



**GEORGE WILL**

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**GREAT DEEDS**

# Let's keep our vision of America

**W**HEN Hoover Dam, in Nevada and Arizona, was constructed, first, the Colorado River had to be temporarily moved. And it was.

Then, thousands of men working in three shifts around the clock every day except Christmas and the Fourth of July, and paid \$6 a day — from which \$1.60 was subtracted for food, housing and transportation — poured 4.4 million cubic yards of concrete, enough to pave a highway 16 feet wide from New York to San Francisco.

They did this in less than four years, finishing two years ahead of schedule, 60 years ago this summer.

Let us now praise those who conceived and executed this still breathtaking marvel in the Black Canyon.

And let us pause during this season of discontent with the federal government and all its works to consider what we have lost that the country had when it had a will for such great works.

The dam is named for the president who was an engineer and who encouraged the project.

He was secretary of commerce in 1922 when the Colorado River Compact allocated the river among the states it serves.

Today half the population of the West is to some extent dependent on the river he helped subdue.

The dam, says an inscription here, was "inspired by a vision of lonely lands made fruitful." Back then, even the Los Angeles basin was relatively lonely.

Today Southern California and Arizona are the biggest users of the electric power generated here. Just down the road there is a novel form of fruitfulness — the fastest growing city in the nation: Las Vegas, population 1 million. In 1935 its population was about 7,000.

Behind the dam — 660 feet thick at its base — is 110 miles of Lake Mead, enough water to cover Pennsylvania a foot deep.

Construction of the dam cost the lives of 110 men, some of them victims of heat prostration in temperatures that often topped 125 degrees deep in the canyon.

Flood control, irrigation, power generation, water storage — the dam serves many functions. But could it be built today?

Perhaps, if it did not unduly inconvenience

some cousin of the snail darter, and if all the impact statements and racial set-asides could be negotiated before everyone decided the whole thing was too much trouble.

But back then, before it was considered correct to be a conscientious objector to the "conquest" of nature, America had an appetite for big conquering projects.

As the dam was being completed trains were rolling west from Pittsburgh carrying steel beams bearing banners that proclaimed "Bound for the Golden Gate Bridge," which was completed in 1937. The bridge, like the dam, expressed the soul of the nation as Stephen Vincent Benet had sung it:

We made this thing, this dream. This land unsatisfied by little ways.

Or by slow paces. Around 1940, when the government got interested in atomic physics, it asked some leading scientists what they needed.

They asked for \$6,000 worth of graphite. By 1944 investment in the Manhattan Project equaled investment in the prewar automobile industry.

In the 1950s the first Republican president since Hoover produced the biggest public works project in the nation's history to that point: The Interstate Highway System had been born in the brain of young Maj. Eisenhower in 1921 when he was assigned to take a convoy across the country to test equipment and demonstrate the inadequacies of the nation's roads.

In 1969 the Apollo Project fulfilled a government vow made in 1961.

In 1995 the movie "Apollo 13" is thrilling audiences for whom the exhilaration of collective achievement through government is but a rumor about long ago.

Speaker Gingrich recently called for "rethinking how we mobilize the American people." He said: "We need a series of large projects. You don't hold together the free people of the planet by small things: 'Let's get another 30,000 thousand cars in this year.' That's not exactly a noble battle cry. ... We ought to be back on the moon. We ought to be on Mars. And we ought to do it with all the free nations of the planet participating, so that we build a momentum of the human race. ..."

