Wilderness and the American Mind

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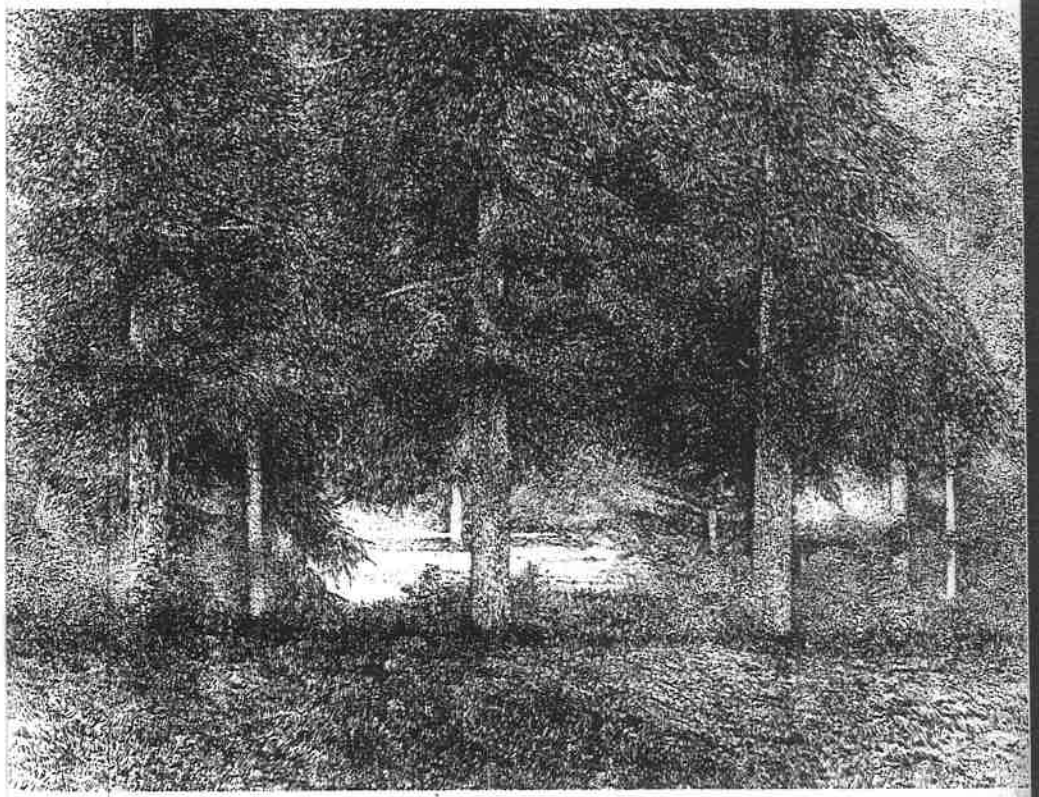

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a wilderness cult. Both men made wildness their dominant concern, yet the extent to which they were successful and influential figures in their lifetimes differed markedly. In 1853 Thoreau was obliged to find storage space for the seven hundred unsold volumes of a thousand-copy printing of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.[59] Just over forty years later, Muir happily wrote Johnson that bookstores could not supply the demand for *his* initial book-length work, *The Mountains of California*.[60] The authors' comments were symbolic. While he lived, Thoreau's supporters consisted of a handful of personal friends. His writings went unsold and his lectures were sparsely attended. The general public regarded the Walden Pond episode as incomprehensible at best.[61] Muir, on the contrary, was highly successful and nationally acclaimed in spite of the fact that most of his thoughts were simply restatements of the Transcendentalists' case for wilderness. The context rather than the content of the respective philosophies determined their popularity. Like Joe Knowles, it was Muir's good fortune to live at a time when he could reap the honors that belatedly came to Thoreau's ideas.

The American cult of the wilderness that lifted Muir, and for that matter, Thoreau, into prominence was not, to be sure, overwhelming, nor was the popularity of primitivism the only manifestation of discontent and frustration at the end of the nineteenth century. In a complex age, it was but a single current of thought. Even in the minds of those who championed wilderness, pride in the accomplishments of American civilization and a belief in the virtues of further development of natural resources persisted. Yet by the twentieth century's second decade something of a divide had been passed. Sufficient misgivings about the effects of civilization had arisen to encourage a favorable opinion of wilderness that contrasted sharply with earlier American attitudes.

59. Torrey and Allen, eds, *Journal*, 5, 459.

60. Muir to Johnson, Jan. 10, 1895, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 7.

61. On Thoreau's unpopularity in his own time see Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, 1959), p. x, and Walter Harding, "Thoreau on the Lecture Platform," *New England Quarterly*, 24 (1951), 365–67.

CHAPTER 10

Hetch Hetchy

> As to my attitude regarding the proposed use of Hetch Hetchy by the city of San Francisco . . . I am fully persuaded that . . . the injury . . . by substituting a lake for the present swampy floor of the valley . . . is altogether unimportant compared with the benefits to be derived from its use as a reservoir.
>
> Gifford Pinchot, 1913

> These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the Mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar.
>
> John Muir, 1912

SITUATED on a dry, sandy peninsula, the city of San Francisco faced a chronic fresh-water shortage. In the Sierra, about one hundred and fifty miles distant, the erosive action of glaciers and the Tuolumne River scooped the spectacular, high-walled Hetch Hetchy Valley. As early as 1882, city engineers pointed out the possibility of damming its narrow, lower end to make a reservoir. They also recognized the opportunity of using the fall of the impounded water for the generation of hydroelectric power. In 1890, however, the act creating Yosemite National Park designated Hetch Hetchy and its environs a wilderness preserve. Undaunted, San Francisco's mayor James D. Phelan applied for the valley as a reservoir site shortly after the turn of the century. Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock's refusal to violate the sanctity of a national park was only a temporary setback, because on April 18, 1906, an earthquake and fire devastated San Francisco and added urgency and public sympathy to the search for an adequate water supply. The city immediately reapplied for Hetch Hetchy, and on May 11, 1908, Secretary James R. Garfield approved the new application. "Domestic use," he wrote, "is the highest use to which water and available storage basins . . . can be put."[1]

1. *Decisions of the Department of the Interior . . . June 1, 1907–June 30, 1908*, ed. George J. Hesselman (Washington, D.C., 1908), p. 411.

