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This book began as an effort to reinsert Congress into the post-1945 political history of the United States. The body of historiography I encountered during graduate school focused almost exclusively on the presidency in matters of national policymaking. Adherents of the “organizational synthesis,” in particular, looked to the interest groups, experts, and bureaucrats who orbited the executive branch to explain why the federal government expanded the way it did during the twentieth century. Scholars like Steven Skowronek, Brian Balogh, and Theda Skocpol, who emphasized the contingent nature of “modernization,” usually depicted the legislative branch as an inveterate opponent, rather than a willing architect, of big government. If such “top-down” history marginalized Congress, however, the view was not much better from the bottom up. Historians who studied social movements or cultural experiences viewed legislative machinations as remote from and largely irrelevant to the authentic struggles of local people and communities.

To “bring Congress back in” to narratives of American political development, I searched for a policy area that fused “top-down” and “bottom-up” storylines and featured legislators as the first responders on the federal level. The environment was a perfect choice. The rise of the environmental regulatory state ranks as one of the most far-reaching transformations in American government since World War II. Grassroots activism and shifting cultural ideals helped bring about this change, particularly in the sixties and seventies, but I soon realized that Congress did more than just respond reflexively to the prevailing zeitgeist. Water pollution control policy provided a particularly useful case study in this regard, since, beginning in the fifties, legislators’ concern about national water quality both outpaced public concern and predated the environmental movement. As such, a congressional focus prompts us to reconsider the periodization of post-World War II environmental politics.

Likewise, paying heed to the institutional structure of the legislative branch can tell us something new about the substance of
environmental policy and how it came to be. It is less important to know that the 1965 Water Quality Act became law during the Johnson administration or that the 1972 Clean Water Act did so during the Nixon years than it is to understand that both laws were the products of Congress’s “committee era.” This, too, suggests a new periodization—but that is not all. Historians like Julian Zelizer have underscored how standing committees and their powerful chairmen shaped important federal policies, like taxation, that fueled the growth of the modern American state. Beyond the power of the purse, Congress’s internal structure and dynamic also determined why legislators played a more assertive role than did the executive branch in placing emerging policy priorities like pollution control on the national agenda.

As I came to discover, the institutional exigencies of the legislative branch often prescribed the ideas, interests, and values that informed environmental policy and law. As a consequence, the persons or organizations articulating them did not always conform to conventional wisdom about what constitutes an “environmentalist.” The title of this book, and the chapters to follow, indicate that the roots of environmental policy extended in multiple directions and drew inspiration from more varied sources than either political or environmental historians realized. Likewise, they suggest that practitioners in both fields will find richer stories to tell when Congress is given its due.

Much like J. R. R. Tolkien, I found that this tale grew in the telling. Along my way there and back again, I incurred many debts, which I gladly acknowledge here.

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Introduction

By the middle of the twentieth century, pollution had become a predicament that spared few rivers, lakes, or streams in the United States—and no wonder. The continent’s water resources bore a considerable burden for a burgeoning nation. These waters nourished its population’s agriculture, buoyed its industry, transported its goods, and supported its cities, even as their beauty continued to stir the souls of its intrepid vacationers and outdoor enthusiasts. As the country emerged victorious from World War II, Americans pursued postwar prosperity with well-deserved optimism but soon discovered that the by-products of that prosperity befouled the very waterways that sustained it. Between 1900 and 1950, the population of the United States doubled from 76 million to 151 million, and its industrial capacity expanded by 700 percent. World War II in particular sparked a dramatic burst in production and urbanization that accelerated these upward trends. As populace and productivity increased, so too did the volume, intensity, and complexity of pollution from municipal and industrial sources.

