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THE UNSETTLING OF THE WEST: HOW INDIANS GOT THE BEST WATER RIGHTS

David H. Getches*

INDIAN RESERVED WATER RIGHTS: THE *WINTERS* DOCTRINE IN ITS SOCIAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT, 1880S-1930S. By *John Shurts*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 2000. Pp. xv, 333. \$39.95.

A single, century-old court decision affects the water rights of nearly everyone in the West. The Supreme Court's two-page opinion in *Winters v. United States*¹ sent out shock waves that reverberate today. By formulating the doctrine of reserved water rights, the Court put Indian tribes first in line for water in an arid region. Priority is everything where water law typically dictates that the senior water rights holder is satisfied first, even if it means taking all the water and leaving none for anyone else.

In the West, water rights belong to "prior appropriators." The earliest users of water secure legal rights to continue using water, superior to the rights of all who come later. So when there is not enough water for everyone, users are served in order of their priority, with the latest users bearing the full impact of shortages. *Winters* held that the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana had rights superior to their non-Indian neighbors who had begun using water first. The Court's rationale was that the very creation of the Fort Belknap Reservation out of the much larger territory ceded by the tribe effectively "reserved" the tribe's future right to use water. The decision threatened the water uses of the white settlers near Fort Belknap and, as precedent, it profoundly threatened to disrupt the expectations of all water-using neighbors of reservations where water might be used someday.² In the real world of water use, though, Fort Belknap and other reservations still despair of the lack of water.

In his probing history, *Indian Reserved Water Rights*, John Shurts³ concludes that the *Winters* doctrine of reserved water rights is "per-

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1. 207 U.S. 564 (1908).

2. *Id.* The reserved rights principle was extended by the Supreme Court to secure water rights sufficient to fulfill the purpose of all lands reserved for federal purposes, as well as for Indian reservations. See *Arizona v. California*, 373 U.S. 546 (1963).

3. Adjunct Professor, Northwestern School of Law of Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon.

haps the most potent force at the command of western tribes in their attempt to protect their lives, resources, and society” (p. 124). Nevertheless, he finds the Supreme Court’s decision that created such an asset to be less remarkable than other historians have indicated. He uses original historical research to document how “the litigation and its outcome fit well within the existing legal context and into on-going efforts at water development in the Milk River valley” where it arose (p. 4). The book explains that the *Winters* decision was not more controversial locally because some non-Indian neighbors actually gained from the outcome. By telling a new and fuller story, Shurts also corrects the illusion that prior appropriation was so entrenched at the time of the case that lawyers and courts would not consider applying any other rule. He points out that in some quarters of the West other approaches to water allocation were still being debated. He also presents several examples of how the doctrine was, contrary to others’ observations, a serious topic of government activity in the years following the decision.

In Part I, I argue that the West was sufficiently committed to the appropriation system in 1908 that the only likely departures from it were expedients to accomplish broad social goals. Thus, if *Winters* had been simply a water law decision, I believe that its apparently anti-settler thrust would have been genuinely revolutionary. But, as I offer in Part II, the case can be best understood as an Indian law decision. In Indian law, there is a tradition of upholding foundational principles that buck contemporary trends in order to protect Indian rights.

Shurts has also assembled new evidence concerning the aftermath of *Winters* that he uses to set right a misimpression that *Winters* lay dormant for seventy-five years after it was decided. Shurts may have succeeded in defusing the arguments of those who say they were caught by surprise by the government’s latter-day assertions of the doctrine. But, as I discuss in Part III, learning the history does not alleviate my suspicions that the government acted only when it was consistent with the interests of non-Indians, and that it actually did little with the mighty doctrine to advance the Indians’ welfare.

The doctrine of Indian reserved water rights lies at the intersection of two fascinating, essentially unique fields of law. The development of each field provides a rich study of American legal history rooted in the American West. But the evolutionary patterns of jurisprudence in each field are radically different. Only the traditions of Indian law can explain how the Supreme Court could so threaten to disrupt the pagantry of national expansion led by yeoman farmers settling hostile lands.

I. RESERVED RIGHTS AS A WATER LAW ABERRATION

A. *Water Law: A Tradition of Economic Expedience*

Water law has always been a malleable instrument of economic progress. Consider the fountainheads of the prior appropriation doctrine. One involved miners competing for water from the same stream on federal public land.⁴ California, like many new states, had adopted a gap-filling statute that made the common law of England the rule of decision in the absence of statute. The common law followed riparian principles, recognizing a property right in those along a stream to use the water in its natural course. A miner who began digging gold from the bed of a California stream, aided by the flowing water, found that another miner had diverted water away from the stream through a canal for the benefit of himself and other miners and that this interfered with his mining on the stream. But when the miner along the stream invoked the riparian doctrine, the California Supreme Court rejected his claim.