The best political histories of the Hetch Hetchy controversy are Jones, *John Muir*

John Muir, Robert Underwood Johnson, and those whom they had won to the cause of wilderness preservation disagreed. Secretary Garfield's approval stimulated them to launch a national protest campaign. Given the flourishing cult of wilderness on the one hand and the strength of traditional assumptions about the desirability of putting undeveloped natural resources to use on the other, the battle over Hetch Hetchy was bound to be bitter. Before Congress and President Woodrow Wilson made a final decision in 1913, the valley became a *cause célèbre*. The principle of preserving wilderness was put to the test. For the first time in the American experience the competing claims of wilderness and civilization to a specific area received a thorough hearing before a national audience.

When the preservationists first learned of San Francisco's plans for Hetch Hetchy, Theodore Roosevelt occupied the White House, and the choice of reservoir or wilderness placed him in an awkward position. There were few Americans so committed to a belief in the value of wild country (see Chapter 9). Yet Roosevelt appreciated the importance of water, lumber, and similar commodities to national welfare and as President felt responsible for providing them. The result of this ambivalence was inconsistency in Roosevelt's early policy statements. In 1901 he declared in his first annual message that "the fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forests by use. Forest protection is not an end in itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend on them." But later in the message, he revealed his hope that some of the forest reserves could be made

and the Sierra Club, pp. 83–169; Elmo R. Richardson, "The Struggle for the Valley: California's Hetch Hetchy Controversy, 1905–1913," *California Historical Society Quarterly, 38* (1959), 249–58; and Ise, *National Park Policy*, pp. 85–96. Richardson's *The Politics of Conservation: Crusades and Controversies, 1897–1913*, University of California Publications in History, 70 (Berkeley, 1962) discusses the context of the dispute. Unpublished studies include Suzette Dornberger, "The Struggle for Hetch Hetchy, 1900–1913" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1935) and Florence Riley Monroy, "Water and Power in San Francisco Since 1900: A Study in Municipal Government" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1944). There are several accounts of the engineering aspects, principally Ray W. Taylor, *Hetch Hetchy: The Story of San Francisco's Struggle to Provide a Water Supply for Future Needs* (San Francisco, 1926) and M. M. O'Shaughnessy, *Hetch Hetchy: Its Origin and History* (San Francisco, 1934).

"preserves for the wild forest creatures."[2] The same uncertainty appeared two years later in an address on the goal of forestry: "primarily the object is not to preserve forests because they are beautiful—though that is good in itself—not to preserve them because they are refuges for the wild creatures of the wilderness—though that too is good in itself—but the primary object of forest policy . . . is the making of prosperous homes, is part of the traditional policy of homemaking in our country."[3]

In this seesaw manner Roosevelt hoped to hold the two wings of the conservation movement together on a united front. The task was formidable: Muir already had found his position incompatible with Gifford Pinchot's. But after 1905 Pinchot was Chief Forester and the principal spokesman of the utilitarian conception of conservation. Moreover, he enjoyed a close friendship with Roosevelt. According to Johnson, the President went so far as to declare that " 'in all forestry matters I have put my conscience in the keeping of Gifford Pinchot.' "[4] And Pinchot favored converting Hetch Hetchy into a reservoir. Yet Roosevelt had camped in Yosemite with Muir and appreciated the growing political strength of the preservationist position. Early in September 1907, he received a letter from Muir that brought the issue to a head. Reminding the President of their 1903 trip into the Sierra wilderness, Muir expressed his desire that the region "be saved from all sorts of commercialism and marks of man's works." While acknowledging the need for an adequate municipal water supply, he maintained that it could be secured outside "our wild mountain parks." Concluding the letter, Muir expressed his belief that over ninety per cent of the American people would oppose San Francisco's plans if they were apprised of their consequences.[5]

Roosevelt's initial reaction, made even before Muir's communication, was to seek advice from engineers about alternative reservoir sites.[6] The report, however, was that Hetch Hetchy offered the only practical solution to San Francisco's problem. Reluctantly

2. Roosevelt, "First Annual Message" in *Works, 17*, 118–19, 120.
3. Roosevelt, "The Forest Problem" in *Works, 18*, 127.
4. Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, p. 307.
5. Muir to Roosevelt, Sept. 9, 1907, in "Water Supply for San Francisco," Record Group 95 [United States Forest Service], National Archives, Washington, D.C.
6. Roosevelt to James R. Garfield, Aug. 6, 1907, and Garfield to Roosevelt, Aug. 8, 1907, ibid.

Roosevelt made up his mind. While assuring Muir that he would do everything possible to protect the national parks, the President reminded him that if these reservations "interfere with the permanent material development of the State instead of helping . . . the result will be bad." Roosevelt ended with an expression of doubt that the great majority would take the side of wilderness in a showdown with the material needs of an expanding civilization.[7] Pinchot seconded the judgment in favor of San Francisco. Writing to the President in October 1907 that "I fully sympathize with the desire of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Muir to protect the Yosemite National Park, but I believe that the highest possible use which could be made of it would be to supply pure water to a great center of population."[8] Still Roosevelt was not comfortable in his decision against wilderness, and confessed to Johnson that Hetch Hetchy was "one of those cases where I was extremely doubtful."[9]

In spite of his doubts Roosevelt had made a choice, and in the spring of 1908 the Garfield permit opened the way for the development of the valley. Muir was discouraged but not defeated. He believed it still was possible to arouse a national protest and demonstrate to federal authorities that Roosevelt was mistaken in his judgment about the lack of public sentiment for keeping Hetch Hetchy wild. But Muir fully realized that "public opinion is not yet awakened."[10] The first task of the preservationists was to capitalize on the wilderness cult and replace ignorance with anger. Telling arguments against the reservoir were needed. As the basis for their protest, the friends of wilderness turned to the old Romantic case against "Mammon." They made Hetch Hetchy into a symbol of ethical and aesthetic qualities, while disparaging San Francisco's proposal as tragically typical of American indifference toward them. This line of defense took advantage of national sensitivity to charges of being a culture devoted entirely to the frantic pursuit of the main chance. It criticized the commercialism and sordidness of American civilization, while defending wilderness.