Pollution did not have to be “unnatural” to cause problems. Domestic sewage contains mostly organic materials, which provide a hearty meal for aquatic microscopic organisms. Their feasting decomposes fecal wastes into phosphorus and nitrogen, but receiving waters pay the tab in the form of dissolved oxygen to complete the necessary chemical reactions. In 1920, the total “oxygen demand” exerted by such waste loads nationwide was equivalent to that of the raw sewage produced by 40 million people. By the mid-fifties,
Despite the construction of 6,500 municipal treatment plants nationwide, the “population equivalent” of municipal pollution alone had ballooned to 75 million people; organic wastes from manufacturing effluent approached twice that volume. As a consequence, oxygen deficiencies plagued waterways with heavy urban-industrial concentrations, particularly in the Northeast and the Midwest. Lakes Erie and Michigan, along with the Upper Mississippi, Calumet, Delaware, Hudson, Merrimack, and Ohio Rivers (and their tributaries) suffered frequent fish kills, putrid odors, and zones practically devoid of life—except for eels, suckers, and an overabundance of algae that thrived in waters with excessive amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus.

Although public health officials made great advances in the first half of the century in neutralizing waterborne diseases, much of what flowed into America’s waters confounded conventional knowledge or treatment technology. This included inorganic industrial wastes like metal filings, pickling liquors, phenols, and acids. During and after World War II, an expanding chemical industry produced dozens of new synthetic compounds each year, discharging complex by-products whose effects on streams were largely unknown. Perhaps the fastest-growing sector was petrochemicals. Oil and petroleum derivatives not only spilled into the densely industrialized Ohio River, but also the Houston ship channel, Galveston Bay, and other waterways in the Southwest where the majority of the nation’s oil refining took place.

Not all the culprits were industrial by-products, however. From burgeoning towns and suburbs, manufactured consumer items like synthetic detergents, lawn fertilizers, and insecticides flowed through sewers, washed into local streams during rainfall, or penetrated into groundwater, where they resisted decomposition. Nor were all pollutants complex or exotic. Rivers already prone to siltation, like the Mississippi, Delaware, and Potomac, carried even denser loads when activities that promoted run-off (commercial agriculture, logging, real estate development, and damming) accelerated. Rain seeping through abandoned and exposed coal mines leached sulfuric acid into Appalachian streams. Heat emitted from steam electrical power plants during the cooling process elevated water temperatures to levels that reduced oxygen or endangered aquatic wildlife. And high salt concentrations threatened the potability of water drawn from western rivers heavily tapped for crop irrigation, from rivers vulnerable to the Atlantic Ocean’s incursion in times of drought,
and from subterranean tables in areas as diverse as Michigan, Florida, Oklahoma, and California.3

For most of the country’s history, polluted waters remained, in the words of President Dwight Eisenhower, a “uniquely local blight.” What was unique, in fact, was the federal system outlined by the Constitution, which delimited the authority of the national government and vested individual states with the power to police both public health and private markets. When it came to pollution, few Americans, Eisenhower included, had a problem with this arrangement. Of course, pleas for a more forceful federal response arose from some corners, particularly those associated with sport fishing or conservation. But these voices were few. Politically influential business leaders preferred environmental regulations that were minimal and overseen by local officials who were accountable. Local officials, meanwhile, guarded their spheres of influence and resisted federal encroachment. And citizens retained a vigilant distrust of a distant, centralized state. As late as 1950, the most prominent federal water pollution statute on the books was a weak, temporary law that extended no authority to enforce standards or punish recalcitrant violators.

Within little more than two decades, however, all that changed. Nothing heralded the new era quite like the 1972 Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments, more commonly known as the Clean Water Act. This groundbreaking law coupled stringent standards and tough federal enforcement with unprecedented programmatic objectives, including a goal to eliminate discharges into the nation’s waters by 1985. Its passage confirmed that water pollution had graduated from a uniquely local blight to occupy an unequivocal place on the national agenda.