The court found that the plaintiff technically was not a riparian because he was there under a mining claim rather than as a landowner. All the land was public and therefore the miners were essentially trespassers. Because the United States, as owner of nearly all the land, tacitly allowed the mining, and because the custom among the miners was to allow the first person who claimed the minerals and began working them to have a legal right to them, an analogous principle should apply to water. The court opined that any other rule would work to the detriment of the large number of mines that were not adjacent to the stream. But prior appropriation would protect miners who take “waters from their natural beds, and by costly artificial works [conduct] them for miles over mountains and ravines, to supply the necessities of gold diggers, and without which the most important interests of the mineral region would remain without development.”⁵

Some years later, a bigger leap was made by the Colorado Supreme Court in *Coffin v. Left Hand Ditch Co.*⁶ In the 1860s, Colorado had adopted territorial statutes that seemed to adopt riparian water law. One statute gave persons with possessory rights to land along a stream rights “to the use of the water of said stream.” Another prohibited diversion of water “from its original channel to the detriment of [anyone] along the line of the stream” and required that enough water be left in the stream for the use of those along it. Settlers with fee simple to their lands — not just a mining claim on public land as in

4. See *Irwin v. Phillips*, 5 Cal. 140 (1855).

5. *Id.* at 146.

6. 6 Colo. 443 (1882).

the California case — began farming along the St. Vrain River. During a particularly dry summer, they noticed that their water supply was inadequate. On investigation they found that someone had put a dam far upstream and was taking water out of the St. Vrain through a ditch, across a low divide, and into Left Hand Creek for irrigation of lands in another watershed.

The outraged riparians tore out this diversion, provoking the Left Hand Ditch Company, owner of the dam, to sue them. The court then ruled in favor of the ditch company that had dried up the stream because its diversion had begun before the riparians started actually using water. It disregarded the riparian statutes under which the defendants claimed their rights, saying that it was unbelievable that the legislature would have intended the unsavory consequences that would result from applying the statutes. The court said “the doctrine of priority of right by priority of appropriation for agriculture is evoked . . . by the imperative necessity for artificial irrigation of the soil.” By contrast, the riparian doctrine urged under the statutes “would be an ungenerous and inequitable rule . . . [and] would prevent the useful and profitable cultivation of productive soil.”⁷

Now, of course the court was correct that a rule limiting water uses to those along the stream would not reward the investment of people who had decided to take it to lands away from the stream in violation of the statutes. And, more broadly, there was a legitimate concern with the potential inutility of all nonriparian lands if they could not lawfully get water.

To be sure, riparian doctrine sounded rigid and impractical. Under the pure version of the doctrine, every landowner “upon each bank of a river is entitled to the land, covered with water, in front of his bank . . . [and in] virtue of this ownership he has a right to the use of the water flowing over it in its natural current, without diminution or obstruction.”⁸ A right to use water “without diminution or obstruction” of the source once sounded less absurd than it now does. The rule served to mediate the rights of mill owners along streams, where the typical problem was one mill owner damming up the river to regulate the speed and timing of flows in order to optimize the water power available to the mill. An alteration of flow could work to the detriment of other mills, so the rule was that everyone could use the river’s flow for power but could not alter natural conditions.

The riparian rule was not designed for one who needed to dam up the stream to get enough power for a big mill, and it certainly did not work for anyone who wanted to consume water or use it away from the stream, as that would diminish the flow. No problem. Where it was

7. *Id.* at 449-50.

8. *Tyler v. Wilkinson*, 24 F. Cas. 472, 474 (C.C. D. R.I. 1827) (No. 14, 312).

a court-made doctrine, courts could modify it. So diversions that diminished natural flow were allowed under various theories.⁹ And uses on “non-riparian” land apart from the stream, even land in other watersheds, were all allowed contrary to blackletter law — so long as they were “reasonable.”¹⁰ Presumably, any such use could be enjoined but most courts simply conditioned non-riparian uses on payment of actual damages and enjoined only unreasonable uses.¹¹

Courts that avidly rejected riparianism and embraced prior appropriation usually referred to the inflexibility of the doctrine and the inherent unsuitability of such a law to the necessities of the arid West.¹² This was nonsense, because riparian law could have been adapted to the conditions and needs of the West as well as it had been to those of the East.

When a court applied riparian law too rigidly, states rushed to change their statutes or constitutions. When the California Supreme Court decided that downstream landowners had a riparian right to allow the river flow across their land to nourish grasses that provided feed for cattle on the land,¹³ it had the effect of prohibiting development of hydroelectric dams upstream because their impoundment of water would significantly interfere with the natural flow. Fearing that progress would be stopped in its tracks, the state proposed, and the voters passed, a constitutional amendment limiting riparian rights to the water “reasonably required” for beneficial uses and reasonably diverted.¹⁴

Suppose the *Coffin* court had applied riparian law and the Coffins, with their lands along the river, had won. If the ditch company served farmers whose uses were more valuable, it could have continued diverting and paid damages or bargained for an appropriate payment. The market would have allowed adjustments. Instead, *Coffin* and the prior appropriation system recognized a property right to the specific quantity of water that had actually been diverted. In any event, the Coffins’ use would be limited to what was “reasonable.”

The real problem with riparianism was neither its eastern roots nor its inflexibility. In fact, it may have been *too* flexible for the West. It required courts, agencies, or officials to weigh the contentions of every water user who claimed a reasonable use, and these institutions were

9. See *id.* at 474.

10. See, e.g., *Stratton v. Mt. Hermon Boys’ Sch.*, 103 N.E. 87 (Mass. 1913).

11. *Id.* at 89. Modern courts simply consider nonriparian use to be an “important” factor in determining reasonableness. See RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF TORTS § 855 (1979).

12. See, e.g., *Coffin v. Left Hand Ditch Co.*, 6 Colo. 443, 446-47, 449 (“The doctrine . . . is evoked. . . by the imperative necessity for artificial irrigation of the soil.”).

