lowdermilk suggested that "there were many Jews much better informed on Palestine, and therefore more capable of writing such a book" than he was, Neumann countered that a book written by a non-Jew would be of "much influence." Ultimately, Lowdermilk's wife intervened and decided the issue. To Inez Lowdermilk, if a book would help Jewish refugees languishing on "human cargo boats floating in the Mediterranean" and suffering Nazi persecution in Europe, then it was their "duty" to write the book. Walter Lowdermilk and his wife spent the summer of 1942 in the basement of their Washington, D.C. home completing a draft manuscript

tentatively entitled "Reclaiming the Promised Land." Inez did the basic background research on Palestine; Walter wrote the manuscript.²⁶

All available evidence clearly indicates that Lowdermilk wrote the manuscript, but Neumann and Zionism were omnipresent. Emanuel Neumann was a frequent visitor to the Lowdermilk's basement during that summer, supplying Lowdermilk with research assistants and other material support as needed to complete the book as soon as possible. Accordingly, Neumann assigned the head of the AZEC's publication department, Shulamith Schwartz-Nardi, to assist Lowdermilk. Such assistance clearly shaped the book's tone, structure, and agenda. In a memorandum to Zionist leaders, Neumann indicated that he "repeatedly stressed the importance of attacking the problem of absorptive capacity," a key issue which the British advanced as rationale for blocking further Jewish immigration into Palestine.²⁷ Given this reality, Neumann saw Lowdermilk's book as both an appeal for an immediate increase in Jewish immigration into Palestine and a blueprint for a postwar Jewish state. Neumann's general guidelines, however, obscured a more fully conceptualized framework that eventually guided Lowdermilk's work. For example, Neumann's overtures to Lowdermilk reflect the ideas of Simha Blass, a Zionist hydraulic engineer in Palestine. In early 1941, the Zionist leadership circulated Blass's memorandum suggesting that a book be written publicizing "a plan for Jewish colonization in the Palestine deserts." According to Blass, the fullest utilization of the Jordan River should be one of the book's central features. Specifically, Blass argued that the irrigation of southern Palestine would prove no more difficult than channeling Colorado River water into California. If it could be done in the United States, it could be done in Palestine. Although Blass envisioned a book of greater technical specificity than Lowdermilk ultimately produced, he nevertheless recognized the importance of popularizing the project as a means of gaining support for a Zionist agenda in Palestine.²⁸ Aligning Zionist development projects with American reclamation successes not only educated the American public but also shaped American public opinion.

Although the JVA ultimately became the book's centerpiece, Neumann initially encouraged Lowdermilk both to offer a general introduction to Palestine and to respond to several criticisms of Zionist programs in Palestine. Water-resource development was only part of a much larger Zionist plan for Palestine. Consequently, prior to unveiling his more fully developed plan for the JVA, Lowdermilk fulfilled Neumann's more general requests. The result was a Zionist propagandist's dream come true. Drawing upon both his personal experiences in Palestine and his professional expertise, and revealing once again his strong biases toward ethnicity, religion, history, and climate, Lowdermilk presented his arguments for an increased Jewish presence in Palestine. In his opening chapters, Lowdermilk explained how he first became familiar with the Zionist efforts. Like "the Children of Israel," he had entered Palestine via the Sinai and soon encountered scenes

of utter devastation. Recent Arab riots had compounded the damage done by centuries of warfare and neglect. "Suspicious looking Arabs" reminded Lowdermilk that violence remained a constant threat in the region. In the midst of this devastation, Lowdermilk found Jewish settlers concentrated in "about three hundred colonies defying great hardships" in their attempts to restore Palestine to its former productivity. Their efforts were "the most remarkable" he had seen "while studying land use in twenty-four countries."²⁹ Lowdermilk proposed that America was the best standard for comparison for what was happening in Palestine. Jewish settlers in Palestine reminded Lowdermilk of early colonists in America. And as Americans had pioneered new methods of land conservation in the west, Jews were blazing a path in "the reclamation and the restoration of the decadent Near East."³⁰ Like Elwood Mead, Lowdermilk compared Palestine to Southern California. In both areas, energetic newcomers were remaking the land.³¹ But unlike California, Palestine had flourished once before. Historical records and archaeological evidence indicated "a remarkable period of prosperity in Palestine which lasted for more than a thousand years."³² Everywhere in Palestine the remnants of ancient civilizations punctuated the ruined physical landscape. Crumbled terraces and mounds of rubble indicated an earlier period of fruitfulness that had suffered a terrible fate. To Lowdermilk, the destruction was complete:

Not only the terraces have been destroyed: the ruins of dams, cisterns, aqueducts and irrigation canals show us how the Palestine of the Hebrew, Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods reached its high degree of prosperity and why the Palestine of later periods became so much less fertile and greatly decreased in population.³³

In a chapter entitled "Darkness Over Palestine" Lowdermilk explained Palestine's demise. His analysis relied upon a by-then standard tripartite indictment: Arabs, Islam, and Turks. According to Lowdermilk, "The decline of Palestine's land and of the people began with the first Arab invasion during the seventh century of our era."³⁴ In addition to the physical destruction wrought by this invasion, Islam enveloped both the land and the people with a "fatalistic philosophy." In Lowdermilk's analysis of Islam, Muslims accepted the deterioration of land and water resources as predestined; the will of God relieved humans of their responsibility for wise stewardship of land and water resources.³⁵ Although this view distorted both Islamic teachings and Arab history, it clarified Lowdermilk's (and many Zionists') vision of Palestine's future. If the twin-yoke of Arab occupation and Islam had desiccated the land of milk and honey, Zionism and American conservation techniques would restore it. Lowdermilk allowed that there had been other disruptive elements. Christian Crusaders attempting to liberate the Holy Land had campaigned "in the name of Christianity" but failed to honor its spirit. Consequently, Palestine was further damaged. Yet the Crusaders brought some benefits: trade, new

crops, improved farming techniques. But these momentary glimmers of hope did not last. The Crusades failed and the Ottoman Turks soon arrived: "The decay of Palestine reached its darkest stage in the four hundred years of Turkish rule." Palestine's impoverished Arab peasantry perfectly "suited the rich effendi (Turkish ruling class)." Turkish rulers and Arab farmers plundered Palestine's wealth and neglected the land's needs. Citing this evidence, Lowdermilk disputed the theories of Ellsworth Huntington. Palestine's current condition was not the result of climatic change; human hands had destroyed Palestine. Consequently, human hands could reclaim Palestine's lost potential.³⁶

Jewish settlers in Palestine were also effecting a social and scientific transformation of Palestine that mirrored American society. The rigors of life in Palestine required a greater measure of gender equality than had been seen in the region. In the Jewish colonies "women naturally occupy a place very different from that of their Mohammedan sisters in the Arab lands. We found Jewish women enjoying full equality in Palestine." In addition, the rule of law superseded the rite of revenge. Although they suffered violent attacks by Arabs inflamed by Nazi and Fascist propaganda, Jewish settlers "disapproved all attempts to imitate the deeds of the terrorists." British authorities would deal with perpetrators of violence while the Jews continued the greater task of rebuilding Palestine.³⁷ As a part of this mission, Lowdermilk noted Zionist successes in the drainage of malarial swamps. Drainage of the upper Jordan's Huleh Basin was of prime importance in this endeavor. Zionists were also actively pursuing means to moderate saline soils. Scientific efficiency and a dedication to progress were at the heart of Zionist efforts to renew Palestine.³⁸

According to Lowdermilk, Jewish settlers in Palestine had accomplished much in a remarkably short time, and even greater things were on the horizon, namely the Jordan Valley Authority. Although Lowdermilk's initial vision of the valley's possibilities emerged during his flight over the valley in 1939 and in subsequent conversation, the JVA concept gradually developed over the intervening years. By mid-1942, the vision had become a more clearly articulated plan that lacked an appropriate title. In August 1942, Lowdermilk sent Neumann a draft chapter entitled "TVA Reclamation Project for the Jordan Valley and a Post-War Solution for the Jewish Refugee Problem" in which Lowdermilk outlined his basic plan for the valley. Neumann subsequently suggested that the project be labeled the Jordan Valley Authority (JVA).³⁹ Immediately recognizing the value of the JVA idea, Neumann suggested to Lowdermilk that "much should be made of the JVA in the book."⁴⁰ The JVA represented much more than just an economic development proposal. In November 1942, several weeks after Lowdermilk finished the manuscript, Neumann offered this assessment of the JVA's wider significance in a confidential memorandum to Zionist leaders in the United States, England, and Palestine:

It is felt that nothing so calculated to influence favorably the attitude of official circles towards the Zionist program as a large-scale and comprehensive economic project such as this. It offers a new and more promising approach to the problem of Palestine and one that is peculiarly suited to the American mind. The conception of the Jordan Valley Authority in particular is thoroughly in line with the social and political philosophy of the New Deal.