How and why did this transition occur when it did? The primary explanation offered by historians and other observers is the rise of environmentalism, and with good reason. Just as happened in the struggle for civil rights, heightened citizen awareness and participation helped transform the environmental policy landscape—and American society. By the late sixties and early seventies, grassroots activists, public interest advocates, and ordinary voters had united to voice their apprehension about the fragile state of the natural world. They converted anxiety into political capital and prodded government officials to reexamine the costs associated with unchecked growth. This mass movement channeled the New Left’s faith in direct action as well as
its sense of urgency and moral imperative. But it also amplified a diffuse chorus of local concerns, which in turn reflected a deeply rooted shift in public values. In the years after World War II, a growing population of middle-class, urban, and educated Americans became more enthusiastic “consumers” of natural amenities, attuned to the benefits of open space, fresh air, and clean streams for human health and well-being. From this perspective, then, environmentalists combined the forces of cultural change and grassroots politics to challenge entrenched interests and compel the federal government to take a more active, aggressive role in regulating pollution.4

Such a singular focus on mass movement environmentalism, however, has obscured the full panorama of people, organizations, ideas, and events that gave rise to the environmental regulatory state. It is the purpose of this book to reveal what the traditional storyline has neglected by weaving the history of the federal water pollution control program into a broader narrative of political and institutional development after World War II. This more inclusive approach acknowledges the impact of familiar activists and agendas. But it also reveals influential advocates for pollution control where no one previously had bothered to look for them. Indeed, the spotlight falls on a less-celebrated, though no less significant cast of characters whose activities, properly accounted for, reconfigure the boundaries of environmental politics. These were the “unlikely environmentalists.”

The classification is a loose one, and purposely so. Unlikely environmentalists include those persons or bureaucracies whose efforts on behalf of water quality would register as unexpected, counterintuitive, and even ironic when measured against popular and scholarly assumptions about the origins of environmental law. The label is also applied to more renowned environmental politicians and professionals whose careers and motivations, once re-examined, defy conventional depictions. It does not, however, imply merely cynical or ulterior motives. Richard Nixon’s surprising contributions to federal pollution control policies, for example, though well chronicled in these chapters, remained products of political expediency that failed to hold his interest. If opportunism were all that defined unlikely environmentalists, there would be little to recommend them. But there is more to them than that.

Unlikely environmentalists remind us that the federal government’s interest in redressing polluted streams after 1945 also grew out of a set of priorities distinct from those voiced by the grass roots. These alternative influences
have been eclipsed by the long shadow cast by the environmental movement, but recovering them is crucial. By interpreting environmental policy simply as the product of upheaval, or as the outgrowth of a single set of values, we risk overlooking the continuity and diversity of other discourses—technical, institutional, and political—that played a part in its evolution.

Advocates of economic development, missile system designers, and dam-building bureaucrats may not have represented the typical audience at an Earth Day rally. On first inspection, their interests appear indifferent or even inimical to the cause of clean water. Yet they did not serve exclusively as a force of opposition in environmental politics. In the course of pursuing their own agendas within well-established organizational channels, these ubiquitous actors in the nation’s political life took an active interest in water pollution and proceeded to shape how policymakers devised solutions to the problem. They did so not only prior to the onset of a tangible environmental movement, but afterward as well.

The institution at the center of this process was the U.S. Congress. In recent years, students of post-1945 political history have come to recognize the extent to which the legislative branch, not just the executive, took the initiative in “state-building,” or the expansion of the federal government’s administrative capacity. True, Congress conceded the advantage to the “imperial presidency” in terms of in-house expertise, staff support, media relations, control of classified information, and a centralized administrative structure equipped for rapid responses to national crises. But ever since the nineteenth century, the legislature has modernized in its own way. It grew as the nation’s population did and responded to an ever-increasing workload with a system of standing committees that accommodated both the need for policy specialization and the demands of new legislative careerists. After World War I, in both the House and the Senate, formal and informal rules coalesced to promote the autonomy of committee chairs and detach them from the strict discipline of party leadership. By the end of World War II, a constellation of independent chairmen exerted near total control over the pace and substance of legislative output. Although some reveled in obstruction, others established their committees as hubs for policy networks that served as fertile ground for new government initiatives.5