13. See *Herminghaus v. S. Cal. Edison Co.*, 252 P. 607 (Cal. 1927).

14. See CAL. CONST. art. X, § 2 (formerly art. XIV, § 3).

lacking in the old West. The simplicity and greater certainty of prior appropriation, by contrast, allowed the users to monitor and enforce the law themselves — at first.

To get a water right required only a diversion for a beneficial use; the date of the first diversion determined priority of the right. But prior appropriation soon proved too simple and too inflexible for a changing society. Suppose a city proposed to take water out of the stream but did not divert it for a year because of the time needed to build canals and reservoirs. So long as there was no diversion and water was not put to a beneficial use, other users could come to the same stream and divert water, getting a water right that was prior in time to the city's. To allow time to build diversion facilities, then, courts ruled that the diversion and beneficial requirements — the essentials of the doctrine — need not be satisfied in order to secure a priority date.¹⁵ If there was evidence of intent to divert, and if work on the diversion continued with reasonable diligence culminating in an actual diversion sometime in the future, the priority date would relate back to the first manifestation of intent. Sensible as this new rule may have been, given the realities of water development for a growing economy, it changed the basic nature of the doctrine. And proving the subjective requirements of intent and due diligence demanded the involvement of courts, agencies, and officials.

Prior appropriation by definition protects prior users from the acts of subsequent users. But what if a prior user wanted to change the place where water was taken from the stream and the move made it more difficult for a junior user to use water? Courts in appropriation states have only allowed changes in the point of diversion and changes in the type or timing of use on the condition that they not harm other water users, including juniors.¹⁶ This embellishment of prior appropriation law adds another complication. Engineering evidence of the impacts on junior users resulting from the senior user's change has to be weighed by a court or agency.

The prior appropriation system was created to work out competing uses among private parties with water rights. But the general public was impacted when the first user to get to the water monopolized it for a wasteful project or if there was no water left for future generations, for fish, or for recreation. Consequently, most states adopted constitutional or statutory requirements that water rights would be recognized only if they were consistent with the "public interest" or the "public welfare."¹⁷ Leaving aside criticisms of the spotty effectiveness of such

15. *E.g.*, *Sand Point Water & Light Co. v. Panhandle Dev. Co.*, 83 P. 347 (Idaho 1905).

16. *E.g.*, *McDonald & Blackburn v. Bear River & Auburn Water & Mining Co.*, 13 Cal. 220, 239-40 (1859).

17. *See* A. DAN TARLOCK ET AL., *WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT* 263-81 (4th ed. 1993).

provisions, they surely introduced subjective factors that required institutions like courts or agencies to exercise discretion, and they fundamentally altered the simple, priority-based doctrine. The courts have upheld extremely broad discretion in water officials under the banner of public interest. So important is the public interest in water that even where laws were silent, the California courts superimposed a "public trust doctrine" requiring the public interest to be considered before rights are allocated.¹⁸

Part of the mythology of the West is that the prior appropriation doctrine is inexorably linked to the West's aridity. Shurts convincingly rejects this myth (pp. 36-40). As its evolution shows, the essence of water law has been to change rules as necessary to fulfill the social and economic goals of the time. Shurts joins other revisionist historians in attributing the evolution of water law to the perceived "needs of an emerging market capitalist society" (p. 38). This was the conclusion of Morton Horowitz concerning riparian law in his famous *The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860*,¹⁹ as well as of noted historians of the prior appropriation doctrine like Donald Pisani and Donald Worster (pp. 38-40). Whenever either doctrine, riparian or prior appropriation, had to be altered to fit social and economic needs, courts or legislatures would act.

B. *The Winters Doctrine: A Misfit in Contemporary Water Law?*

Establishing that prior appropriation was not the only system that conceivably could have worked in the West does not mean that any other system was politically viable at the time of *Winters*. The doctrine had become the dominant, if not exclusive, method of water allocation in the West. This fact caused most observers to find the Supreme Court's decision in *Winters* surprising. It seemed to fabricate a new system that risked producing results *contrary* to well-accepted ideas of what was progressive and desirable for social and economic welfare of the expanding West. The Court must have understood that on rivers where there were Indian reservations *Winters* could disrupt established economies and retard future growth. And the Court surely knew that removing the requirement of use as the basis of water rights, would undermine prior appropriation as the rule of choice in the West.

Shurts addresses this apparent anomaly by questioning the assumption that prior appropriation was so entrenched in 1908 as to admit no other rule. Distancing himself from Norris Hundley, the emi-

18. Nat'l Audubon Soc'y v. Superior Court, 658 P.2d 709, 718-24 (Cal. 1983).

19. MORTON J. HORWITZ, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN LAW, 1780-1860*, at 40-47 (1977).

ment historian whose account of *Winters* has been the standard,²⁰ he asserts that the government had at its disposal other legal theories that could have justified water claims for the reservation and that some were part of the fabric of western, even Montana, water law. In particular, he argues that the doctrine of riparian rights was still viable and that this fact made it more plausible that a court might depart from prior appropriation. To bolster the plausibility that an alternative theory of water law could succeed, he cites evidence that the Indian reserved rights doctrine actually was compatible with non-Indian goals (pp. 27-34).