John Muir opened the argument for the Valley on aesthetic grounds with an article in *Outlook*. After describing its beauties,

7. Roosevelt to Muir, Sept. 16, 1907, in Morison, ed., *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 5, 793.

8. Pinchot to Roosevelt, Oct. 11, 1907, "Water Supply," National Archives.

9. Roosevelt to Johnson, Dec. 17, 1908, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 6.

10. Muir, "The Tuolumne Yosemite in Danger," *Outlook*, 87 (1907), 489.

he declared that its maintainence as a wilderness was essential, "for everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike."[11] Others took up the same theme in the national press. Writing in *Century*, which he now edited, Robert Underwood Johnson charged that only those who had not advanced beyond the "pseudo-'practical' stage" could favor San Francisco. The presence of these individuals in the nation, he added, "is one of the retarding influences of American civilization and brings us back to the materialistic declaration that 'Good is only good to eat.' "[12] As a self-appointed spokesman for culture and refinement, Johnson took it upon himself to defend intangibles. In a brief submitted at the first Congressional hearing on the Hetch Hetchy question in December, 1908, he made his protest "in the name of all lovers of beauty . . . against the materialistic idea that there must be something wrong about a man who finds one of the highest uses of nature in the fact that it is made to be looked at."[13]

As president of the American Civic Association, J. Horace McFarland took every opportunity to preach the desirability, indeed the necessity, of maintaining some element of beauty in man's environment. He believed the aesthetic should have a place in the conservation movement, and in 1909 expressed his displeasure at its concentration on utilitarian aims. In the same year he told Pinchot that "the conservation movement is now weak, because it has failed to join hands with the preservation of scenery."[14] For McFarland, Hetch Hetchy was a test case, and he spoke and wrote widely in its defense. If even national parks were to be given over to utilitarian purposes, there was no guarantee that ultimately all the beauty of unspoiled nature would be destroyed. Speaking before the Secretary of the Interior on the Hetch Hetchy question, McFarland contended that such undeveloped places would become increasingly valuable for recreation as more and more Americans

11. Ibid., 488. Large portions of the article were borrowed from Muir's earlier essay: "Hetch Hetchy Valley: The Lower Tuolumne Yosemite," *Overland Monthly*, 11 (1873), 42–50.

12. Robert Underwood Johnson, "A High Price to Pay for Water," *Century*, 86 (1908), 633.

13. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 60th Cong., 1st Sess. (Dec. 16, 1908), pp. 37–38.

14. McFarland to Johnson, Feb. 4, 1909, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 5; McFarland to Pinchot, Nov. 26, 1909, Pinchot Papers, Box 1809.

lived in cities. Yet when the preservation of wilderness conflicted with "material interests," those financially affected cried: " 'that is sentimentalism; that is aestheticism; that is pleasure-loving; that is unnecessary; that is not practical.' " Usually such resistance carried the day and wildness was sacrificed. McFarland objected because "it is not sentimentalism, Mr. Secretary; it is living."[15] Elsewhere he elaborated on his ideas: "the primary function of the national forests is to supply lumber. The primary function of the national parks is to maintain in healthful efficiency the lives of the people who must use that lumber. . . . The true ideal of their maintenance does not run parallel to the making of the most timber, or the most pasturage, or the most water power."[16]

Lyman Abbott, the editor of *Outlook*, also felt it was a mistake "to turn every tree and waterfall into dollars and cents." His magazine found most of its readers among a class of people concerned over what they thought was the eclipse of morality, refinement, and idealism by urbanization, industrialization, and an emphasis on business values. The defense of wilderness attracted them because it permitted making a positive case—they could be for something (wilderness) rather than merely against amorphous forces. Protecting the wild from an exploitative civilization, in short, represented the broader struggle to maintain intangibles against the pressure of utilitarian demands. Sensing this, Abbott made *Outlook* one of the chief organs of the Hetch Hetchy campaign. He explained his stand in an editorial in 1909: "if this country were in danger of habitually ignoring utilitarian practice for the sake of running after sentimental dreams and aesthetic visions we should advise it . . . to dam the Tuolumne River in order to instruct its citizens in the use of the bathtub. But the danger is all the other way. The national habit is to waste the beauty of Nature and save the dollars of business."[17]

The same disparaging reference to American tastes and values appeared in the statements of preservationists in early 1909 at the House and Senate hearings in regard to Hetch Hetchy. One man, who had camped in the valley, pointedly asked: "is it never ceas-

15. *Proceedings Before the Secretary of the Interior in re Use of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir by the City of San Francisco* (Washington, D.C., 1910), pp. 18–19.

16. McFarland, "Are National Parks Worthwhile?" *Sierra Club Bulletin, 8* (1912), 237.

17. Abbott, "The Hetch-Hetchy Valley Again," *Outlook, 91* (1909), 330–31; Abbott, "Saving the Yosemite Park," *Outlook, 91* (1909), 235–36.

ing; is there nothing to be held sacred by this nation; is it to be dollars only; are we to be cramped in soul and mind by the lust after filthy lucre only; shall we be left some of the more glorious places?" Others joined him in pleading that "loftier motives" than saving money for San Francisco be taken into consideration. "May we live down our national reputation for commercialism," one letter concluded.[18]

In the Senate hearings, Henry E. Gregory of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society appeared in person and spoke of the need to counteract "business and utilitarian motives" that seemed to him to dominate the age. He pointed out that wildernesses such as Hetch Hetchy had value beyond computation in monetary terms "as an educator of the people and as a restorer and liberator of the spirit enslaved by Mammon."[19] Arguments along these lines struck home, especially at a time when many Americans squirmed uncomfortably at charges that their nation's aesthetic sense was stunted and deformed.

Another tactic of the preservationists emphasized the spiritual significance of wild places and the tendency of money-minded America to ignore religion. Hetch Hetchy became a sanctuary or temple in the eyes of the defenders. John Muir, for one, believed so strongly in the divinity of wild nature that he was convinced he was doing the Lord's battle in resisting the reservoir. The preservationists' innumerable puns about "damning" Hetch Hetchy were only partly in jest. John Muir and his colleagues believed they were preaching "the Tuolumne gospel." San Francisco became "the Prince of the powers of Darkness" and "Satan and Co." Muir wrote: "we may lose this particular fight but truth and right must prevail at last. Anyhow we must be true to ourselves and the Lord."[20] This conviction that they were engaged in a battle between right and wrong prompted the preservationists to vituperative outbursts against their opponents. In a popular book of 1912, Muir labeled his foes "temple destroyers" who scorned the "God of

18. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, 60th Cong., 2d Sess. (Jan. 9, 12, 20, 21, 1909), pp. 179, 323.

19. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, *Hetch Hetchy Reservoir Site*, 60th Cong., 2d Sess. (Feb. 10, 12, 1909), p. 14.

20. Muir to Johnson, Feb. 7, 1909, Muir Papers, New York; Muir to Johnson, March 23, 1913, ibid; Muir to "Kelloggs Three," Dec. 27, 1913, Muir Papers, Berkeley, Box 1; Muir to William E. Colby, Dec. 31, 1908, ibid.

the Mountains" in pursuit of the "Almighty Dollar." A ringing and widely quoted denunciation followed: "Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man."[21]

Using these arguments, and the especially effective one (unrelated to wilderness) that the valley as part of Yosemite National Park was a "public playground" which should not be turned over to any special interest,[22] the preservationists were able to arouse considerable opposition to San Francisco's plans. Members of the Sierra and Appalachian Mountain Clubs took the lead in preparing pamphlet literature for mass distribution. *Let All the People Speak and Prevent the Destruction of the Yosemite Park* of 1909, for example, contained a history of the issue, reprints of articles and statements opposing the dam, a discussion of alternative sources of water, and photographs of the valley. Preservationists also obtained the sympathies of numerous newspaper and magazine editors in all parts of the nation. Even Theodore Roosevelt retreated from his earlier endorsement of the reservoir and declared in his eighth annual message of December 8, 1908, that Yellowstone and Yosemite "should be kept as a great national playground. In both, all wild things should be protected and the scenery kept wholly unmarred."[23]

Evidence of the effectiveness of the protest appeared in the action of the House after its 1909 hearings. Although the Committee on the Public Lands had approved the grant in a close vote, a strong minority report dissented on the grounds that such action would deny the public's right to the valley for recreational purposes. Testifying to the amount of popular opposition, the report observed that "there has been an exceedingly widespread, earnest, and vigorous protest voiced by scientists, naturalists, mountain climbers,

21. John Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York, 1912), pp. 261–62. Muir used a similar statement as early as 1908: "The Hetch-Hetchy Valley," *Sierra Club Bulletin, 6* (1908), 220. For another defense on religious grounds, see Cora C. Foy, "Save the Hetch-Hetchy," *Out West, 1* (1910), 11.

22. For example, Portland *Oregonian,* Dec. 30, 1908; French Strother, "San Francisco Against the Nation for the Yosemite," *World's Work, 17* (1909), 11441–445; Edward T. Parsons, "Proposed Destruction of Hetch Hetchy," *Out West, 31* (1909), 607–27; "Hetch-Hetchy," *Independent, 73* (1912), 1203–1204; and I. R. Branson, *Yosemite Against Corporation Greed* (Aurora, Neb., c. 1909).

23. Roosevelt, *Works, 17,* 618.

travelers, and others in person, by letters, and telegrams, and in newspaper and magazine articles."[24] In the face of this expression of public opinion, the House pigeonholed and killed San Francisco's application in the Sixtieth Congress.

San Francisco was bewildered and incensed at the public unwillingness that it should have Hetch Hetchy as a reservoir. Was not supplying water to a large city a worthy cause, one that certainly took priority over preserving wilderness? The San Francisco *Chronicle* referred to the preservationists as "hoggish and mushy esthetes,"[25] while the city's engineer, Marsden Manson, wrote in 1910 that the opposition was largely composed of "short-haired women and long-haired men."[26] San Francisco argued that the beauties of wilderness were admirable, but in this case human health, comfort, and even human life were the alternatives. Phrased in these terms, even some of the members of the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Sierra Club felt compelled to place the needs of civilization ahead of protecting wild country. In the Sierra Club, Warren Olney, one of the founders, led a faction which supported the city.[27] In 1910 the Club held a referendum in which preservation won 589 to 161, but in order to prosecute the defense of Hetch Hetchy, the preservationists were obliged to act in a separate organization: the California Branch of the Society for the Preservation of National Parks. The wilderness enthusiasts in the Appalachian group formed an Eastern Branch of the Society.[28]

At every opportunity the proponents of the dam expressed their belief that a lake in Hetch Hetchy would not spoil its beauty but, rather, enhance it. A prominent engineer reported on the City's behalf that roads and walks could be built which would open the

24. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, *Granting Use of Hetch Hetchy to City of San Francisco,* 60th Cong., 2d Sess., House Rpt. 2085 (Feb. 8, 1909), pp. 11–12.

Several hundred of the communications addressed to the President, Secretary of the Interior, and various Congressmen have been preserved in chronological files in "Water Supply," National Archives.

25. As quoted in House, Committee on the Public Lands, *Granting Hetch Hetchy,* p. 16.

26. Marsden Manson to G. W. Woodruff, April 6, 1910, Marsden Manson Correspondence and Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

27. Olney, "Water Supply for the Cities about the Bay of San Francisco," *Out West, 31* (1909), 599–605.

28. Jones, *John Muir and the Sierra Club,* pp. 83–117; Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 13.

region for public recreation in the manner of European mountain-lake resorts.[29] Since the preservationists frequently based their opposition on the need to maintain a "scenic wonder" or "beauty spot,"[30] and on the desirability of maintaining a public playground, the claims of San Francisco were difficult to dismiss. If, instead, more attention had been paid specifically to the wilderness qualities of Hetch Hetchy—which *any* man-made construction would have eliminated—San Francisco's point about the scenic attraction of an artificial lake could have been more easily answered. As it was, this tactical error cost the preservationists considerable support.

The Hetch Hetchy controversy entered its climactic stage on March 4, 1913, when the Woodrow Wilson administration took office. San Francisco's hopes soared, because the new Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane, was a native, a former attorney for the city, and a proponent of the reservoir. But Lane upheld the policy of previous Secretaries that in cases involving national parks Congress must make the final decision. On behalf of San Francisco, Representative John E. Raker immediately introduced a bill to the Sixty-third Congress approving the grant. The preservationists prepared to send protest literature to 1418 newspapers and to make known their views before Congress.[31] Robert Underwood Johnson distributed an *Open Letter to the American People* in which he declared Hetch Hetchy to be "a veritable temple of the living God" and warned that "again the money-changers are in the temple."[32] The stage was set for a showdown.