The story of water pollution control is a story of congressional state building. The legislative branch acted more assertively than the executive branch
to make a federal case of water quality in the postwar era. Moreover, Congress’s responsiveness to the issue was a function of its own internal evolution over the course of the twentieth century. Its decentralized institutional structure and behavioral norms encouraged legislators to pursue novel policy initiatives, often outpacing public demand for them. At the same time, however, these initiatives often grew out of—and were filtered through—existing committee jurisdictions and the ingrained networks of interest groups, experts, and federal bureaucracies attached to them. Congress, then, served as the arena where unlikely environmentalists operated and thrived. It was there that older agendas, reflecting long-standing national values and priorities, continued to receive their fullest airing. They provided a ready template for legislators seeking to define a new role for the federal government in environmental regulation, a template that persisted and adapted to the challenges issued by the movement culture of the sixties and seventies.

To tell this story, the book is organized into three parts. Part One focuses on the most prominent set of values and priorities influencing the early politics of water pollution control, which I refer to collectively as the “developmental discourse.” For much of the twentieth century, when Americans worried about water, they usually worried about running short of it. Improving and impounding local watercourses ranked among the highest priorities for business and civic leaders nationwide, even in eastern communities blessed with more humid climes.

Such collective enthusiasm for water resources development found institutional expression in Congress. Committees specializing in public works and reclamation projects mediated between solicitous interest groups and the federal construction agencies eager to oblige them. These insulated policy units, or “iron triangles,” as political scientists call them, directed a generous dispersal of government funds to build dams, reservoirs, and diversions along virtually every free-flowing stream that could bear them (and some that could not). Following World War II, as the demand for water surged amid an unprecedented urban–industrial take-off, Congress responded with annual public works budgets that soared into the billions.

Federal water pollution control policy during the post-1945 era evolved as an adjunct of this extensive congressional pursuit of water development. In the fifties and sixties, conventional concerns about water quantity often
shaped legislative approaches to water quality. Contemporary policymakers interpreted pollution as part and parcel of a national water resource problem, since it impeded the reuse of limited supplies and exacerbated deficiencies that seemed to pose an ominous threat to regional economic growth. As a matter of jurisdiction, the same public works committees that dispensed local pork barrel projects to engineer an end to scarcity also presided over the fledgling expansion of what would become the federal government’s largest environmental regulatory program. This institutional pedigree left its mark on the substance of water quality legislation.7

The unlikely environmentalists introduced in Part One are precisely those legislators who discovered water pollution in the process of doling out pork and promoting development. Some used this “distributive politics” to muster new constituencies in support of federal environmental regulation at a time when business opposition was strong and public environmental consciousness was not. John Blatnik (D-Minn.), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Rivers and Harbors, shepherded the first permanent water pollution control legislation through Congress in 1956 by recasting it in the more familiar New Deal mold of government-promoted natural resource development, employment, and economic growth. Others, like the Senate’s reigning king of pork, Robert Kerr (D-Okla.), had little use for an expanded regulatory state but did wish to justify Congress’s multibillion-dollar public works bills in the face of executive branch condemnation. He used the prestige of a select committee in 1959–1960 to underscore the linkage between water quality and quantity, depicting federally funded dams in Oklahoma and waste treatment plants in Ohio as part of the same national blueprint for prosperity. Kerr embraced pollution control to deflect criticism of special interest politics and localism in the public works budget; Blatnik exploited special interest politics and localism to promote pollution control. What they both shared, however, was the power of the congressional committee chair to marshal institutional resources, from staff support to purse strings, to shape policy.

