

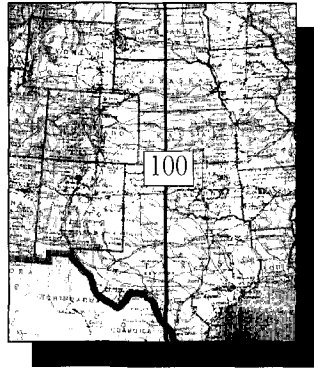
# The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## Now Hear This!!!

You could say it isn't easy being a liberal in the most conservative state in the Union if it weren't for the fact that in the most conservative state in the Union, the liberals occupy all the best bully pulpits. This means that, in Wyoming as in the rest of the 50 states, Democratic liberalism is the unofficial public philosophy—in spite of Wyoming's congressional delegation being solidly conservative Republican. Though liberals in Wyoming are a small minority, that minority is very *present*, which is why the mood of official gloom prevailing here might suggest to the uninitiated observer that Al Gore, not George Bush, won the presidential election last fall. Lamentation comes largely from distraught environmentalists, who have not been happy campers since the attempted Democratic coup in Florida collapsed in December.

Not counting the election itself, Bush's Cabinet was the first shock. Governor Christie Whitman replacing Carol Browner at the EPA was more or less acceptable to Western environmentalists (she comes to the position from a place called the Garden State, and has no problem with using abortion as a means of population control). Gale Norton replacing St. Bruce the Babbitt, though, was another story, since Norton created a significant paper trail in defense of property rights during her years as Colorado's attorney general (and, before that, in her association with James Watt at the Western States Legal Foundation). Having Agriculture taken away from an urban Jew and entrusted to someone with experience as an agriculturist didn't put smiles on environmentalist faces, either. The *Casper Star-Tribune* (the Wyoming equivalent of the *New York Times*, whose editorial-page editor is a native New Yorker) claims the Republicans are initiating a "Time of the Great Undoing." The Bush administration, the paper warns, intends to open Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Wyoming, and parts of the Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana to oil exploration and drilling; revoke the ban the National Park Service placed on snowmobiling in Yel-



lowstone Park; and drain the Zuni Salt Lake in New Mexico (where Zuni, Navajo, Hopi, and Acoma Indians gather salt "for religious purposes"). Nay, more (as Mencken liked to say): Republicans on the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee have announced their intention to review all 19 national monuments, and three expansions of monuments, created by President Clinton during his eight years in office. In short, "Republican leaders in Congress and the Bush administration are attempting to unravel the nation's environmental protection laws and the protections granted to some pristine areas of public lands." (No mention that much of the Great Rollback is targeted at Clinton's *Great Roll Forward—or Over?*—when, in the former president's final days in office, he seemed to be trying to monumentalize everything from himself to the branch creek where Black Elk took his last leak.) The controversy for the most part underscores a longstanding impression that conservatives always think they're right, while liberals believe themselves to be right *and* righteous.

The *Star-Tribune* has been working hard to make the point that "The oil and gas business couldn't have better friends in office than President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney." Maybe it could; then again, maybe it couldn't. But what a stupid time to be making the point, when Californians (by their standard) are freezing in the dark, while Westerners living east of the Sierra Nevada are paying through the nose before, perhaps, suffering the same fate, and the California and United States governments are talking seriously about *importing electrical power from Mexico*! "What was *your* gas bill last month?" is a ubiquitous question in these parts (mine was

\$320), followed by "How can we have a gas shortage in [expletive deleted] *Wyomin'*? Do you realize this saloon we're settin' in is *built* above a [expletive deleted] *gas bubble*?" The problem, I suppose, is that when you spend most of your life talking with rocks, trees, grizzly bears, and clouds, you forget in time how to communicate effectively with real people.

In an intelligent column in the same paper, two local coauthors, Geoffrey O'Gara and Dan Whipple, argue that

There seems to be only one relationship possible between the West and the federal government . . .

With the ascendancy of the Democrats, Rocky Mountain denizens inevitably charge that the administration has declared "War on the West . . ." In the interregnums between Democratic administrations, however, the West does not declare "peace." Instead, we launch a "Sagebrush Rebellion . . ." It [seems] illogical to fight a War on the West to install your own people and then declare a Sagebrush Rebellion against them once they are in.

With George W. Bush succeeding the "Antichrist Bill Clinton" in office, O'Gara and Whipple continue, the rebellion is raising its ugly head once more in Western legislatures. As evidence, they cite a Montana House bill that would require the state attorney general to transfer title to the state of all federal land within its boundaries, a bill in the Utah legislature requiring state approval of the sale of any land to the feds, and a proposal by the Idaho Department of Lands to hand over national forest lands to local communities.

What Whipple and O'Gara miss is that the process they describe is simply two steps forward and one back, which Sagebrush Rebels eternally hope to replace by two steps forward, one ahead—with the help, naturally, of the Republican administration in power. The West is not anti-federal—federalism as it's properly understood, at least—so much as it is anti-Democrat, anti-centralist, and anti-statist; and so the rebellion's re-

newed legislative assault, following the installation of George W., is intended not as a challenge to the new administration but a facilitator of its agenda regarding the disposition of the public lands in the West, and elsewhere. It makes sense, doesn't it? The columnists suspect that "privatization" is a code word for a sell-off which would be disastrous for the very "agricultural interests" who are loudest in their demands for privatization.