Dr. Lowdermilk's Plan is regarded as a bold and ingenious project likely to fire the imagination and attract wide support on the part of many who would naturally resist a direct political approach. Politically speaking, it may be regarded as a flanking movement of a most promising character—one of the most significant contributions ever made to Political Zionism.⁴¹

Thinly veiled political calculations aside, Lowdermilk (and Neumann) emphasized the JVA's many humanitarian aspects. He noted that "the full utilization of the Jordan Valley depression and adjoining drainage areas for reclamation and power will in time provide farms, industry and security for at least four million Jewish refugees." Regardless of whatever sympathies one had for Zionism, Lowdermilk contended that American support for the JVA was "a debt of honor owed by the Christian peoples to those who have suffered most in this world-wide struggle for freedom."⁴² Nazi persecution alone was only one reason Americans should support the JVA. "The Jews, who for centuries have been cruelly persecuted at the hands of Christians, should be made custodians of this new Holy Land and directors of the JVA under the supervision of the United Nations."⁴³

In explaining the JVA's comprehensive and progressive nature, Lowdermilk touted the Jordan River Valley's capacity to support developments throughout Palestine and the Middle East. JVA electricity would industrialize Palestine's southern desert regions. Surplus electricity could be sold to the surrounding states. JVA water, power, and social programs would open the Transjordan frontier. Contained within this latter point was a not-so-subtle argument for the re-inclusion of the Transjordan into Palestine. For centuries the Transjordan "was considered an integral part of Palestine not only for historical reasons, but essentially because the two form a natural economic and geographic unit." Consequently, exclusion of the Transjordan from the JVA would deprive the former of many benefits and seriously compromise the latter.⁴⁴ Lowdermilk assured readers that JVA supporters would not force the project's benefits upon anyone who wished to turn their back on progress. The Transjordan's nomadic tribes "of fierce men, painted women and unkempt children" who scratched out a meager existence amid the rubble of ancient civilizations could simply fold their "black goat's-hair tents," shoulder their "slimy goatskin water bags" and march north to the more familiar and backward terrain of Iraq.⁴⁵

The publication of *Palestine: Land of Promise* in 1944 generated exceptionally favorable reviews. Predictably, Jewish-American newspapers were uniform in their praise of the book. The Jewish Press Agency's eventual coronation of the JVA as "the Near East's Magna Carta" was typical of sentiments within the Jewish community that reflected commitments to both a Jewish state in Palestine and the propagation of American liberalism.⁴⁶ More mainstream press reviews were no less laudatory. *U.S. News and World Report* proclaimed the JVA a "blueprint for building a nation."⁴⁷ *Time Magazine* depicted Palestine as "a run-down, beaten-up Southern California" but informed its readers that the JVA would "make the Holy Land as prosperous as it was in the time of Jesus."⁴⁸ More technical journals pronounced the JVA as the most effective means of mining Palestine's "real treasure," the Jordan River.⁴⁹ The *New York Times* pursued a similar theme and assured its readers that the JVA would not allow a single drop of water "to run to waste." Moreover, this particular article also introduced the idea of Nazi reparations as a means of financing the JVA.⁵⁰ George W. Norris, one of the TVA's progenitors, praised the JVA as evidence of the "TVA idea gone around the world." As a means of assisting men in their struggles "with the problems of nature," the TVA was "a blueprint turned into reality" and offered a perfect template for the Jordan Valley's future development.⁵¹ No less an authority than Harcourt A. Morgan, one of the founding directors of the TVA, declared Lowdermilk's work a "universal appeal of keeping man and nature in partnership." Raising a concern over "the inroads war has made on exhaustible sources of energy," Morgan noted that the "alarming losses of exhaustible sources, especially oil and gas, may be covered by the returnable resources of water and soil."⁵² Although Zionist forces looked to the JVA, and by extension the TVA, as leverage for a future occupation of Palestine, TVA proponents carefully skirted the politically contentious issue of a future Jewish state in Palestine while pointing the JVA as validation of the TVA concept at home and abroad.

