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Chapter 10: Our Citizen Briefing Points to the God Committee Staff

Zygmunt J.B. Plater

Boston College Law School, plater@bc.edu

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[from book manuscript text prior to condensation]

Chapter 10

Our Citizen Briefing Points to the God Committee Staff

Our involvement in the God Committee preparation should be intensive, but will have to be surreptitious as well. Through an intermediary, with luck, we are able to open a link to the chief of the Committee task force himself, Robert Davis. He is very professional, realizes we can provide some useful help, but is cautious.

We provide a range of facts and suggestions to Davis:

1. He should check the USDA ratings on the valley's soils. Although TVA denigrates the value of the farmlands, if his staff investigates they'll find that there are 16,500 acres of the highest-value prime USDA Class 1 and 2 agricultural soils. He should talk to Bob Sliger, an East Tennessee banker and agricultural expert whom Peter Alliman has located. Sliger will provide data on the rarity and agricultural productivity of the valley's prime soils.
2. The staff should ask TVA about its actual experience of industrial development along other reservoirs. We've discovered that TVA condemned more than 200,000 acres around other reservoirs claiming, as at Tellico, that they would attract many new industries, but decades later their grand total of industrialized acreage amounts to only sixteen acres.
3. The staff analysis of Tellico needs to understand that the "barge traffic" benefits TVA claims for the dam ignore the sub-standard size of the locks downstream immediately below the project. It's nowhere on the official record, but if the God Committee staff inquires about those locks, they'll discover that most modern barges are too big to pass through them, and, further, every barge chain would have to be disconnected to pass through, and then reassembled. Given the improbability of practical barge usage at a Tellico reservoir, TVA's alleged "Tellico Port Authority" will probably remain just the small concrete wall with rusting fittings currently standing in an overgrown weedy pasture near Vonore, and its "Executive Port Commissioner" Bob Pennington will remain forever landlocked in his small real estate office in nearby Madisonville.
4. Logically, if barge access is insignificant, there's no difference between potential industrial development benefits for a reservoir and for the river, except that a river-based industrial park would have substantially *more* acreage available.

5. The energy claims for the dam have been escalated as a TVA public relations tactic. But the Committee staff should note that any power attributable to diverted flows through the neighboring dam amounts to less than .001 of TVA's current capacity. To put that in further perspective the staff should request a TVA research report on biomass energy, deep-quarantined by Red Wagner, that had revealed that merely burning (or otherwise oxidizing) the crops raised in the Little T valley each year in a biomass facility would net 45% more in annual energy production than a dam diversion could.
6. Flood control benefits claimed by TVA for the dam should be discounted by the fact that Tellico would have detectable effect on only one downstream community, Chattanooga, and that negligible. We inform Davis of floodplain zoning research done by TVA in the 1960s (I'd coincidentally worked with this TVA data doing doctoral work in Michigan) indicating that recent flood damage in Chattanooga could have been prevented by sound land use advisories, which TVA water division officials had over-ruled. As a corollary, moreover, the old TVA study showed that managing the river valley with crops and non-structural uses would provide significant safety benefits, mitigating downstream flooding by absorbing the peaks and velocity of future flood flows.
7. TVA's recreation claims for the dam should be scrutinized for baseless estimates of potential recreational usage. The claims, furthermore, aren't netted: the staff should note TVA's refusal to acknowledge that a substantial amount of claimed potential recreation use would merely be switched over from existing reservoirs. The staff report should acknowledge the uniqueness value of the Little T's river recreation given that the region's rivers have been eliminated by 68 TVA dams. It should also note the lucrative potentials for flowing-river recreational development, as on Arkansas's White River which generates \$300-million annually in tourist and recreational spending; TVA has consistently refused to consider developing the Little T's river recreation resources.
8. But *tourism* is our pet gorilla among potential economic river benefits. If the Committee staff considers the potential for a "Cherokee Trail" leading up through the valley's Indian and archaeological sites, from the two adjacent East-West and North-South Interstates to the Smokies, which at 10 million visitors a year have the highest visitation of any national park, the tangible economic advantages of river development will be overwhelming. Designating it as part of a "Circle the Smokies" tourist route would also boost the regional economy of western North Carolina as well. Virtually all the tourist features of the Little T valley, however, would be drowned under the water and mud of a reservoir. We'd included a map of our projected tourism development "Cherokee Trail" in the Supreme Court brief, but no one has publicly acknowledged its possibilities. The Committee can.

9. Picking up on the tourism economics, Bob should also talk off the record with Superintendent Boyd Evison at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park about alternatives for the valley lands near the Park. Evison is ecstatic at the idea of providing a manageable tourism entry route into the Park, free of the shrill materialism and hullabaloo of Gatlinburg (Tennessee's answer to Coney Island at the Park's Northwest entrance). Coordinated with Park management, the valley lands could provide extensive camping, horseback riding, and float trip facilities to take pressure off the Smokies. Evison himself is based in Interior, in the National Park Service. Politically he cannot take a public stand for the darter, but if asked he is eager to provide support for river development, against the dam.
10. Bob should also communicate off the record with Dr. Bennie Keel, in Interior's Historic Preservation office. Keel is even more gun-shy than Evison about Tellico, but he says the valley's historical resources are ripe and ready for economically beneficial management. "Heck, the state of Ohio is generating several million bucks annually with their designated Historic Route for tourists, and the Little Tennessee valley is a hundred times more significant and interesting than all of the Ohio sites put together!"
11. The Tellico Dam structure is sited on a geological fault-line, susceptible to fractures and seismic dislocation, and it violates existing dam safety criteria. Any estimate of dam economics must include retro-fitting the dam to bring it up to safety code.

- and so on.

There is no way the God Committee staff would have learned of most of these issues from TVA, or on their own. So the clandestine flow of communications between Bob Davis and his God Committee staff, and "Andy Graham" and our group down in Tennessee, goes back and forth through November and December, giving us a pleasant, unfamiliar sense of being heard and valued as solid, rational public critics of a fundamentally unsound project.