Shurts's research does build a strong case that some non-Indians stood to gain when the Fort Belknap Reservation was awarded water rights superior to its upstream neighbors. But I believe that he strives too hard to recast the context framed by Hundley. I remain unconvinced that the survival of vestiges of riparian law made it a viable alternative for the attorney litigating the case or for the Supreme Court. By focusing on the existence of local non-Indian self-interest, the author does help explain how local non-Indians might have supported prosecution of the case and the results of the decision. Yet, the reserved rights doctrine surely threatened more non-Indian water users across the West than it benefited.

In the West, riparian rights have been most important in states along the Pacific coast and those straddling the one-hundredth meridian that generally divides the humid east from the arid lands beyond. Although Shurts and others have successfully debunked any essential connection between climate and doctrine (pp. 38-40) it does not follow that riparian law ever stood a chance of acceptance throughout the West. Riparianism was considered to be starkly inflexible and so it rapidly diminished in importance. Some states initially embraced it, as in Colorado, before roundly discarding it. Others accepted it indirectly, incorporating the common law by reference.

Riparian law had its greatest influence in California. The situation there was skewed because a few politically favored magnates reaped fortunes by abusing the natural flow extremity of riparianism. Henry Miller, the legendary cattle baron, won the "right" to have seasonal flows of the copious San Joaquin River sprawl across his Central Valley hay meadows, unimpeded by the uses of any upstream farmers or ranchers.²¹ Yet the state constitution was amended to correct this extravagance and tame the potential of riparian rights by requiring them to be reasonable relative to other water uses.

20. Norris Hundley, Jr., *The "Winters" Decision and Indian Water Rights: A Mystery Reexamined*, 13 W. HIST. Q. 17 (1982).

21. *Lux v. Haggin*, 10 P. 674 (Cal. 1886); see DONALD J. PISANI, FROM THE FAMILY FARM TO AGRIBUSINESS 191-249 (1984) (discussing *Lux*).

State laws in California and other states continually whittled away at riparian rights. The dominant economic interests in the West were, on balance, better served if those who settled the vast lands in between the West's sparsely located waterways could get water rights rather than if those who happened to take up homesteads or mining claims along the rivers had a monopoly on water. So most states simply replaced riparian rights with prior appropriation. Some states abolished riparian rights except to the extent they were actually used as of some arbitrary date. This wiped out any special value of riparian rights, as distinguished from appropriative rights, by tying them to use. California perpetuated the fiction that riparian owners had inchoate water rights that they could start using at any time in the future. But this was rendered almost meaningless by statutes effectively subordinating unexercised rights to all water uses that existed at the time rights in the river were adjudicated.²²

Not only was the sun setting on riparianism in the West as a matter of law by the early twentieth century, but politicians and development interests spoke out zealously against it while venerating prior appropriation. Shurts recognizes the western mindset: "[People] whose lives depended in part on the use of water or rights to water use were accustomed to thinking primarily in terms of the prior appropriation system" (p. 65).

Shurts correctly points out that riparian law had been repudiated in Montana when the *Winters* case was filed (p. 43). An 1865 territorial statute replaced it with prior appropriation. Nevertheless, he argues that two rather ambiguous territorial cases showed that riparian law was considered by some judges to have vitality. But then Montana became a state in 1889, and revised its water laws in 1895 in part to clear up any ambiguities that had led judges in such cases to opine that a modified riparian system might exist. Shurts acknowledges that the revision "put an end to arguments against the existence or reach of the prior appropriation system based on uncertainties or ambiguities in prior statutes and court cases" (p. 46).

But Shurts still reads a 1900 case²³ as keeping open the possibility that fragments of riparian rights lurked in Montana. In that case, dicta suggested that if lands unaffected by anyone's appropriations had passed into private hands before the 1895 code the owner might be able to claim riparian rights. I have trouble reading the case as holding out any realistic hope for riparian rights claims. Apparently others saw it this way, too. The Montana Supreme Court said several years later, in a case specifically repudiating a riparian claim, that "since the or-

22. See *Rowland v. Ramelli* (*In re* Waters of Long Valley Creek Stream Sys.), 599 P.2d 656 (Cal. 1979) (upholding the legislature's grant of authority to the water board to limit riparian claims).

23. *Smith v. Dennif*, 60 P. 398 (Mont. 1900).

ganization of Montana territory — a period of more than fifty years — no owner, claimant, or occupant of riparian land has ever asserted in the courts the common-law doctrine of riparian rights, as applied to the use of water, until the present action was instituted. . . .”²⁴

Shurts seems to conclude that Carl Rasch, the young United States Attorney who litigated *Winters*, did nothing out of the ordinary when he pursued riparian rights for the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. He says that “any competent attorney for the government would have to have been aware of these legal possibilities” (p. 61). But Rasch must have known it was a longshot when he argued for riparian rights in the trial and appellate courts. He was entirely unsuccessful in these attempts, yet he won when the Court based its decision in favor of the Indians on another theory that was not part of the water law of any jurisdiction — reserved rights.

As applied to water, reserved rights created the same fundamental problem as riparian rights in the context of a prior appropriation system. The prior appropriation doctrine was bedeviled by the characteristic of reserved rights that allowed them to exist without any use of water. This would enable reserved rights holders to start using water years after an appropriator had begun using it, and defeat the appropriator. It is this issue that led to the widespread and bitter reaction against the decision in *Winters*.

As soon as the decision was handed down, the Montana legislature enacted memorials vigorously denouncing it and predicting that it “will seriously and permanently stifle prosperity” (pp. 65-66). And outside Montana there was a chorus of indignant criticism.

