

Remarks, Glen Canyon Dam, Spring Equinox 1981

Edward Abbey

1981

Greetings. How nice to be back in Page—or Paje, Arizona—shithead capital of Coconino County.

We are gathered here today to celebrate three important occasions: the rising of the full moon, the arrival of the Spring Equinox, and the imminent removal of Glen Canyon Dam.

I do not say that the third of these events will necessarily take place today—although I should warn you that some of my born-again Christian brothers and sisters have been praying, night and day, for one little *pree-cision* earthquake in this here immediate vicinity, and I do predict that one of these times their prayers will be answered—in fact, even now, I think I perceive an ominous-looking black fracture down the face of yonder cee-ment plug—and this earth will shake, and 1 that dam will fall, crumble, and go. Glen Canyon Dam is an insult to God’s Creation, and if there is a God he will destroy it. And if there isn’t we will take care of it, one way or another, and if we don’t then Mother Nature most certainly will. Give her a few more centuries and the Colorado River will fill Lake Foul with mud, right to the brim, and plug its penstocks and jam [its] pressure tubes with sand; then the river will come flowing over the top and Glen Canyon Dam will erode away, rapidly, down to grade level, down to the bedrock sandstone of Glen Canyon. Another century or two—at most—and the river will clean out Glen Canyon, Narrow Canyon, Cataract Canyon, the Dirty Devil, and the San Juan, and the Escalante and the hundred other beautiful, mysterious side canyons now *temporarily* buried beneath the stagnant, stinking waters of Lake Foul. Open once again to sunlight, these canyons will awake from the dead. The willows and the cottonwoods will return, the ricegrass and the cliffrose and the juniper, and the birds will come back, and the deer, and the lion and the bighorn sheep, and then, once again, human beings of some kind. People—our descendants, will also return, for Glen Canyon and all its hundred side canyons will again be open to human access, to human habitation, to human delight, as well as to other creatures which have an equal right to the enjoyment of this earth.

The good news I bring will certainly come to pass. The collapse of Glen Canyon Dam is as inevitable as the rising of the moon, or the revival of spring, or the flow of the river home to the sea. Let the engineers build fifty more dams between here and the Rockies, they can only retard, they cannot stop, the irresistible processes of erosion and renewal. The mountains and plateaus will continue to be uplifted, the rains and snows will fall, the waters will plunge downward back to their source, again and again and again.

All very well, you say, but we prefer not to wait. We want immediate results. We want to see Glen Canyon alive and beautiful, the river free and flowing, in our own lifetimes. To those—the impatient among you, I say, sign our petition to Congress demanding the prompt dismantling of Glen Canyon Dam. Or—we’re reasonable folks, we’re willing to compromise, we too believe in balance—they can keep their goddam dam, for the time being, if they open the gates and *drain* Lake Foul. Drain it, to the dregs, to the bitter dregs. Never mind the sunken cabin cruisers, the skeletons of

drowned water skiers, the fifty million jars of fishbait and the five hundred million empty beercans—time and the winds and the sun and the floods will scour clean this dreary, muck-coated spectacle of ruin, and restore it, in due course, to the green and living wilderness paradise that Glen Canyon once was—only nineteen years ago—and will be again, someday soon. All the garbage will be carried into Lake Merde, where it belongs.