On June 25 the House Committee on the Public Lands opened hearings on the Hetch Hetchy issue, with Gifford Pinchot as the star witness. Pinchot simplified the question into "whether the advantage of leaving this valley in a state of nature is greater than

29. John R. Freeman, *On the Proposed Use of a Portion of the Hetch Hetchy* (San Francisco, 1912), pp. 6 ff.

30. House, *Hearings* (1909), pp. 129 ff., 138 ff., 172 ff. provides numerous examples.

31. Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Boxes 7, 12. The Society for the Preservation of National Parks-Eastern Branch's *The Truth about the Hetch Hetchy and the Application to Congress by San Francisco to Flood this Valley in the Yosemite National Park* (Boston, 1913) is representative of the tracts the preservationists circulated.

32. Robert Underwood Johnson, *The Hetch Hetchy Scheme: Why It Should Not Be Rushed Through the Extra Session: An Open Letter to the American People* (New York, 1913).

. . . using it for the benefit of the city of San Francisco." He admitted that the idea of preserving wilderness appealed to him "if nothing else were at stake," but in this case the need of the city seemed "overwhelming." Explaining his reasoning, Pinchot declared that "the fundamental principle of the whole conservation policy is that of use, to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use in which it will serve the most people." Former San Francisco mayor James D. Phelan told the Committee that the criteria for a decision should be the needs of the "little children, men and women . . . who swarm the shore of San Francisco Bay" rather than the few who liked "solitary loneliness" and "the mere scenic value of the mountains."

Since the House hearings were called on short notice, Edmund D. Whitman of the Appalachian Mountain Club was the only preservationist to testify. He attempted to show that the reservoir would substantially reduce the value of Yosemite National Park as a public recreation ground and beauty spot. But Whitman did not bring out the fact that wilderness was at stake in Hetch Hetchy. As a result Phelan's rejoinder that San Francisco would cover the dam with moss, vines, and trees and would build picnic spots and trails around the reservoir seemed to answer his objections. Whitman concluded his testimony more effectively with a quotation from a Robert Underwood Johnson letter on the danger that without unspoiled nature to provide a "touch of idealism," life degenerated into "a race for the trough."[33]

On the basis of the June hearings, the Committee submitted a report unanimously endorsing the reservoir plans.[34] When the bill reached the floor of the House on August 29, 1913, strong support immediately developed for its passage. Applying the time-honored utilitarian yardstick to the problem, Representative Raker of California asserted that the "old barren rocks" of the valley have a "cash value" of less than $300,000 whereas a reservoir would be worth millions. But most proponents of the dam were not so positive. They prefaced their support of the dam with a declaration of their love of wilderness and reluctance to have it destroyed. Finly

33. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, *Hetch Hetchy Dam Site*, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess. (June 25–28, July 7, 1913), pp. 25–26, 166, 170, 237.

34. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, *Hetch Hetchy Grant to San Francisco*, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., House Rpt. 41 (Aug. 5, 1913).

H. Gray of Indiana, for example, explained: "Mr. Chairman, much as I admire the beauties of nature and deplore the desecration of God's Creation, yet when these two considerations come in conflict the conservation of nature should yield to the conservation of human welfare, health, and life."[35]

The choice Representative Gray made between wilderness and the needs of civilization was especially difficult for William Kent, a Representative from California. Independently wealthy, he had chosen a career as a reformer in politics, first in Chicago and after 1906 in Marin County, north of San Francisco, where he had lived as a boy. Kent's devotion to wild country had the same characteristics as Theodore Roosevelt's. "My life," he declared in an autobiographical fragment, "has been largely spent outdoors . . . I have ridden the prairies, the mountains and the desert."[36] A skilled hunter who deprecated the softness of his contemporaries, Kent called for a revitalization of the savage virtues. Understandably, he believed in the wisdom of preserving wilderness, and in 1903 bought several hundred acres of virgin redwood forest on the shoulder of Marin County's Mt. Tamalpais. In December 1907 Kent informed the Secretary of the Interior of his desire to give this land to the federal government as a national monument under the provisions of the Antiquities Act. His purpose was to keep in a primitive condition "the most attractive bit of wilderness I have ever seen."[37] Kent requested the area be named in honor of John Muir, and on January 9, 1908, President Roosevelt issued a proclamation designating the Muir Woods National Monument.

In view of this record, preservationists believed they had found a champion in William Kent. The Sierra Club made him an honorary member while letters poured in from all parts of the country applauding him for upholding aesthetic and spiritual values in a

35. *Congressional Record,* 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., *50* (Aug. 29, 1913), p. 3904; (Aug. 30), p. 3991.

36. Kent Family Papers, Historical Manuscripts Room, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn., Box 95. For Kent's life see Elizabeth T. Kent, *William Kent, Independent: A Biography* (privately published, 1951) and Gilson Gardner, "Life of William Kent" (unpublished typescript, c. 1933) in the Kent Family Papers, Box 152. The first professional biography is Robert Woodbury's "William Kent: Progressive Gadfly, 1864–1928" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967).

37. Kent to James A. Garfield, Dec. 23, 1907, Kent Family Papers, Box 6. Kent's account of his acquisition and disposition of the land in question may be found in Kent, "The Story of Muir Woods" (undated typescript), Kent Family Papers, Box 111.

materialistic age.[38] Deeply touched by Kent's tribute, John Muir wrote personally, calling Muir Woods "the finest forest and park thing done in California in many a day." A few weeks later he again thanked Kent for "the best tree-lover's monument that could be found in all the forests of the world." Protecting the redwoods, Muir thought, was "a much needed lesson to saint and sinner alike, and a credit and encouragement to God." It astonished Muir that "so fine divine a thing should have come out of money-mad Chicago" and he ended by wishing Kent "immortal Sequoia life." Kent replied at once, inviting Muir to speak in Marin County and proposing collaboration in "the general cause of nature preservation."[39]

A few weeks after arriving in Washington in 1911 to begin his first term as a California Congressman, William Kent received a letter from his friend John Muir about Hetch Hetchy. Assuming that Kent, the donor of Muir Woods, would champion the cause of wilderness preservation, Muir simply encouraged him to follow the Hetch Hetchy issue and "do lots of good work."[40] But for Kent the matter was not so simple. While he realized that Hetch Hetchy was valuable as wilderness and part of a national park, he also knew that the powerful Pacific Gas and Electric Company wanted the valley as a step toward consolidating its control over California hydroelectric resources. Municipal control of Hetch Hetchy's water by San Francisco would block this plan, be a significant victory for the ideal of public ownership, and, beyond that, assert the democratic principle. Moreover, Kent had decided with his political friend Gifford Pinchot that "real conservation meant proper use and not locking up of natural resources."[41] The sacrifice of Hetch Hetchy's wilderness qualities, Kent concluded, was regrettable but