Shurts finds evidence that these views were not universal. Some local news accounts treated the outcome in *Winters* as a matter of fact rather than with the outrage and near panic that were expressed by members of Congress and others who viewed it from a national or regional perspective. Non-Indian water users who diverted water below the Fort Belknap Reservation would benefit if the reservation’s priority could command the flow of water past the upstream non-Indians. These downstream users were — like most water users — more interested in getting water than in doctrine. Non-Indians in the area also could benefit politically because the greater demand on the Milk River gave weight to their campaign for construction of a federally financed water project. Moreover, it appears from Shurts’s account that non-Indians were doing most of the farming on the reservation and would be the primary beneficiaries of the “Indian water” (pp. 78-82).

The presence of local support may help explain why the U.S. Attorney might pursue a controversial case vigorously. But it does not undermine the idea that attorney Rasch acted boldly — whether it was

24. *Mettler v. Ames Realty Co.*, 201 P. 702 (Mont. 1921).

for the sake of the nation's obligations to Indians, or to please his chosen faction of non-Indian irrigators, or some combination of the two. He pursued riparian law after it had been largely rejected in Montana and much of the West and when it was eschewed by the government who employed him. After all, his world consisted of more than a group of settlers in the dust-bitten, chilly frontier towns of northern Montana. Rasch's professional life and his future were tied to pleasing his superiors in Washington. They were, it seems, quite preoccupied with doctrine.

Federal policy, and the federal litigating position in water cases, plainly embraced prior appropriation as the water law doctrine of choice for the West and disfavored riparian law. The reasons for this ranged from a perception that appropriation would advance the crusade for the Reclamation Act program of federally subsidized dam building across the West, to a desire to prevent inconsistency in the government's litigating position at a time when it was trumpeting the prior appropriation doctrine in the United States Supreme Court.²⁵ The President of the United States had delivered a message in 1901 emphatically stating the national policy of favoring prior appropriation (p. 96). And it was the conventional wisdom that if riparian law persisted, "the development of the entire arid West [would] be materially retarded, if not entirely destroyed" (p. 97; alteration in original).

Shurts illustrates the pervasiveness of such attitudes. He cites the views of a government attorney that "practically all the wealth now existing in the arid region was created by and is dependent upon the doctrine of the appropriation of waters" and that "should the doctrine of riparian law be now established in said arid region, further development would cease, the Reclamation Act would become inoperative, existing wealth would be destroyed and the country [would] practically become depopulated" (pp. 92-93).

As Shurts discovered in his research, Reclamation officials had their sights set on eradicating riparian doctrine and enshrining prior appropriation so that they could make "rights to water wholly dependent on diversion and actual use" (p. 85). When these federal officials learned the true nature of *Winters* after the government had already *won* in the trial court they were "horrified," became "positively hostile, even apoplectic," and "viewed with abhorrence" Rasch's riparian claims (pp. 85-86).

Rasch had not told his superiors that he would be arguing the dreaded riparian theory. He had gotten authority from Washington only to take action "to protect interests of Indians against interference by subsequent appropriators of waters of Milk River" (p. 68). He did

25. This was the position of the United States in *Kansas v. Colorado*, 206 U.S. 46 (1907), and the Department of Justice did not want to risk jeopardizing it by taking an inconsistent position in the *Winters* case. Pp. 89-102.

mention to the local Indian agent that he was arguing riparian law in another Montana Indian water rights case and that he would raise it in *Winters* as well, but said that “the principal proposition in the case is the use that was made of the waters for beneficial purposes upon the reservation,” i.e., prior appropriation.²⁶ No wonder Washington was irate.

Shurts recounts the drama of Rasch’s ensuing struggle to get the Justice Department to approve going forward with his theories on appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the United States Supreme Court. Rasch confessed that he had relied on riparian law, but explained that, having discovered that the reservation actually began using water after the non-Indians, he deemed it the strongest ground in the case (pp. 87-88). Even with the inertia of a government victory in hand, it was difficult to get permission to defend it against the white homesteaders’ appeal. Ultimately, the issue was reviewed by President Theodore Roosevelt. When the President solicited his views, the Secretary of the Interior resolved a bitter internal conflict among his own subordinates — Indian affairs officials who favored the appeal and Reclamation interests who opposed it — and concluded that the case was “exceptional” because it was the only way to protect Indian rights. The case went forward and when the Solicitor General took it over in the Supreme Court he continued to argue Rasch’s riparian law ground (p. 100).

C. *Sua Sponte: A Trial Court’s Invention of Indian Reserved Water Rights*

Curiously, the *Winters* decision from the Supreme Court and, as Shurts illustrates, the decisions in the lower courts, were not grounded in riparian law at all. The decisions were based squarely on a recent Indian law decision, *United States v. Winans*, that upheld the rights of Indians to cross private property to get to their old fishing areas along the Columbia River in Washington, because they had retained off-reservation fishing rights in a treaty.²⁷ The salient principles of that case were that, in a treaty with Indians, any rights or property not expressly ceded are retained and, where ambiguities exist in treaty interpretation, they are to be resolved in favor of Indians. The trial court and court of appeals stressed that the intention of the government and

26. P. 72. Shurts says that this was “an apparent reference to a *Rio Grande*-reserved treaty rights approach.” *Id.* Although in *United States v. Rio Grande Irrigation Co.*, 174 U.S. 690 (1899), the Supreme Court said state water law could not “destroy the right of the United States as owner of lands bordering on a stream to the continued flow — so far, at least, as might be necessary for the beneficial use of the government property,” the language Rasch used and the scope of his authority suggests he was referring to a prior appropriation claim.