The first thing [that would happen] is that the bottom would fall out of land prices, destroying the capital value of most existing properties, especially large properties like ranches. And it is unlikely that current ranchers would be able to afford to buy it . . . Exxon, Shell, and dozens of other energy and mineral companies . . . would have real money to spend for that land. So not only would such a sale destroy the value of existing private land, but the lands they [*sic*] now lease would be owned by others who would demand market rates for grazing leases.

But the private-property movement is not just about ownership; it concerns the relationship between citizens and their government, individuals and the mass, man and nature. It has, in other words, to do with human freedom (or Western political philosophy) and man's relationship with the natural world (which is to say, religion). Land set-asides by Washington, D.C., are not ultimately about preservation—saving unspoiled lands for posterity, as statist politicians and bureaucrats assert—but control: managing human resources (people and businesses) the way the Bureau of Land Management and the National Forest Service manage (or mismanage) natural ones. As for the environmental movement, nearly all environmentalists are effectively Deep Ecologists now, whether or not they own up publicly to the fact. (Deep Ecologists believe that the human species ought to be regarded as simply one of many inhabiting the planet, not ordained by God, human consciousness, or intellect to its "privileged" position on earth.) Environmentalists and statisticians have functioned as an effective *dirigiste* coalition for several generations now, more than long enough to make their ultimate destination plain.

Paranoids (like me), who suspect that

the envisioned goal is to remove the existing rural population from the land, pen it up in megalopoli and give it some "meaningful" (meaning harmless and, probably, useless) occupation to pursue in an urban setting, strictly limit citizens' access to "protected land" (that is, all of it, except what hasn't been paved over with asphalt by then), and devote what isn't required for food production by the state to the recovery of "pristine" wilderness and the welfare of endangered species, probably aren't far off the mark. In fact, they're likely dead on it. The scenario is a perfect fit: By the time it could be realized, the population of the United States might easily have reached, say, a billion and a half, thanks to Washington's Romanesque immigration policies. The population explosion would encourage more extensive (and intensive) regulation of people and resources, with results gratifying to Greens and bureaucrats alike—if the human population could be forcibly removed from rapine contact with nature, tamed (no more guns, no more pioneer hardiness, no more rugged self-sufficiency), and reeducated to join the ranks of the mall-rat proletariat that an advanced but increasingly fearful technocommercial tyranny desires and demands.

Back to that *USA Today* election map again: Blue America (nihilistic, abstracted, socialistic, urban, decadent and dependent, feminized and effeminized, helpless, clueless, soft, and defenseless) deeply fears Red America (religious, realistic, capitalist, rural and small town, decadent to some extent but conscious to some degree of that fact, independent, manly and womanly still, self-reliant, relatively aware, with some muscle left, and ARMED). As well it should. The reddest of Red America—the Rocky Mountain West—has understood for some time that Blue America not only threatens its property and livelihood but challenges its social reality and its metaphysical concept of the world.

I recall a conversation I had some years ago in a sports bar in Douglas, Arizona, across the street from the old Gadsden Hotel where Pancho Villa once ate, with a horse trainer working at the Douglas track. Armando was a slightly built but wiry man of about my age, sharply dressed in a red silk shirt, cowboy boots, tight blue jeans cinched in with a belt of silver conchos, and a stiff, new hat circled by a snakeskin band. He looked Mexican; actually, he'd been born down there

but as a young man crossed to the States where he was drafted into the U.S. Army and packed off to Vietnam. In the Army what impressed him most was the staggering naivete of the upper-middle-class American draftees taken straight from college or graduate school and thrust ceremoniously into an environment where survival depended upon physical skills and experience. "They didn't know not to grab hold of a running rope," Armando said, wonderingly. "They never fired a gun in their lives before. They didn't know you don't back a guy with a knife into a corner." He shook his head pityingly, and drank his beer. "They were always the ones to be killed first," he finished. "I saw it happen time after time after time."

Environmentalists and their bureaucratic allies in Washington are engaged in the dangerous work of backing people with guns into corners, unaware of the danger they put themselves in thereby. If they're as smart as they think they are, they won't go through with it. Rather than lock up more land in national monuments and parks, shut down mining, obstruct drilling, halt timber sales, bankrupt ranchers, and create "wildernesses" that, in the circumstances of modern-day America, can only be expensive artifices—natural Disneyland where you can't buy cotton candy or shoot water pistols—they will . . . shut off immigration and shut it off but good—for good. No more talk from the Sierra Club about how we can enjoy continued high levels of immigration and zero population growth if the natives start having fewer babies. If the ruling class isn't willing to do that much, then forget it! Pave over Yellowstone, fill the Grand Canyon up with L.A.'s garbage, kill off every endangered species before it multiplies and becomes an even bigger political headache than it was before. Without a stop to immigration, everything environmentalists value is *finito*, dead, *caput*. Why should anyone be willing to make the other sacrifices necessary to preserve it?

If these people are smart, they won't push the West to the point where we have to make a choice between freedom and preservation, or even conservation. As human beings, we cannot allow ourselves to become slaves to nature, much less enslaved to other human beings for nature's sake, or in the name of nature. We just can't do it, and we *won't*.



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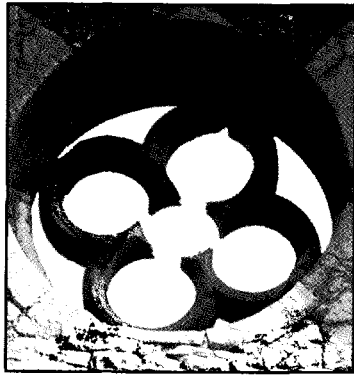
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