38. Kent carefully preserved clippings and correspondence in regard to Muir Woods: Kent Family Papers, Boxes 6 and 162.

39. Muir to Kent, Jan. 14 and Feb. 6, 1908, Kent to Muir, Feb. 10, 1908, Kent Family Papers, Box 6.

40. Muir to Kent, March 31, 1911, Kent Family Papers, Box 26.

41. As quoted in Gardner, "Life of William Kent," pp. 347–48. See also Kent's testimony in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Public Lands, Hearings, *Hetch Hetchy Reservoir Site,* 63rd Cong., 1st Sess. (Sept. 24, 1913), p. 70, and his dispatch on the passage of the Hetch Hetchy bill, *San Francisco Bulletin,* Dec. 20, 1913. A discussion of Kent's efforts on behalf of public control of waterpower by Judson King, a fellow crusader, is included in Judson King Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 77. See also King's *The Conservation Fight from Theodore Roosevelt to the Tennessee Valley Authority* (Washington, D.C., 1959), esp. pp. 40 ff. Compare footnote 56 below.

in this case necessary for a greater good. Answering Muir indirectly in a letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, Kent stated his conviction that conservation could best be served by granting the valley to San Francisco.[42]

In 1913, as a key member of the House Committee on the Public Lands, William Kent was in a position to exert considerable influence. He began by helping draft a bill permitting San Francisco to build its reservoir; then opened his home to the city's supporters as a campaign headquarters. The fact that Kent was widely known as the donor of Muir Woods lent extra weight to his opinions. Certainly *he* would not dismiss the claims of wilderness preservation lightly. Kent exploited this advantage fully. When the Hetch Hetchy bill came to the floor of the House, he stated simply: "I can lay claim to being a nature lover myself. I think that is a matter of record." The same technique appeared in a letter to President Woodrow Wilson in which Kent advocated San Francisco's claim and then added that in the cause of protecting nature he had personally "spent more time and effort . . . than any of the men who are opposing this bill."[43]

It remained for Kent, as an acknowledged admirer of Muir, to provide public explanation for their divergence over Hetch Hetchy. He did so in the summer of 1913 in a series of letters to his Congressional colleagues. To Representative Sydney Anderson of Minnesota he wrote: "I hope you will not take my friend, Muir, seriously, for he is a man entirely without social sense. With him, it is me and God and the rock where God put it, and that is the end of the story. I know him well and as far as this proposition is concerned, he is mistaken." Similarly, Kent wired Pinchot that the Hetch Hetchy protest was the work of private waterpower interests using "misinformed nature lovers" as their spokesmen. In October Kent told a meeting in California that because Muir had spent so much time in the wilderness he had not acquired the social instincts of the average man.[44]

42. Kent to Robert Underwood Johnson, April 6, 1911 (carbon), Kent Family Papers, Box 17.

43. *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., *50* (Aug. 30, 1913), p. 3963; Kent to Woodrow Wilson, Oct. 1, 1913, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., File VI, Box 199, Folder 169.

44. Kent to Sydney Anderson, July 2, 1913, Kent Family Papers, Box 26; Kent to Gifford Pinchot, Oct. 8, 1913, Gifford Pinchot Papers, Box 1823; San Rafael *Independent*, Oct. 21, 1913, in Kent Family Papers, Box 171.

It was not the case that Kent changed his mind about the value of wilderness between 1908 and 1913. In fact, at the very time he was advocating development of Hetch Hetchy, he asked Gifford Pinchot for a statement in support of a state park on Mt. Tamalpais. Specifically, Kent wanted Pinchot to show "the advantage of such a wilderness, particularly near San Francisco."[45] And after Hetch Hetchy, Kent went on to help author the bill establishing the National Park Service, participate in the founding of the Save-the-Redwoods League, and add more land to Muir Woods National Monument. Kent's problem was that the necessity of deciding about Hetch Hetchy left no room for an expression of his ambivalence. The valley could not be a wilderness and a publicly owned reservoir simultaneously. And, ultimately, Kent and Muir gave wilderness preservation a different priority at the price of their earlier friendship.

As the consideration of the Hetch Hetchy question in the House continued into September, 1913, the sentiments of William Kent and other supporters of San Francisco encountered stiffer opposition. Halvor Steenerson of Minnesota declared it was nonsense to claim that an artificial lake would add to the beauty of the valley. "You may as well improve upon the lily of the field by handpainting it," he pointed out, and added that all the city offered was a power plant making a "devilish hissing noise" and a "dirty muddy pond." Concluding his remarks, Steenerson spoke in the agrarian tradition, deploring the tendency of Americans to live in cities, and in the Romantic manner, hoping that some day a poet would use the "pristine glory" of Hetch Hetchy "to produce something more valuable than money." Horace M. Towner of Iowa agreed, and pleaded with his colleagues to recognize that "dishwashing is not the only use for water, nor lumber for trees, nor pasture for grass." But Martin Dies of Texas rose to say the final word before the House vote. He felt that natural resources should serve civilization. "I want them to open the reservations in this country," Dies declared. "I am not for reservations and parks." Applause and cries of "Vote!" greeted the conclusion of Dies' remarks.[46]

On September 3 the House passed the Hetch Hetchy bill 183 to

45. Kent to Gifford Pinchot, March 5, 1913, Gifford Pinchot Papers, Box 164.

46. *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., *50* (Aug. 30, 1913), pp. 3972–74; ibid. (Extension of Remarks made on Aug. 29, 1913), p. 461; ibid. (Aug. 30, 1913), p. 4003.