27. 198 U.S. 371 (1905).

the Indians when they entered into an agreement in 1888 was to settle the Indians on the Fort Belknap Reservation and that irrigation was necessary to accomplish that purpose.²⁸

These were not Rasch's ideas. He did plead that allowing upstream use would be "violative of the treaties" but he did not stress *Winans* to the trial court, although it had emanated from the Supreme Court just before he filed the case. Nevertheless, the trial judge made *Winans* the foundation of his decision. Inexplicably, even after inadvertently winning on this theory, Rasch used the decision only cursorily in his brief to the court of appeals. He apparently did not believe in it and chose to continue emphasizing riparian rights (pp. 57-58). He might have muted or confused some of the opposition to his appeal in his battles with Washington had he framed the matter as a peculiar Indian law issue resolvable by reference to the *Winans* reserved rights theory rather than as one that implicated fundamental principles of western water law. Either he never grasped the significance of the reserved rights theory or he did not feel that it would hold up on appeal.

Given the clarity of the Montana trial judge's understanding and articulation of the reserved rights doctrine of Indian water rights, it is difficult not to see U.S. Attorney Rasch as rather hardheaded. He unrelentingly advocated riparian law; never mind that neither of the courts below bought the theory. If we are looking for the champion of Indian reserved water rights it is U.S. District Judge William H. Hunt because it was he who extended the reserved rights doctrine from the treaty fishing rights context of *Winans* to water rights (pp. 72-74). Rasch may have been too close to the matter to see it as anything but a water rights case. The lower courts understood that it was a matter of sustaining the foundations of Indian law, and so did the Supreme Court in an opinion by Justice McKenna, who was also the author of the *Winans* decision a few years before.

II. INDIAN LAW: A TRADITION OF JUDICIAL RESTRAINT

Water law is characterized, first, by judicial announcements of starched doctrines that appear to have Talmudic significance. But if doctrine — whether based on riparian concepts or notions of prior appropriation — fails to protect investments and settled expectations, or impedes social progress, then courts will heap on exceptions and qualifications to fit contemporary utilitarian demands. And if the courts fail to do this, legislatures will step in and modify the system. Water law's mission, then, has been to serve the forces of social change, without substantially interrupting vested interests.

28. *Winters v. United States*, 143 F. 740, 745-49 (9th Cir. 1906). The trial court's memorandum order is quoted in full in Shurts. Pp. 72-74.

Federal Indian law, by contrast, historically has been marked by judicial decisions resistant to the intrusion of social change into Indian country enclaves, at least until Congress has made clear an intention to alter the situation. Courts have honored two, occasionally conflicting, principles: Indian tribes have a right to maintain the integrity of their lands and autonomous societies; and Congress has almost unbridled power to manage, and change, Indian policy.

So the Supreme Court has made sure that treaties are honored, that states are excluded from imposing their laws in Indian country, and that tribes can pursue self-determination. But whenever Congress, in its presumed wisdom, wants to destroy tribal rights, the Court has deferred. The judicial role in Indian law, then, has been agnostic to pleas of social necessity for change. Neither the Court's perceptions of contemporary conditions, nor non-Indian pleas based on inequity or obsolescence of Indian rights, have prevailed.

A legal realist finds nothing exceptional in judicial adjustments of doctrine that conform it to changing conditions. Water law follows this mode, ballasted by property notions that tend to restrict the ambit of change. It is Indian law that is exceptional, with its often uncontextualized results, its relative timelessness.²⁹ It seems to me that *Winters* never would have emanated from the Supreme Court if it had been "merely" a water law case. It can be better explained, and understood, as an Indian law case.

A. *The Supreme Court as a Bulwark of Indian Rights*

Indian law historically has been distinguished by jurisprudence that seems to defy contemporary political winds. From the first Supreme Court until the Rehnquist Court, Indian rights have survived all but express congressional abrogation. The Court's landmark cases in Indian law have been bulwarks against the erosion of Indian rights by the forces of non-Indian economic and social interests.

Perhaps sensing that relations between aboriginally sovereign tribes and the United States are essentially a political matter, and that the relationship is constitutionally defined in the Commerce Clause, the Court has been largely unwilling to restrict Indian rights by interpretation. This trait has aroused loud conflicts over the rights of states and the impacts on non-Indians. While the Court has remained impervious to the resulting political pressures, however, it has also unquestioningly deferred to curtailing Indian rights once Congress has spoken.

29. Charles F. Wilkinson, in *AMERICAN INDIANS, TIME, AND THE LAW* 32 (1987), says, "The modern cases reflect the premise that tribes should be insulated against the passage of time."

In the *Cherokee Cases*,³⁰ Georgia tried to assert its laws over the territory of the Cherokees within the state.³¹ Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion rebuked the State of Georgia for violating the Cherokee Nation's rights of self-government and conflicting with Congress's exclusive authority to regulate such matters.

Andrew Jackson, before running for president, vociferously supported Georgia's claim to sovereignty over Cherokee lands and advocated removal of the Indian tribes from the territory of the states. As President, he was unmoved by the Cherokees' pleas for protection against Georgia's encroachments on their lands and for enforcement of the guarantees of independence anchored in treaties. This touched off one of the nation's earliest and bitterest federalism conflicts.

