

Omnibus Bill: Congressional Collision

A collision of committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives may well decide within the next few days the fate of Bruces Eddy dam and other Columbia Basin projects pending in this session of Congress.

Bruces Eddy dam on the North Fork of the Clearwater River and Burns Creek dam on the Upper Snake River were specifically mentioned as targets yesterday as the House Rules Committee chairman called for war to the death against numerous projects approved for authorization by the Senate. What the other targets may be depends in part upon the standards finally adopted by the House to guide its attack upon the Senate. As vaguely defined yesterday, those standards could possibly doom all Columbia Basin projects awaiting authorization in the Senate-approved omnibus bill.

It is discouraging and even disgusting to ordinary citizens to see as worthy a project as Bruces Eddy dam caught in the whirlpool of personal, partisan and institutional angers which dominate closing sessions of Congress. But they should try to glimpse at least some of the main currents contributing to the whirlpool.

One force is the personal ambition of committee chairmen of Congress — and even of the professional committee staff members who sometimes guide their elected bosses on key committees.

Rep. Howard W. Smith, D-Va., is one of the most power-conscious members of Congress. As chairman for many years of the potent House Rules Committee, he has endeavored to govern the content of legislation from his strategic position as well as direct the flow of bills through Congress. The House endeavored in the last session of Congress, with considerable prodding from the Kennedy administration, to reclaim some of the power usurped by Smith. His committee was enlarged, and some progressive blood was pumped into it. But Smith retains enough authority to kill almost any bill in Congress if he can plot his moves carefully enough. He is plotting his moves against the omnibus river development bill with studious care.

Yesterday Smith questioned individually members of the House Public Works Committee about how they would stand if they went as House conferees to negotiate with Senate representatives over differences between House and Senate versions of the omnibus bill. He won the promise of two Republican members that they would refuse to accept any "controversial" Senate additions to the House-approved project list. A Democratic conferee likely to be chairman of the House group also assured Smith he would oppose objectionable Senate-endorsed projects. Only after Smith had received such promises did he agree to allowing the House conferees to meet with the Senate conferees at all.

Smith indicated he might ask the entire House to endorse a rule instructing its conferees exactly how far they might go in negotiating with the senators. If the House votes to restrict its conferees in this fashion then the Senate has little recourse but to accept the best terms the House rule permits — then retaliate against some House-beloved program. If

the House conferees are permitted to negotiate without a formal House rule — but only under the stern injunctions of Smith's committee — then a measure of genuine compromise might yet be achieved.

Even in that event, some worthy projects certainly are going to be scuttled on one or another of the shoals clearly visible already.

A basic hazard is the jealousy between the House and Senate. The House membership certainly will reflect — though it will not duplicate in the same absurd degree — the rules committee's resentment that the Senate presumed to add to the omnibus bill projects which the House had not been asked to consider (as in the Bruces Eddy case) or had previously rejected (as in the Burns Creek affair). Sponsors of many types of legislation prefer to deal with the relatively orderly and responsible Senate rather than with the fractionated and often chaotic House. House members know this — and often resent it.

Another hazard is sectional rivalry. Many members of Congress — particularly in the House, where representation is on a mostly local basis without the direct national responsibilities inherent in the Senate — fear and mistrust further river development in the Pacific Northwest. They seize upon any division in the region itself (and some areas of the Northwest provide them with unending excuses) or any arguments even superficially sound to justify opposition to this region's projects. Authorization for future Northwest projects once was relatively easy to obtain in Congress. Now it is increasingly difficult.

The old public *versus* private power specter still is horrendous enough to frighten congressmen by the score whenever it is revived by the lobbyists. Bruces Eddy is not involved in this political cauldron, but Burns Creek is — quite irrelevantly and unfairly — and China Gardens may be.

Partisan struggles often are paramount in these congressional blood-letting ceremonies, especially in election years. Burns Creek dam almost certainly will fall on this account, regardless of whatever other burdens it bears in Congress. In a recent test vote only seven Republican members of the House voted for this project and 121 voted against it. Obviously the Republican party, including many Republicans in Idaho who favor the Burns Creek project, have decided to do all they can to kill it rather than give the Democrats any excuse to claim credit for its authorization. No river development project can expect to survive all the normal hazards in Congress, plus such single-minded, party-line opposition, too.

All of these forces and more will be involved somehow or other in the tug-of-war between the House and Senate over the omnibus river projects authorization bill. And always in the foreground will be the tempers of hurried, harried, exhausted lawmakers struggling to close up their congressional affairs and adjourn.

What will come out of it nobody knows as yet, but great skill and good fortune may well be required to bring out of it authorization for Bruces Eddy, Asotin or any other Northwest dams. — B. J.