43, with 203 Representatives not voting. No Congressman from a Western state voted against it. Most of its support came from Southern and Middle Western Democrats. In fact, the bill was rumored to be an administration measure, connected, in some minds, with the votes California had given to Wilson in the recent election.[47]

The Senate still had to decide on San Francisco's application, and in preparation the preservationists worked frantically. Their plan was "to flood the Senate with letters from influential people."[48] In addition, the Society for the Preservation of National Parks and the newly organized National Committee for the Preservation of the Yosemite National Park published several pamphlets which called on Americans to write or wire their President and Congressmen and suggested arguments against the dam.[49] Thousands of copies circulated, and the public responded. Between the time of the House passage and early December when the Senate began its debate, the destruction of the wilderness qualities of Hetch Hetchy Valley became a major national issue. Hundreds of newspapers throughout the country, including such opinion leaders as the New York *Times,* published editorials on the question, most of which took the side of preservation.[50] Leading magazines, such as *Outlook, Nation, Independent,* and *Collier's,* carried articles protesting the reservoir. A mass meeting on behalf of the valley took place at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. Mail poured into the offices of key Senators: Reed Smoot of Utah estimated late in November that he had received five thousand letters in opposition to the bill, and other Senators were likewise besieged.[51] The protests came from women's groups, outing and sportsmen's clubs, scientific societies, and the faculties of colleges

47. Richardson, "The Struggle for the Valley," 255; New York *Times,* Dec. 4, 1913.

48. Robert Underwood Johnson to Bernhard E. Fernow, Oct. 17, 1913, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 1.

49. National Committee for the Preservation of the Yosemite National Park, *Bulletin No. 1: The Hetch Hetchy 'Grab': Who Oppose It and Why* (New York, 1913) and *Bulletin No. 2* (New York, 1913); Society for the Preservation of National Parks, *Circular Number Seven* (San Francisco, 1913).

50. The Committee's *Bulletins* list and quote from several hundred papers.

51. *Congressional Record,* 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., 50 (Nov. 25, 1913), p. 6012. Additional indication of the scope of the protest may be found in the voluminous files which the United States Forest Service kept on the controversy: "Water Supply," National Archives.

and universities as well as from individuals. The American wilderness had never been so popular before.

The arguments the preservationists used against the dam followed the lines laid down in the earlier stages of the controversy. The issue was represented to be between the intangible values of wilderness and the insensitivity of utilitarianism. One widely circulated statement from an editorial in the Brooklyn [N.Y.] *Standard Union* maintained that keeping Hetch Hetchy wild was an opportunity to answer the taunts of detractors and demonstrate "that there are some things even in America which money cannot buy."[52] Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who had succeeded to his father's place as a leader in the field of landscape architecture, also published a defense of the valley. After distinguishing between the "beauty-value" and the "use-value" of nature, he observed that the previous century "has shown . . . an enormous increase in the appreciation of and resort to the wilder and less man-handled scenery as a means of recreation from the intensifying strain of civilization." As a consequence, Olmsted contended, wildernesses like Hetch Hetchy had great importance to modern society. They must be preserved and held inviolate "if beauty of scenery is not to be pushed to the wall at every point of conflict [with] the more obvious claims of utilitarian advantages."[53]

Robert Underwood Johnson worked for Hetch Hetchy at a fever pitch through the summer and fall of 1913 because he believed that "this is a fight between the sordid commercialism on the one hand and the higher interests of the whole people on the other." The difference between a wild Hetch Hetchy and an artificial reservoir, he asserted, was not "a tweedledee and tweedledum distinction between two equally good kinds of scenery" but rather involved "worship and sacrilege." In Johnson's eyes there could be no compromise with San Francisco. "I am so confident that we are right in this matter," he wrote young Franklin D. Roosevelt at the height of the controversy, that he would debate anyone anywhere on the subject.[54] Johnson and his colleagues constantly emphasized that

52. As quoted in Society for the Preservation of National Parks, *The Truth About the Hetch-Hetchy,* p. 1.

53. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., "Hetch Hetchy: The San Francisco Water-Supply Controversy," Boston *Evening Transcript,* Nov. 19, 1913.

54. Johnson to William R. Nelson, Oct. 27, 1913 (carbon); Johnson to William E. Borah, Nov. 6, 1913 (carbon); Johnson to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nov. 11, 1913 (carbon), Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 1.

they had no desire of denying San Francisco an adequate water supply. Of course civilization must have its due, they conceded, but in this case other sources of water were available and keeping Hetch Hetchy wild was worth the extra cost of their development.

The wilderness advocates looked forward hopefully to the Senate debate and vote. They had succeeded in demonstrating that a large number of Americans resented the proposed alteration of Yosemite National Park. In mid-November 1913, Muir cheered the hard-working Johnson: "we're bound to win, enemy badly frightened, Up and smite em!"[55] But when the Senate began its consideration of the bill on December 1, it was apparent that San Francisco's representatives, who had not campaigned nationally but rather lobbied quietly in Washington, had done effective work. As was the case with many Representatives, most Senators first made clear that they too appreciated the values of unspoiled nature but went on to support the dam. "I appreciate the importance of preserving beautiful natural features of a landscape as much as anybody else," Frank B. Brandegee of Connecticut declared. Yet ultimately civilization won out because the "mere preservation of a beautiful, romantic, and picturesque spot . . . for esthetic purposes" could not conceivably take precedence over "the urgent needs of great masses of human beings for the necessities of life." Echoing Brandegee, Marcus A. Smith of Arizona said that his affection for natural beauty "leads me as nothing else could to sympathize with those thousands of people who have sent their protests against the destruction of . . . Yosemite National Park." However, Smith, too, was in favor of the reservoir, because while "we all love the sound of whispering winds amid the trees . . . the wail of a hungry baby will make us forget it . . . as we try to minister to its wants." Few Senators supported the dam because they opposed wilderness. Most either thought the benefits coming to San Francisco greater than the good that accrued from the wild park or, as with George D. Norris of Nebraska, conceived of the issue only in terms of publicly owned hydroelectric development.[56]

55. Muir to Johnson, Nov. 10, 1913, Muir Papers, New York.

56. *Congressional Record,* 63rd Cong., 2d Sess., *51* (Dec. 4, 1913), p. 198; ibid. (Dec. 5, 1913), p. 273; ibid. (Dec. 6, 1913), pp. 339 ff. In *Fighting Liberal* (New York, 1945), pp. 163 ff., Norris describes in retrospect his impressions of the Hetch Hetchy controversy and his part in it. For evidence that he hoped San Francisco's control of its water supply and the resulting hydroelectric power would be a step in the direction of intelligent national policy see Richard Lowitt, "A Neglected Aspect of the Progressive Movement: George W. Norris and Public Control of Hydro-electric Power, 1913–1919," *Historian,* 27 (1965), 350–65.