The Cherokees' first attempt to get judicial relief was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction, but Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion was couched in sympathetic language that characterized the relationship of tribes to the United States as having constitutional dimensions. The Commerce Clause gave Congress power over Indian affairs, and put the federal government in the position of "guardian."³² In a second case, Marshall found the Georgia laws regulating matters in Indian country "repugnant to the constitution, treaties, and laws of the United States."³³ Georgia effectively was told that its laws were invalid on the Cherokee Reservation, a vast area within its boundaries where gold had been discovered. Instead, supreme federal law secured the Cherokee Nation's power of self-government within its territory.

Georgia refused to obey the mandate of the Court and was supported by President Jackson. Legend holds that it is of this decision Jackson said "John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it."³⁴

The *Cherokee Cases* touched off a constitutional crisis. Former President John Quincy Adams declared that "[t]he Union is in the most imminent danger of dissolution. . . . The ship is about to founder."³⁵ The nation survived, however, and so did the decision with its sweeping, and persistently unpopular, preemption of state laws and recognition of tribal sovereignty in Indian country. The Cherokees did

30. *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. (6 Pet.) 515 (1832); *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. (5 Pet.) 1 (1831).

31. On the history surrounding the *Cherokee Cases*, see generally 4 ALBERT J. BEVERIDGE, *THE LIFE OF JOHN MARSHALL* (1919); 2 CHARLES WARREN, *THE SUPREME COURT IN UNITED STATES HISTORY* (1922); G. EDWARD WHITE, *THE MARSHALL COURT AND CULTURAL CHANGE: 1815-35* (1988); and Joseph C. Burke, *The Cherokee Cases: A Study in Law, Politics, and Morality*, 21 *STAN. L. REV.* 500 (1969).

32. *Cherokee Nation*, 30 U.S. (5 Pet.) at 17.

33. *Worcester*, 31 U.S. (6 Pet.) at 562-63.

34. MARQUIS JAMES, *THE LIFE OF ANDREW JACKSON* 603 (1938).

35. 4 BEVERIDGE, *supra* note 31, at 544 (second alteration in original).

not fare so well; they were later removed in the Trail of Tears to what is now Oklahoma.³⁶

Other Indian law cases have demanded heroic advocacy and judicial resistance to popular will and political trends. For instance, in the late nineteenth century, popular sentiment against tribalism was strong. There was pressure to open up already shrunken reservations to white settlement and the policy of moving tribes out of the way of settlement to their own enclaves and allowing them to manage their own affairs became nearly impossible to maintain.

The government turned its attention to controlling Indian life within the reservations in order to "civilize" the Indians. The goal, which resonated with both the well-intentioned, self-styled friends of the American Indian and those bent on settling the West, became assimilation.³⁷ Conveniently, this involved opening the reservations to land-hungry non-Indians who would come in to take up lands that were deemed surplus after tribal holdings were parceled out to individual Indians. The non-Indians gained land but would serve as examples of individual enterprise for the Indians. By giving each Indian a piece of what had belonged to the whole tribe, communalism would end and the Indians would be induced to shed their "old and injurious habits . . . [f]requent feasts, community in food, heathen ceremonies, and dances, constant visiting."³⁸ Traditional religious and cultural practices were reviled and forcibly repressed.³⁹ "Civilizing" the Indian, it was thought, depended on destruction of Indian culture and reservations. And Indian children were to be civilized by removing them from their families and putting them in boarding schools, where they were forced to give up their dress, language, religious practices, attitudes, and families.⁴⁰

To supplant tribal government and end the influence of traditional leaders, Indian agents were put in charge of law and order on reservations.⁴¹ The agents eventually ran their own police and courts under an

36. See RENNARD STRICKLAND, *FIRE AND THE SPIRITS — CHEROKEE LAW FROM CLAN TO COURT* 65-67 (1975).

37. See generally HENRY E. FRITZ, *THE MOVEMENT FOR INDIAN ASSIMILATION, 1860-1890* (1963); 2 FRANCIS PAUL PRUCHA, *THE GREAT FATHER: THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT AND THE AMERICAN INDIANS* 609-58 (1984).

38. *Readjustment of Indian Affairs: Hearings on H.R. 7902 Before the House Comm. on Indian Affairs*, 73d Cong., 2d Sess., pt. 9, at 430 (statement of Delos S. Otis, quoting agent for Yankton Sioux) (internal quotation marks omitted).

39. See ANGIE DEBO, *A HISTORY OF THE INDIANS OF THE UNITED STATES* 290-94 (1970); JENNINGS C. WISE, *THE RED MAN IN THE NEW WORLD DRAMA* 289-91 (Vine Deloria, Jr. ed., 1971).

40. See PETER FARB, *MAN'S RISE TO CIVILIZATION AS SHOWN BY THE INDIANS OF NORTH AMERICA FROM PRIMEVAL TIMES TO THE COMING OF THE INDUSTRIAL STATE* 257-61 (1968).

41. See generally WILLIAM T. HAGAN, *INDIAN POLICE AND JUDGES* (1966); Russel Lawrence Barsh & J. Youngblood Henderson, *Tribal Courts, the Model Code, and the Police*

administratively promulgated federal code. This was part of the scheme to educate and tame Indians for their own good and the safety of their new neighbors.⁴² The assimilation policy and the authority of the Indian agents were directly threatened by the continuation of traditional tribal justice.