Even the nation’s foremost environmental lawmaker took his career cues from Congress’s post–World War II committee system, not the will of the people or an inherent love of nature. Edmund Muskie (D-Maine) earned a reputation as the Senate’s “Mr. Clean” in the sixties and seventies, with a résumé that boasted some of the nation’s most important pollution control statutes. Yet Muskie was not just an unlikely environmentalist, he was also
an unwilling one, at least initially. A New Deal–style Democrat and former governor, Muskie came to the Senate in 1958 seeking prestige for himself and economic development for his poor, rural state. His committee assignments, for reasons beyond his control, portended neither. Placed on the Senate Public Works Committee but denied the chairmanship of the coveted Rivers and Harbors Subcommittee, in 1963 he found himself saddled with a temporary subcommittee on air and water pollution control, an assignment he bemoaned as marginal and irrelevant to his broader ambitions.

But the chairmanship he didn’t ask for—and didn’t want at first—allowed Edmund Muskie to pursue an alternative path to power. Muskie soon learned to broker another indispensable congressional resource besides pork: knowledge. The junior senator realized that his modest subcommittee offered him more than just a primer on smog and sewage. It also provided an institutional base to publicize an emerging social problem, develop legislation to address it, and cultivate constituencies to lobby for continuous policy implementation. In short, it allowed him to become a legislative entrepreneur. Muskie leveraged his authoritative knowledge to build consensus—in committee, in Congress, and among a myriad of interests in both the public and private sectors—to create a more viable federal water quality program at a time when relatively few Americans demanded one.

As a consensus builder, Muskie continued to rely on a set of traditional assumptions that pervaded the postwar policymaking system. He, too, viewed water pollution control as a way to conserve a scarce natural resource essential for regional development. Unlike his predecessors, however, he moved beyond distributive politics to devise a developmental mode of environmental regulation. To augment national water supplies, his 1965 Water Quality Act sought to establish regionally specific ambient stream standards and impose some of the costs of cleanup on industrial dischargers. The legislation’s potential to promote local water resource planning may have motivated the senator and his colleagues more than the prospect of punitive action against recalcitrant polluters. But Muskie’s emphasis on resource management catered to both developmental and environmental concerns. It did not overlook aesthetic or health-oriented justifications for water quality regulation so much as it subsumed them within a broader utilitarian framework. This policy outlook comported with the political climate of the early sixties, when the Johnson administration’s newfound interest in “natural beauty” and ecology
coexisted with its stated intention to develop and manage the water supply of
every river basin in the country. It also comported with the atmospheric cli-
mate, as the most severe northeastern drought of the twentieth century dra-
matically underscored the link between water quality and quantity in dense
urban concentrations.

Without recourse to a broad base of grassroots support or a powerful na-
tional environmental lobby, Muskie looked to two other pillars of postwar
policymaking—experts and federalism—to overcome entrenched oppo-
sition to his initiative. The legislation featured multiple safeguards to pre-
save local control and deferred to the sanitary engineers who dominated
state regulatory boards. As such, the limits of political acceptability dictated
the structure of Muskie’s pollution control program. Nevertheless, he also
sincerely endorsed its cooperative, technician-centered approach as the best
regulatory option for promoting long-term enhancement of water quality.

Unfortunately for Muskie, prevailing assumptions about development,
expertise, and localism were in transition even as he was locking them into
law in 1965. By the latter half of the sixties, their perceived legitimacy had
waned. Once a mass environmental movement emerged as a tangible politi-
cal and cultural force, Muskie’s careful consensus building, deference to fed-
eralism, and developmental outlook not only became less necessary—these
became political liabilities. Faced with a whole host of challenges from ag-
gressive interest groups, new sets of experts, the media, other congressional
committee chairs, and even a Republican White House, the senator was soon
forced to reconsider his regulatory philosophy.

While accounting for this undeniable upheaval in environmental poli-
tics during the late sixties and early seventies, Part Two of the book taps the
vein of underlying continuity that also played a crucial role in shaping the
substance of policy. The focus shifts from development to a second postwar
ethos, less familiar but no less prominent or pervasive. I have dubbed it the
“systems discourse.” It refers to a broad affinity in the political culture for a
distinct archetype: the autonomous, self-regulating unit, be it mechanical,
natural, social, or administrative. A diverse cross section of Americans as-
sumed that an apposite understanding of such systems would enable them to
appreciate—and manage—complexity. The penchant for “systems thinking”
penetrated a wide range of public policies during the sixties. In the case of
water pollution control, it not only gave voice to new kinds of experts, but
it also captured the public imagination in ways that stimulated grassroots demands for change.