Yes, in 1962, only nineteen years ago, they closed the bypass tunnels of Glen Canyon Dam and began the inundation of Glen Canyon—the place that only a few ever knew. Perhaps a few hundred, a few thousand, were privileged to make that enchanted journey down the Colorado from Hite to Lee’s Ferry, through this canyon that Major Powell named Glen. What those few saw was first of all the living flowing river, with its riffles and minor rapids—nothing serious or difficult. It was in fact a trip that any could make, on their own, with almost any kind of equipment—no need there for professional guides or commercial outfitters—from Cub Scouts to little ole ladies in inner tubes, with or without life jackets, anybody could do it. In and along the river were sandbars, beaches, willow groves and glades of cottonwood, and the innumerable grottoes, caves, arches, amphitheaters, coves, [and] side canyons along the way so aptly named by Powell and his men: Cathedral in the Desert, Music Temple, Hidden Passage, Dungeon Canyon, Forbidden Canyon, to name but a few. Up these side canyons were great natural bridges, like Gregory, now submerged, and countless pools, streams, waterfalls, springs, and seeps. Everything was full of life—not only deer and lion but also fox, beaver, coyote, bighorn, bullfrogs and gopher snakes, great horned owls and great blue herons, wood ibis, killdeer, sandpipers and redtail hawks. Plus the ancient human history of the canyon: the hundreds of ruins, granaries, shelters, and villages left by the Anasazi, the priceless rock art of pictograph and petroglyph. All this you could’ve known in Glen Canyon, plus a scenic grandeur equal to though quite different from Grand Canyon, or Desolation, or Hells Canyon, or Big Bend. All this plus the sweetness and adventure and wonder of unspoiled wilderness. All this and much, much more.

And they took it away from us. The politicians of Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado, in cahoots with the land developers, city developers, industrial developers of the Southwest, stole this treasure from us in order to pursue and promote their crackpot ideology of Growth, Profit, and Power—growth for the sake of power, power for the sake of growth. We can see now that Glen Canyon Dam was merely a step toward the urbanizing, industrializing, and—probably—militarizing of the American West. But Glen Canyon Dam remains particularly painful and obnoxious—not only symbol but ongoing exemplification of what greed and stupidity can do to the American land. Surely no man-made structure in modern American history has been hated so much, by so many, for so long, with such good reason, as Glen Canyon Dam.

The industrialization, urbanization, [and] militarization of the American West continues. More dams are proposed, more coal-burning and nuclear power plants projected, an MX system that would devastate much of Nevada and western Utah, more river diversion projects, more strip-mining of our mountains and clearcutting of our forests,

the misuse of water and the abuse of the land—all for the sake of short-term profit, all to keep the industrial-military Empire going and growing until it finally reaches the point where it must self-destruct, destroy itself. I predict that the military-industrial state will eventually collapse, both here and abroad, whether capitalist, socialist, or communist, either by war or by internal contradictions (the waste of power to produce more power) or by both. This may happen in our lifetimes. There will be much suffering and hardship, but enough humans will survive to carry on in a new and better way. Humanity will learn a bitter lesson: that this earth was not created for human use alone, that all creatures great and small, animal and plant, have the inherent, basic, self-evident right to exist, to be, to live out their lives in their own manner, to produce posterity and pursue happiness in their own individual way. Humans must learn this lesson before we can change: that human life is a part and only a part of the great web of life; and that all life depends, first and foremost, upon the preservation of a livable earth. "What is the use of building a great city if you haven't got a tolerable planet to build it on?" Earth first. How can we create a civilization fit for the dignity of free men and women if the globe itself is ravaged, polluted, defiled, and insulted? Ah yes, earth first. The domination of Nature leads to the domination of human beings.

Meanwhile, what to do? Here I can offer nothing but more of the same. Oppose. Oppose the destruction of our homeland by these alien forces from Houston, Tokyo, Manhattan, D.C., and the Pentagon. And if opposition is not enough, we must resist. And if resistance is not enough, then subvert. After ten years of modest environmental progress, the powers of industrialism and militarism have become alarmed. *The Empire Strikes Back*. We must continue to strike back at the Empire, by whatever means and every means available to us. Win or lose, it's a matter of honor. Lend a hand, grab a holt. Oppose, resist, subvert, delay, until the Empire begins to fall apart.

And until that happens: enjoy! Enjoy our great American West—climb those mountains, run those rivers, hike those canyons, explore those forests, and share in the bounty of wilderness, friendship, love, and the common effort to save what we love. Do this and we will be strong, and bold, and happy, we will outlive our enemies, we will live to piss on their graves. Joy, shipmates, joy.

Earth First, life first, freedom first. God bless America, let's save some of it. Love the Land—or Leave it alone.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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Archive.org. Original dead link:
<<http://thejournal.link/staff/~johnfjacobi/misc/abbey-speech>>.
This speech was given at one of the first public events by Earth First!, the "cracking"
of Glen Canyon Dam.

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