The Zionist publicity campaign eventually reached the highest levels. In January 1945, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, a major Zionist activist in the United States, sent Roosevelt a copy of *Palestine: Land of Promise* after the President had referred to it in a prior conversation. Wise told the Roosevelt that the only criticism that he had seen of the JVA was that it was too "visionary and impractical." Although in poor health and busy with preparations for the up-coming Yalta Conference, Roosevelt read the book and subsequently referred to many of its major points in his later conversations with Saudi King Ibn Saud after Yalta. On February 14, the President and the King discussed America's future in the Middle East as they steamed through the Suez Canal. On St. Valentine's Day 1945, Roosevelt spoke to the Saudi king about water resources rather than oil reserves.

Roosevelt "emphasized the need for developing water resources, to increase the land under cultivation as well as to turn the wheels which do the country's work." The President told the King of his "special interest

in irrigation, tree planting and water power which he hoped would be developed after the war in many countries, including Arab lands."⁵³ Roosevelt spoke specifically about Jewish efforts in Palestine as a model for future development in the region. Although he never mentioned Lowdermilk or the JVA, Roosevelt's examples reflected their clear influence. Ibn Saud, however, clearly understood that Roosevelt's praise for land reclamation and water-resource development in the Middle East translated into a potential American endorsement of Jewish plans for postwar Palestine. Roosevelt was stunned by Ibn Saud's vehement opposition to any expanded Jewish presence in Palestine. Roosevelt persisted in his efforts to persuade the Saudi monarch of the benefits that water-resource development conferred on any people but Ibn Saud remained adamant in his demands that nothing be done to assist Jews in Palestine. The meeting ended with the patrician president assuring the Arab patriarch that he would be consulted before any final decisions were made concerning U.S. policy toward a Jewish state in Palestine.⁵⁴

Roosevelt died two months after his meeting with Ibn Saud, only weeks prior to the end of the war in Europe. Within Zionist circles a folklore quickly developed surrounding *Palestine: Land of Promise* and the president's final days. Both Lowdermilk and Neumann later reported that the book was found open on Roosevelt's Warm Springs desk the day the president died.⁵⁵ No independent corroboration of this claim exists, however. Nonetheless, Roosevelt's conversation with Ibn Saud clearly indicated that the president had either read parts of the book or had become familiar with its broad outlines. Moreover, Roosevelt's statements during late 1944 and early 1945 concerning his plans for his post-presidential years indicated a familiarity with Lowdermilk's ideas.⁵⁶ Yet, Roosevelt's promise to Ibn Saud vis-a-vis the future of Palestine and the president's at-best lukewarm support for Zionism did not indicate that he would champion either the JVA or a Jewish state in Palestine. By April 1945, Neumann and other Zionist leaders had determined that "Roosevelt was no Messiah."⁵⁷

