

## Western author

Don Lago's new book *The Powell Expedition* deals with Western explorer John Wesley Powell and his crew's 1869 trip down the Green and Colorado rivers through the Grand Canyon. Powell was an explorer who tried to plan the white West, and particularly its use of water ("Water wars," RN&R, Nov. 5, 2015).

**What would Powell think of the way the West is set up now? There are people living where he did not think they should.**

One of the first things you notice running a river is that water is a whole lot more powerful than human beings are, and you better obey the laws of water or you're going to be killed. And he sort of applied that idea to a larger observation, that there wasn't nearly enough water in the West ... and the settlement practices that had worked well in the East and the Midwest could not possibly succeed in the West. There just wasn't enough water for a 60-acre family farm to succeed. He tried to sound a warning about that in the '70s, and nobody wanted to hear it. It ran against the, almost a religion, of Manifest Destiny that America was destined to spread across the continent and find great economic wealth and great land and become a rich, powerful nation. Powell challenged that.



**Do you think he imagined what has happened to the Colorado?**

No, he certainly couldn't assume the West becoming as populous as it is. So he certainly saw that there were limits to water use here. And that's a lesson we still are trying to figure out. You know, most of the Southwest was settled by people from the East and Midwest where you just never imagined the possibility that you're going to run out of water. ... And a lot of our planning—or lack of planning—has been done out of that same old, you know, faith in Manifest Destiny. There's just no limits, you know. The frontier isn't going to run out. Our resources aren't going to run out. We can do whatever we please, and we can conquer the wilderness. And we're only now, I think, running up against the realities of that—and I don't think we've still totally, truly figured that out emotionally or in terms of our

planning for the future. So, yes, I don't think Powell would be entirely shocked by this. He couldn't have imagined the country with three hundred million people, but I think he saw our current circumstances pretty clearly, that we were going to oversettle the West and run out of water as the first important resource in the West.

**Did he lack political savvy or have too much of a faith in planning?**

Well, he probably had too much faith in political leaders, because he announced when he was a pretty important leader in Washington—he was running the U.S. Geological Survey—he announced that our plans for Western settlement were foolish, and I think he sort of figured people would listen to him and learn something from that, and they didn't. They just didn't want to hear him at all. So in that regard, he was naive. He certainly got himself in a lot of trouble as far as his career went. I think he was maybe a little too hopeful Americans would pay attention to the science and not to the national mythology. I think that's a mistake he made, was imagining that science rated more than it did.

**And that's still a problem.**

Exactly. I mean, we're still—over climate change issues—we're still arguing science versus Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny says there's no limits, and climate change just can't happen. It's not part of our belief system, so these people must be crazy if they're suggesting there's limits. So, yes, that's very much alive today. □

## NOTES FROM THE NEON BABYLON

BY BRUCE VAN DYKE

## Swamping down the clean

When you take a look at the Trump Cabinet, you really can't be blamed for thinking that something sorta fishy is going on. I mean, the Secretary of Interior is David Bernhardt, ex-lobbyist for the petroleum industry. The Health and Human Services secretary is ex-pharmaceutical industry lobbyist Alex Azar. The new temporary Defense secretary is ex-lobbyist for military contractors Mark Esper. The EPA chief is ex-coal industry lobbyist Andrew Wheeler.

All in all, the naked corruption is simply breathtaking in its brazenness. Indeed, I actually appreciate the transparency. I don't think there's much in the way of craftiness or guile or deception going on here, right? This guy just does what he wants, appoints all the inappropriate wolves to guard the various chicken coops, and if you don't like it, well—tough. "What's it to ya? Piss off, pal." And guess

what? This "Piss off, pal" approach is doing exactly what it's intended to do, which is *buy time*.

My favorite recent Twitler moment came when he was talking about the Mueller probe, and he was trying to use the word "origins." Only he couldn't say it. He literally could not say that particular three-syllable word. Instead, the word that fell out of his burger-hole was "oranges." So here's the Prez, talking about the "oranges" of the Mueller Report, and in so doing, not exactly sounding like the sharpest knife in the drawer. So, obviously frustrated by this blooper, our plucky DDDOTUS (doddering dipshit dotard) gave it another shot. And sure enough, once again, he said "oranges" instead of "origins." What the hell, close enough! He then moved on to the next action-packed sentence. It'd be funny if it wasn't freaking terrifying. □

Further proof that we as a country are almost now totally numb to the horror of DDDOTUS? How about a nationally famous advice columnist coming out, accusing the POTUS of rape, and our response is one enormous yawn, followed by a deafening wave of crickets? Can you imagine what the zombies on Fux News would be spitting up on their neckties if Obama had 15 rape accusers in his closet? □

Whether it's picking fights with the Muslims of Iran, or abusing Hispanic immigrants in brutal camps in Texas, we see the dark carnage of Trumpian Sadopopulism in action (these Sadopopulist deeds/state-ments are *precisely* how Twitler connects with his base). And make no mistake, the raw cruelty at the border has the stamp of Grand Wizard Supreme Superjerk Stephen Miller all over it. □



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