Ecology—or more specifically, ecosystems ecology—emerged as a systems-oriented science whose mainstream cultural appeal helped fuel the rise of the modern environmental movement. Popular interpreters appropriated the discipline’s holistic principles to emphasize nature’s complex, interdependent relationship with human society. From this perspective, ecology offered ordinary Americans an intellectual framework for interpreting the environmental consequences of unchecked development, reexamining technological hubris, and appreciating the “balance” of nature. For disaffected young activists taking a sober second look at the market or the military-industrial complex, an ecological worldview also registered as an authentic alternative.

Ecology’s resonance in legislative policy circles during the mid-to-late sixties, however, often had more to do with its compatibility with traditional institutions and ways of thinking. Indeed, postwar ecosystems ecology emerged from the very military-industrial ethos that the counterculture condemned. Practitioners of the so-called New Ecology imported to the study of nature the same interdisciplinary, mechanical, and management-oriented perspective that grew out of World War II operations research and Cold War aerospace engineering. For this reason, professional ecologists found that they shared a common vernacular with members of Congress. Systems analysis, at once holistic and technocratic, enjoyed a pervasive appeal among legislators and bureaucrats seeking to use the administrative capacity of the federal government to address a host of new issues and problems. As systems analysis merged with social science and migrated into the civilian realm, policymakers believed they had discovered a planning tool to bring just about any large, complex, interdependent system under efficient control—including the natural environment that ecologists described.

The first serious tests to Edmund Muskie’s authority and his committee’s jurisdiction grew out of this broader systems framework. First, rival legislators, ambitious staffers, and a few influential academics applied the insights of ecology to environmental administration. Their efforts culminated with the landmark National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA), legislation its sponsors believed would bring rational management to both the environment and federal environmental bureaucracies. Implicit in this vision of a
comprehensive policy for the “total environment” was a challenge to Muskie’s piecemeal, and decidedly unecological, approach to pollution control.

Likewise, the success of Earth Day in April 1970 confirmed that a mass movement had coalesced around ecological values. A diverse cross section of the American public now perceived threats to nature with a greater sense of urgency and expected the federal government to enforce tough new standards of environmental protection. A new professional class of public interest lobbyists also lent clout to this diffuse constituency, which had traditionally lacked an organizational presence in Washington. As these advocates condemned the Muskie subcommittee’s air and water legislation for kowtowing to corporate polluters and acquiescing to “captured” local officials, their demands for stronger federal regulation found a receptive audience elsewhere in Congress, not to mention an opportunistic Nixon White House. Edmund Muskie, once a legislative entrepreneur, suddenly found himself behind the curve.

The cumulative impact of these transformations in the political landscape helped usher in a revolution in the American regulatory state. In the fifties and sixties, environmental statutes had granted state administrators considerable discretion, refraining from pushing the technological envelope or demanding hard deadlines for air and water quality improvement. Edmund Muskie’s groundbreaking Clean Air Act of 1970 and Clean Water Act of 1972, however, abandoned such restraints in an effort to reassert his committee’s policy leadership—a task made easier thanks to its superior knowledge, experience, and staff support. These long, dense, complex statutes marked a sea change in environmental law. They concentrated regulatory power at the federal level, promulgated strict national standards and timetables, and placed the burden of proof on polluters during the enforcement process.

