

ENVIRONMENT

and the Quality of Life

A Challenge for the President

Does President Nixon really want America's polluted rivers and lakes to be cleaned up once for all?

The question was put to him indirectly last month by the leading Democratic obstacle to his hopes for re-election in 1972, United States Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine.

The Senator personally said or did nothing evocative of the challenge. But the environmental subcommittee he chairs within the Senate Public Works Committee reported out on the sixth day of August, for the full committee's approval, a bill proclaiming the first set of clear and sharp priorities ever laid out for action toward ending pollution of the nation's waterways.

The top priority fixed by the subcommittee is "recycling of pollutants and the reclamation of water, including confined and contained disposal on land of pollutants so they will not migrate to cause (or will limit to the maximum extent attainable) water or other environmental pollution." In unlegislative English, this means that wherever possible human sewage effluent must be turned away from its present outfall in rivers and lakes, impounded for appropriate periods of time in treatment ponds inland, and then released to irrigate barren soils with fertilizing spray.

As a second priority (to be applied where soil conditions are not conducive to land disposal of sewage), the Senate bill calls for "the best available treatment of pollutants before discharge into receiving waters."

Together, these two priorities say that at the present time there is no requirement in law that the best available scientific knowledge and technological skill be put to use to clean the country's waterways and keep them clean.

As now worded, the laws on the

books provide only for a system of federal tax subsidies that pays for biological treatment of sewage at a rate of \$1-million for every hour of the standard forty-hour work week the year round, but does not remove from sources of public drinking water a host of disease-carrying viruses, nitrates hazardous to human health, or organic substances known to cause cancer.

This old and expensive but inefficient and haphazard regime would be ended by the bill Senator Muskie's subcommittee has approved. The text of the legislative draft specifies that no federal money would be given to states, municipalities, or other government agencies that failed to meet the two designated priorities by July 1, 1973.

To make sure that the old pattern is broken, the Senate subcommittee bill applies federal subsidies for sewage disposal to acquisition of land for treatment ponds and irrigation acreage as well as to the sewer pipes, pumps, electric power generators, and assorted equipment heretofore eligible.

Prints of the proposed Senate bill are now circulating. They have aroused a sharp reaction in the Environmental Protection Agency. Much of the planning for disposal of sewage on land would have to be done on a regional basis, and the federal government agency with the greatest experience in such planning is the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The enthusiasm with which the Corps built flood control dams in the past enraged many conservationists who have since come into prominence. These men have the sympathy of Russell Train, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, which is responsible for framing the policies that EPA pursues.

If President Nixon decides to stand behind the opposition to the water pollution control priorities of the Muskie subcommittee, he may find himself

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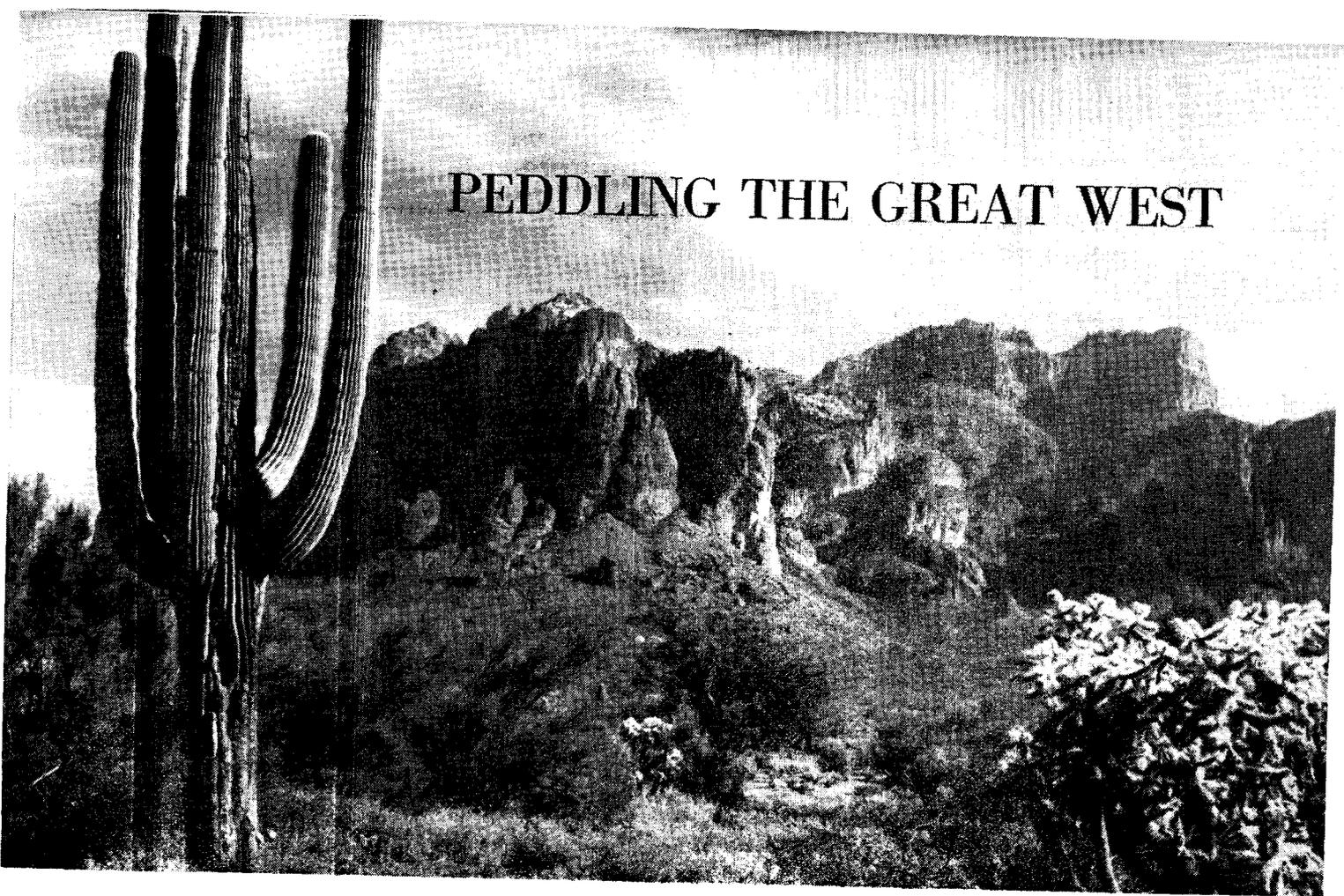
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aligned not only against the Democratic majority of the Senate but a bipartisan coalition in the House of Representatives as well.