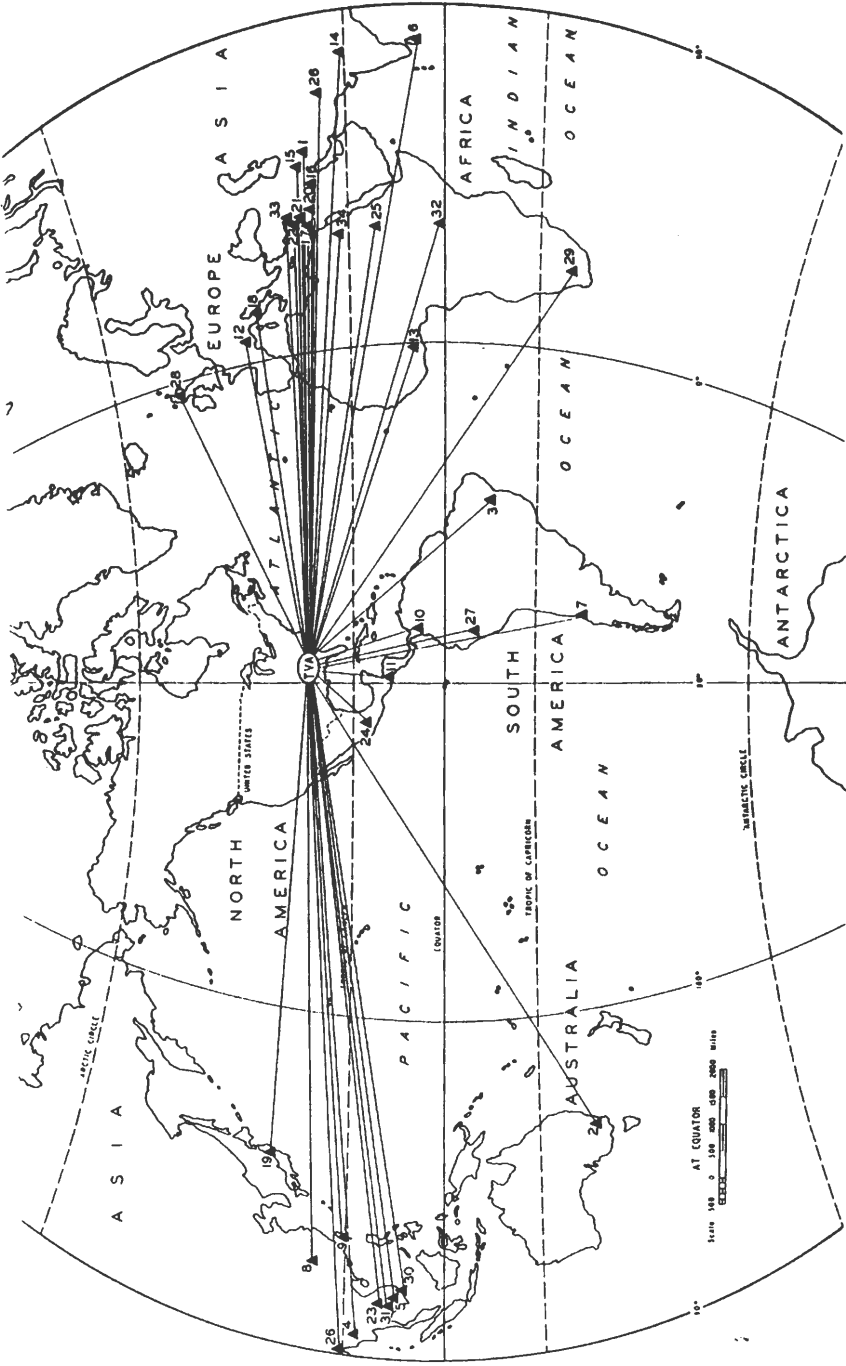
Messiah or not, Roosevelt's interest in an expanded application of the TVA was neither accidental nor more merely the product of Lowdermilk's book. Rather it was indicative of the TVA's continuing appeal to many of its strongest proponents at home and, more importantly, illustrative of hopes and desires for a more peaceful and prosperous postwar world. During the last two months of his life, Franklin Roosevelt spoke often of the TVA's international possibilities. In a March 31 meeting with General Lucius Clay, soon to be governor general of occupied Germany, Roosevelt spoke of "Europe's need for hydroelectric power." Clay observed that Roosevelt was convinced "that a huge hydroelectric power development serving several European countries—a sort of international TVA—was essential to economic rehabilitation and would lead to better cooperation among . . . countries."⁵⁸ Clay's observation reinforces historian Kenneth Davis's later analysis of Roosevelt's interest in the TVA specifically and

water resource development generally. To Davis, Roosevelt possessed "a vivid, though vaguely defined, sense of water, flowing water, as a means and organizing principle of the Union. The watershed became metaphor. It bespoke the unity of nature and the bitter wages of man's sinning against this unity." It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Roosevelt envisioned spreading the TVA idea around the globe during his post-presidential years. To Roosevelt, the TVA was a symbol for a readily transferable hydraulic miracle. To Zionists, the JVA was just the miracle that Palestine needed.