It is tempting to attribute such regulatory innovations, and Muskie’s change of heart, solely to public clamor or political one-upsmanship with the White House. Yet the Clean Water Act cannot be explained solely in terms of partisan competition, the environmental movement, or the pressures exerted by the movement’s most prominent interests and actors. As Part Three of this book argues, the groundbreaking 1972 statute represented both the culmination of a policy process that began in the fifties and a synthesis of the various discourses policymakers engaged in during that time. Although environmentalism exerted an undeniable influence on the final text, developmental agendas with
deep institutional roots continued to inform the deliberations of senators and staff. Moreover, when ecological concepts and values finally penetrated the Senate Public Works Committee, they did so as part of a broader conversation about administrative management that was steeped in the language of systems and prompted by a rather diverse cast of characters, from the Army Corps of Engineers to California’s aerospace industry. In short, the story of one of the postwar era’s most complex and influential pieces of environmental legislation remains incomplete without considering the enduring contributions of unlikely environmentalists.

The Senate Public Works Committee’s internal operations take center stage in fleshing out this broader history. Since 1963, Edmund Muskie had always cultivated an active, independent staff as well as an atmosphere of open debate among members of both parties. This management style left a tangible imprint on the substance of all his environmental legislation, but on none more than the Clean Water Act.

Muskie was not alone in needing help as legislative workloads grew in magnitude and complexity. The population of support personnel exploded in Congress only after the reforms of the seventies, but their total numbers grew steadily between 1947 and 1971, from 290 to 780 in the Senate and 193 to 779 in the House. Staff size and autonomy varied from committee to committee, but in both chambers legislative entrepreneurs formed productive partnerships with ambitious staffers culled from various professional backgrounds. Staff members often took the initiative in drafting statutory language or otherwise filtering the sources of information that informed it. In the early seventies, Public Works Committee staffers conceived some of the Clean Water Act’s more radical features and helped channel the ecological knowledge that inspired them. Even so, the final product grew out of an extended conversation among the senators themselves behind closed doors. During their colloquy, they vetted the feasibility of the legislation’s objectives, the precision of the language used to express them, and the most effective means to implement them in light of past failures. Party affiliation certainly colored individual opinions, but the senators’ cooperative efforts and collective identity as legislative policy specialists tended to trump partisan differences. The result was a water pollution bill whose content surprised both sides of the political divide.\(^8\)

The Senate’s version of the Clean Water Act was a decisive break with the past, and it aroused considerable opposition. The Nixon administration ral-
lied business interests, state officials, and sanitary engineers to protest what they considered the legislation’s unreasonable costs, impractical goals, and inflexible, centralized administrative structure. The House Public Works Committee provided a sympathetic forum for these detractors. Its members did not belong to a specialized subcommittee on pollution control and did not share their Senate counterparts’ pessimism about the existing state-federal program. They proceeded to fight a contentious battle to defend the autonomy of local communities and mitigate the impact of the strict, technology-based controls associated with Muskie’s bill. These, they argued, would compel federal administrators to consider too narrow a range of variables when making regulatory decisions.

Ironically, many environmentalists were making a similar argument about administrative discretion in an effort to reconcile Muskie’s legislation with the National Environmental Policy Act. The senator may have ultimately embraced ecology, but he never wavered from his belief that specialized experts deserved exclusive jurisdiction over matters of pollution control. NEPA’s defenders and congressional patrons did not share Muskie’s sanguinity about specialization, however. Rather, they looked to NEPA’s main instrument, the “environmental impact statement,” to broaden the base of expertise employed to protect the “total environment.” Much to his chagrin, in 1972 Muskie found himself defending the Clean Water Act’s provisions from both its foes as well as its putative friends.

This is a book about water pollution control that seeks to muddy the waters. By extending the time line, expanding the list of players, diversifying the set of relevant ideas and influences, and multiplying the venues where policy was made, it complicates conventional accounts of environmental politics in the United States. Yet such complexity is appropriate if, in the words of one prominent scholar, “the environmental management state deserves to join the national security state and the welfare state as a central concern of political historians.” The rise of modern environmentalism undoubtedly represented a critical turning point in American political culture, but its transformative aura has prompted us to detach the government response that followed from its broader postwar political and institutional context. Unlikely environmentalists will help us recover that context and connect the natural world to the larger story of post–World War II American political development.