The House Committee on Public Works is chaired by John A. Blatnik, Democrat of Minnesota. He has been making enthusiastic speeches about "the Muskegon project." This enterprise, which has been described in these pages ["Reviving the Great Lakes," SR, November 7, 1970], is a precedent-setting venture in land disposal of sewage. Five regional applications of its principles now are being studied by the Corps of Engineers. "In our new legislation [that is, the House counterpart of the Muskie subcommittee bill], we intend to foster innovations such as this," Blatnik has said. "Bill Harsha of Ohio, the ranking minority [Republican] member of the Public Works Committee and a strong champion of environmental protection, shares my enthusiasm. . . . We are approaching the . . . problem on a completely non-partisan basis because there is no place for political gamesmanship in our national effort to preserve the waters that must sustain all of our lives."

—JOHN LEAR,
Science Editor.



PEDDLING THE GREAT WEST

—Black S

by THOMAS W. PEW, JR.

TUCSON.
I followed the dashed purple line along Interstate Highway 19 south from Tucson along the Santa Cruz River from the saguaro cactus country in Pima County through swatches of graceful palo verde with their green trunks and branches, by stretches of cholla and prickly pear and barrel cactus and long spiny-armed ocotillo, down to Tubac Presico (where the oldest Spanish settlement in Arizona was located), on down to Tumacacori (where the ruins of a Spanish mission from 1691 stand), and finally to the old Baca Float Ranch, with its spread of desert grassland and rough-cast mountains. About twenty miles south of Tucson (eighteen miles or so north of the double border towns of Nogales), the dashed purple line ran into thick red, white, and blue stripes on a billboard from which a sketch of President Teddy Roosevelt's face advised me: **LAND IS THE BASIS OF WEALTH. INVEST IN RIO RICO LAND.**

THOMAS W. PEW, JR., is editor and associate publisher of *Troy Daily News*, of Troy, Ohio. He visited Arizona in the course of preparing a series of articles for his newspaper on out-of-state land companies that were peddling land in Ohio.

The garish billboard marked the end of the Baca Float and the beginning of a new kind of development for the whole of southern Arizona. The old ranch has been renamed the Rio Rico, and all 55,000 acres of it are being subdivided into building lots that are peddled like patent medicine to buyers who, with few exceptions, are conspicuously not from Arizona.

The developer of the Baca Float, General Acceptance Corporation (GAC), of Allentown, Pennsylvania, is the company that bought out Gulf American Corporation. Gulf American pioneered the selling of vast tracts of Florida land in little lots to people from every state in the United States and from sixty foreign countries. Gulf American company was so successful with its land-selling techniques (including cocktails, dinners, and airplane flights to Florida for prospective buyers) that it ran out of dry land and began selling land under water in the Big Cypress Swamp.

Albert Winnikoff described Gulf American's underwater land sales technique in his book *The Land Game* thus:

Since much of the Gulf American land, some 300,000 acres, is sloshy swampland, walking on it can be a dampening experience. Therefore, prospective Gulf American buyers are flown over the property at a height of

1,500 feet. From the air, it looks green, lush, beautiful. But below the verdant beauty is the Big Cypress Swamp. . . . When a freezing farmer from North Dakota winter flies into the melting warmth of that Florida sunshine, he is psychologically ripe for buying. And when a bright-eyed, soft-spoken, all-American boy with a warm Southern accent promises profits that warm the heart further, it's no wonder people buy. There is a mystical aura surrounding the whole transaction that starts off with a cocktail party. And since we generally meet friends, not enemies, at a party, the people of Gulf American Corporation make every effort to appear friendly. And who but a friend would offer to fly people from the frozen north to the sunlit south?

The ebullient performance described by Winnikoff ultimately brought on an investigation by the Florida Installment Land Sales Board. In the midst of this inquiry, a new law replaced the Florida Installment Land Sales Board with a new agency called simply the Florida Land Sales Board. On the strength of the old board's findings, the new board brought five charges of fraudulent sales practice against Gulf American, which first pleaded guilty and was ordered to suspend land sales for thirty days. Later, the company sued Florida for \$16-million, saying it had entered the guilty plea under du-