Conclusions: Hydraulic Containment, the American Century, and Israel

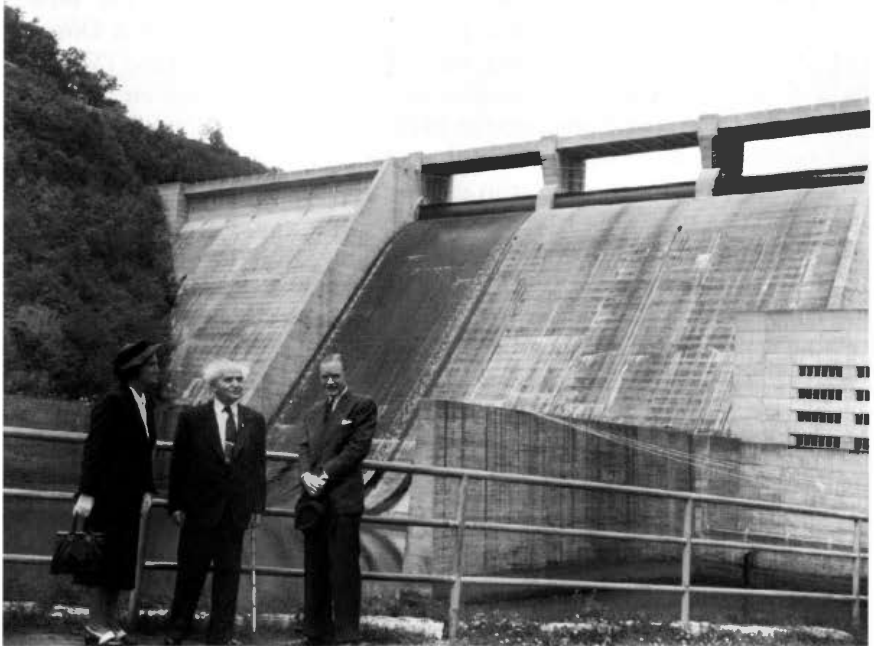
With the end of World War II in sight and postwar realities looming, Europe and the world looked to America. As historian Donald Cameron Watt has noted, at war's end much of the world, and Europe specifically, looked to the United States because "Nothing seemed beyond American strength, financial power, organization, or engineering genius."⁵⁹ The TVA exemplified these traits and, amid the uncertainty and instability of the postwar environment, offered the world hope. In late 1946, Willard R. Espy, a staff writer for the *New York Times*, proclaimed that it required "no prophet to see that in the misery of Asia, Africa and the Middle East lie the makings of social revolution, possibly a third World War." To TVA proponents, the TVA represented a model for economic development and social reform that could stem the rising tide of "chaos and communism" that threatened to plunge the world back into war. Espy declared that "American engineering skills can be applied to an economically sound and socially useful program of integrated . . . projects comparable to our own TVA." TVA-style projects "might emphasize replenishment of soil in one area, irrigation in another, reforestation in a third, power development in a fourth, flood control in still a fifth." These projects were more than just concrete engineering; they were destined (so Espy hoped) to diminish the sources of conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, between rival factions in Greece, between Hindus and Muslims in India, and between communists and nationalists in China. Such projects, Espy proclaimed, were "dreams to put democracy on the march—these are dams to hold back the floods of war."⁶⁰

In late 1947, R.H.S. Crossman, a member of the British Parliament and a former member of the SHAEF Psychological Warfare Division, argued



Map detailing TVA-Style Projects worldwide circa 1953. Photo credit: TVA Corporate Library.

that the TVA was an essential ingredient to future world peace. Writing in direct response to what he perceived as the vagaries of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, Crossman asserted that the world needed more than American dollars and military might: it needed concrete American ideas as well. Put bluntly, Crossman argued that if America was "to dominate the world—as her productive power forces her to do, whether she desires it or not, she must develop a foreign policy which not only serves her national interests but faithfully projects her national institutions." According to Crossman, America was best represented by its most highly regarded structures, "the skyscraper" and "the TVA." The TVA's structures, programs, and institutional integrity suggested moral purpose and virtue. Crossman recommended the TVA as not only a valuable model for economic development but also as a facilitator of international cooperation and a mediator of regional, ethnic, and religious conflict. A Ruhr Valley Authority (RVA) could help settle the squabble between Americans and the British and allay French fears over the reconstruction of postwar Germany. A JVA "would pour a little needed water onto troubled oils" and pacify the Middle East. Specifically referring to the Marshall Plan, Crossman proclaimed that "we do not want American relief; indeed we are determined to cut down our dollar dependency." What was needed was a plan for "rebuilding the



Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion visiting TVA facilities in the early 1950s. Photo credit: TVA Corporate Library.

economic life" of Europe and the Middle East, a plan like the TVA that would "prove a sound long-term investment of American capital and that [would] eventually provide a stable market for American exports."⁶¹

Within these contexts, Lowdermilk's reclamation ideas for Palestine generally and his vision of a JVA specifically illustrate the power of reclamation ideas not only to change the physical condition of the land but also to underwrite political changes on that land. Similarly his ideas resonated within a domestic and an international political environment that awaited deliverance from prewar and wartime realities. In 1948, James B. Hays, a former TVA engineer, presented a detailed engineering feasibility study demonstrating the efficacy and necessity of the JVA as presented in Lowdermilk's *Palestine: Land of Promise*. Published during Israel's War of Independence, *TVA on the Jordan* became a valuable Israeli foreign-policy tool; Israel's first Foreign Minister, Moshe Sharett, received the first official copy. Consequently, although the TVA remained a relatively untainted term in the Middle East, the JVA was a Zionist—and by 1949, a clearly recognized pro-Israeli—symbol.

TVA proponents at home, used the JVA as ammunition in their struggle to maintain and to expand TVA's presence in the United States. By 1953 exasperated former and current TVA officials blasted President Dwight D. Eisenhower's opposition to the TVA at home and usage of it in support of U.S. foreign policy. TVA General Manager Gordon R. Clapp observed that the Eisenhower administration considered the TVA "an asp in the bosom at home, a dove of peace abroad."⁶² Former TVA Director David E. Lilienthal remarked that the President had marked the TVA "For Export Only."⁶³ In a revised version of his *TVA: Democracy on the March* (1953), a book that first appeared in 1944 within months of the publication of *Palestine: Land of Promise*, Lilienthal used the TVA's success abroad in an attempt to reignite interest in expanding the TVA at home. In a new chapter, "The TVA Idea Abroad," Lilienthal presented the testimonies of American travelers who "brought back with them confirmation of . . . the TVA as a symbol of the hopes, the desires, and the expectations of peoples in other countries." Lilienthal included the words of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas who envisioned the TVA as a crucial weapon in the crusade against communism. Speaking to the Tennessee General Assembly in 1951 (as war raged in Korea), Douglas remarked:

If we are bold enough to make [the TVA] an instrument of our Asiatic foreign policy, we can take the political initiative away from Soviet Russia, turn the tide and win country after country for the Democratic cause. . . . TVA represents an idea that can be utilized as one of the major influences to turn back the tide of Communism which today threatens to engulf Asia.

Lilienthal concluded the revised version of his book with an extensively annotated appendix detailing more than a dozen foreign emulations of the TVA. First and foremost of among those examples was the JVA.⁶⁴

In the United States, the TVA is perhaps best known to most Americans as a New Deal program they encountered in a history class. Similarly, to Israelis, Walter Clay Lowdermilk is both a figure in Israeli history texts and the namesake of the Lowdermilk School of Agricultural Engineering at Technion University, Israel's equivalent of America's MIT. For the residents of the Jordan Valley – Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian – the JVA is a reality. Now under exclusive Jordanian control and working in close cooperation with Israeli and Palestinian officials and experts, these most recent claimants to the "holy lands" continue to grapple with the realities that Walter Clay Lowdermilk first encountered more than sixty years ago. The exigencies of regional politics and economic development have delayed the necessary adjustment of man's agenda to nature's realities. But, the wise stewardship of land and water resources in a region where those resources are both scarce and, subsequently, hotly contested requires the sustained efforts of all of the region's disparate partners (Israelis, Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, and Egyptians). Their efforts involve ideology as much as engineering; their successes are largely the result of compromises with both men and nature. The benefits of these successes, as well as the costs of any failures, will reverberate throughout the region and the world. These realities would have come as no surprise to Walter Clay Lowdermilk.



Sign indicating Jordan Valley Authority (JVA) facility, in lower Jordan Valley.
Photo credit: Robert E. Rook.

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