The Senators opposing San Francisco stressed the availability of other reservoir sites and the need to respect the sanctity of a region that had been dedicated to providing the public with a sample of wilderness. Asle J. Gronna of North Dakota believed it was a mistake "to commercialize every bit of land" and to "destroy the handiwork of God's creation."[57] Exchanges were heated, and for several evenings the lights of the Senate burned late into the night.

A decision had been made to vote on December 6, and when the Senators entered their chamber that morning they found copies of a "Special Washington Edition" of the San Francisco *Examiner* on their desks. Skillful drawings showed how the valley might appear as a man-made lake with scenic drives for automobiles and boating facilities for happy family groups. The *Examiner* also published experts' testimony justifying the grant in a variety of ways.[58] In comparison, the preservationists' campaign literature was considerably less impressive.

At three minutes before midnight on December 6, the Senate voted. Forty-three favored the grant, twenty-five opposed it, and twenty-nine did not vote or were absent. Eighteen votes from Southern Democrats were the decisive factor, and suggested, as in the case of the House, that the Wilson administration was behind San Francisco. Only nine of the "yeas" came from Republicans.[59]

A Presidential veto was the last hope of the preservationists. After the Senate passage, Wilson received numerous letters calling upon him to defend Yosemite National Park. Robert Underwood Johnson wrote, characteristically, that "God invented courage for just such emergencies. The moral effect of a veto would be immense."[60] He even called in person on the President, but when he left the office, William Kent was waiting to enter![61] On December 19, 1913, Wilson approved the Hetch Hetchy grant. In signing he declared that "the bill was opposed by so many public-spirited men . . . that I have naturally sought to scrutinize it very closely. I take

57. *Congressional Record,* 63rd Cong., 2d Sess.,*51* (Dec. 4, 1913), p. 199.

58. San Francisco *Examiner,* Dec. 2, 1913.

59. For a detailed account of the final stages of the controversy and the political factors behind the decision see Jones, pp. 153–69.

60. Wilson Papers, File VI, Box 199; Johnson to Wilson, Dec. 9, 1913, Wilson Papers, File VI, Box 199, Folder 169.

61. Gardner, "Life of Kent," pp. 351–52.

the liberty of thinking that their fears and objections were not well founded."[62]

The preservationists had lost the fight for the valley, but they had gained much ground in the larger war for the existence of wilderness. A deeply disappointed John Muir took some consolation from the fact that "the conscience of the whole country has been aroused from sleep."[63] Scattered sentiment for wilderness preservation had, in truth, become a national movement in the course of the Hetch Hetchy controversy. Moreover, the defenders of wilderness discovered their political muscles and how to flex them by arousing an expression of public opinion, and in Hetch Hetchy they had a symbol which, like the *Maine,* would not easily be forgotten. In fact, immediately after the Hetch Hetchy defeat the fortunes of wilderness preservation took an abrupt turn for the better. Early in 1915 Stephen T. Mather, a highly successful businessman and wilderness enthusiast, became director of the national parks. Along with Horace M. Albright, Robert Sterling Yard, J. Horace McFarland, and the Sierra Club, Mather generated a campaign on the park's behalf that resulted in the enactment in 1916 of the National Park Service Act. The publicity that accompanied its passage did much to increase the national interest in preserving wilderness that the Hetch Hetchy fight had aroused.[64]

Near the close of the Senate debate on Hetch Hetchy, James A. Reed of Missouri arose to confess his incredulity at the entire controversy. How could it be, he wondered, that over the future of a piece of wilderness "the Senate goes into profound debate, the country is thrown into a condition of hysteria." Observing, accurately, that the intensity of resistance to the dam increased with the distance from Yosemite, he remarked that "when we get as far east as New England the opposition has become a frenzy." In Senator

62. *Congressional Record,* 63rd Cong., 2d Sess., *51* (Dec. 19, 1913), p. 1189.

63. Muir to Robert Underwood Johnson, Jan. 1, 1914, Johnson Papers, Berkeley, Box 7.

64. Donald C. Swain, "The Passage of the National Park Service Act of 1916," *Wisconsin Magazine of History, 50* (1966), 4–17; Robert Shankland, *Steve Mather of the National Parks* (New York, 1951). One indication of the extent of public interest was the number of articles on the national parks published in popular magazines. Between September 1916 and October of the following year over 300 appeared in 95 journals. The figures for the next two years were equally impressive: *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service* (1917) (1918) (1919), pp. 1017–30, 1051–63, and 1247–61.

Reed's opinion this was clearly "much ado about little."[65] He might have said the same about the enthusiasm for Joe Knowles, the Boy Scouts, or *Tarzan of the Apes* (see Chapter 9) that occurred simultaneously with the Hetch Hetchy battle. But the point, as Reed himself suggested, was that a great many of his contemporaries *did* regard wilderness as worth getting excited about.

Indeed the most significant thing about the controversy over the valley was that it occurred at all. One hundred or even fifty years earlier a similar proposal to dam a wilderness river would not have occasioned the slightest ripple of public protest. Traditional American assumptions about the use of undeveloped country did not include reserving it in national parks for its recreational, aesthetic, and inspirational values. The emphasis was all the other way—on civilizing it in the name of progress and prosperity. Older generations conceived of the thrust of civilization into the wilderness as the beneficent working out of divine intentions, but in the twentieth century a handful of preservationists generated widespread resistance against this very process. What had formerly been the subject of national celebration was made to appear a national tragedy.

Muir, Johnson, and their colleagues were able to create a protest because the American people were ready to be aroused. Appreciation of wild country and the desire for its preservation had spread in the closing decades of the nineteenth century from a small number of literati to a sizeable segment of the population. The extent and vigor of the resistance to San Francisco's plans for Hetch Hetchy constituted tangible evidence for the existence of a wilderness cult. Equally revealing was the fact that very few favored the dam *because* they opposed wilderness. Even the partisans of San Francisco phrased the issue as not between a good (civilization) and an evil (wilderness) but between two goods. While placing material needs first, they still proclaimed their love of unspoiled nature. Previously most Americans had not felt compelled to rationalize the conquest of wild country in this manner. For three centuries they had chosen civilization without any hesitation. By 1913 they were no longer so sure.

65. *Congressional Record,* 63rd Cong., 2d Sess., *51* (Dec. 6, 1913), p. 362.