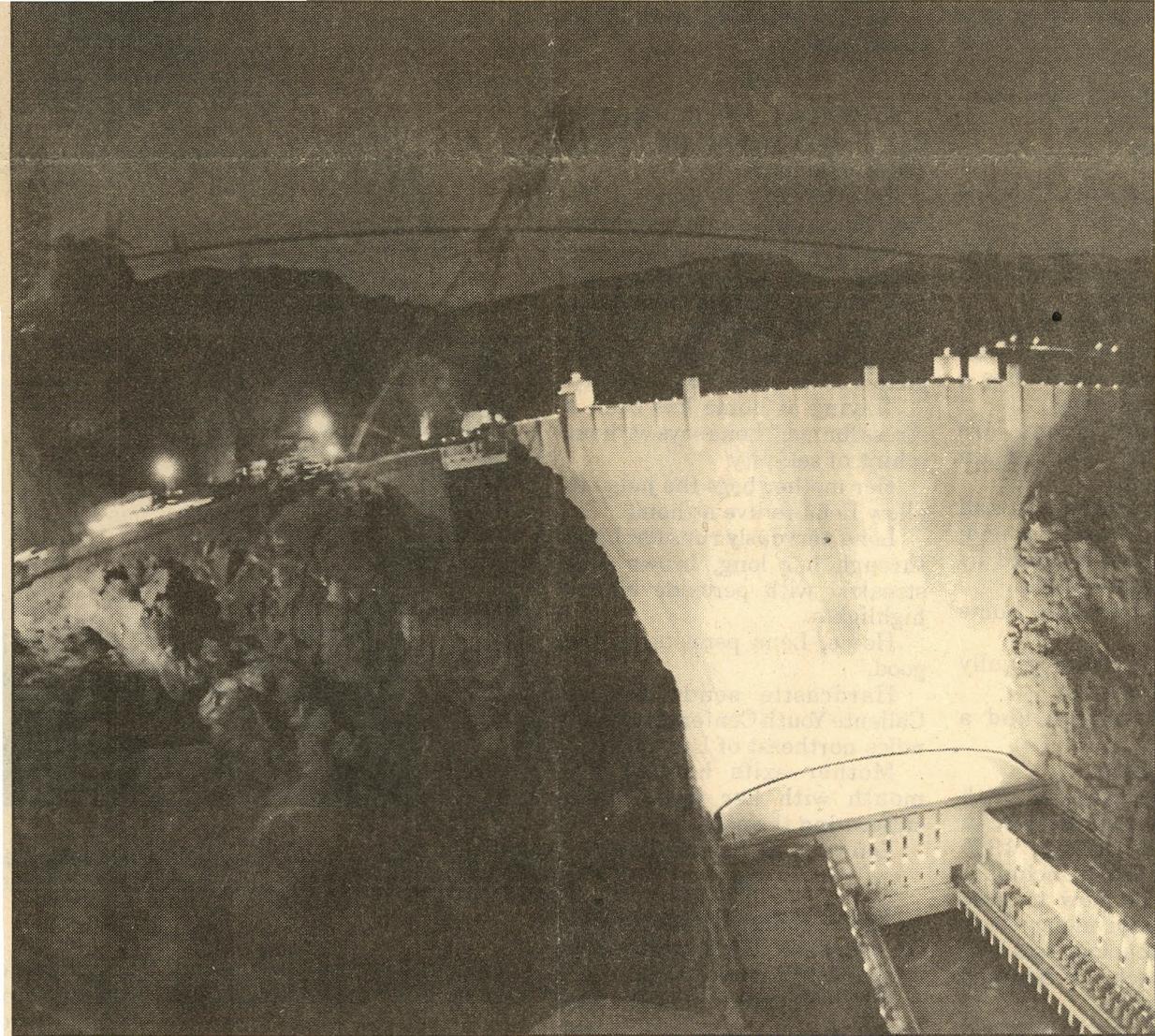
Many people will be surprised, and certain kinds of conservatives will be scandalized, by the speaker's belief that government is competent for, and has a duty to attempt, the peacetime mobilization of people for projects explicitly designed to elicit nobility through collective action.

His belief is incompatible with the agenda of those conservatives who are bent on instilling indiscriminate skepticism about government's utility.

But he has much modern American history on his side.

It is as clear as black and white — the soaring affirmation of glistening white concrete, shimmering in the desert sun between the black canyon walls.

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FILE PHOTO

**HOOVER DAM**, illuminated at night in this photo, stands as an example of the nation's greatest public works projects. It was built during the Depression.