So the Bureau of Indian Affairs pressed Congress for legislation that would extend federal jurisdiction over reservation crimes. A law was passed allowing prosecution of federal crimes in Indian country, but it excepted crimes involving only Indians.⁴³ Nevertheless, federal prosecutions in these matters proceeded. In one such case, *Ex Parte Crow Dog*,⁴⁴ the Supreme Court dealt a blow to the assimilation policy when it set aside the conviction and death sentence of a Sioux Indian who had murdered another Sioux on the reservation. The murderer had already been sanctioned by the tribal council and tribal peace-makers required payments and restitution to the victim's family. The government argued that a rather ambiguous treaty provision allowed federal prosecution, but the Court said that to depart from the "highest and best" promise of "self-government" in the treaty would require a "clear expression of the intention of Congress."⁴⁵ Only after the assimilation policy was embodied in quite specific legislation did the Court uphold its application.⁴⁶

To be sure, the Court's decision in *Crow Dog* ran against popular opinion and federal policy of the time. But it comported with a tradition of tribal independence and of safeguarding the aboriginal autonomy and treaty rights of Indian tribes unless and until Congress plainly abrogated those prerogatives.

Through the years, the Supreme Court has gone against the tide of social change to prevent the deterioration of Indian rights in many other noteworthy cases. In *Winans* it found that a Northwest fishing tribe's retention of fishing rights on lands ceded to the government by treaty implicitly impressed the land with a perpetual easement across the ceded land to get to the river to fish, even after the land was pat-

Idea in American Policy, in AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE LAW 25 (Lawrence Rosen ed., 1976).

42. See *United States v. Clapox*, 35 F. 575, 577 (D. Or. 1888) (describing the courts imposed on reservations as "educational and disciplinary instrumentalities, by which the government of the United States is endeavoring to improve and elevate the condition of these dependent tribes.").

43. Act of Feb. 18, 1875, ch. 80, 18 stat. 316, 318 (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 1152 (1994)).

44. 109 U.S. 556 (1883).

45. *Id.* at 568, 572.

46. See *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*, 187 U.S. 553 (1903) (sustaining the decision of Congress to allot tribal lands contrary to a treaty promise); *United States v. Kagama*, 118 U.S. 375 (1886) (upholding the enactment of the Major Crimes Act, now codified at 18 U.S.C. § 1153 (1994)).

ented to non-Indians.⁴⁷ At a time when society revered the hard work and grit of settlers, the decision cracked the non-Indians' thriving fishing monopoly on the river and gave tribal members an opportunity to use an old treaty promise as a means of economic and cultural survival.

Even where Congress has spoken and instituted policies curbing Indian rights, the Court has been conservative in construing the impact on tribal rights. In the 1960s, at the height of an eventually abandoned "termination" policy under which Congress had ordered several reservations dismantled and tribes disbanded, the Supreme Court surprisingly held that a terminated tribe retained its fishing rights.⁴⁸ The Court cited venerable authority that held that " 'the intention to abrogate or modify a treaty right is not to be lightly imputed to the Congress.' "⁴⁹

Just as the Court has upheld the extensive power of Congress to take away tribal rights and powers, it has also sustained exercises of power that single out Indians for special benefits. In *Morton v. Mancari*,⁵⁰ the Court upheld an act of Congress giving an employment preference to Indians in the Indian service. It rejected non-Indian objections based on the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972.⁵¹ It said that the law made a political distinction and therefore did not result in racial discrimination because the Constitution specifically empowered Congress to deal with tribes as governments. It would have been easy in the 1970s to construe the civil rights laws as ultimately working more to the benefit of Indians than laws that perpetuated their special legal treatment. But the Court adhered to the judicial traditions of Indian law.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, an unprecedented number of Indian cases came before the Supreme Court. As growing non-Indian communities and economies closed in on Indian country, states tried to impose taxes and regulations on reservation activities. Tribes, too, exerted more of their governmental powers. Jurisdictional conflicts led to judicial challenges. The "modern era," as it was called by Charles Wilkinson, was marked by dozens of cases in which the Supreme Court vindicated tribal claims of immunity from state law, exempted non-Indians from taxes and regulatory laws on reservations if they would in any way interfere with federal purposes, and validated tribal authority to govern even non-Indians in Indian country.⁵² Thus, tribes

47. See *United States v. Winans*, 198 U.S. 371 (1905).

48. *Menominee Tribe v. United States*, 391 U.S. 404 (1968).

49. *Id.* at 413 (quoting *Pigeon River Co. v. Cox Co.*, 291 U.S. 138, 160 (1934)).

50. 417 U.S. 535 (1974).

51. Title VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a) (1994).

52. See WILKINSON, *supra* note 29, at 1-2.

were able to collect taxes from non-Indian energy companies producing oil and gas on reservations,⁵³ and non-Indian contractors were held exempt from state taxes when building a school on a reservation.⁵⁴ Indian treaties were also interpreted to allow large shares of commercial fisheries to be harvested by Indians in the Northwest to the detriment of established non-Indian fishers.⁵⁵

All of these cases were contentious and implicated the sovereignty of states. Many of them resulted in serious economic impacts for the states and for non-Indian businesses. It is fair to surmise that there would have been no political outcry if the Indians had lost in these cases. There *was* an outcry when they won.

The significance of having a judiciary able to insulate tribes from the mood swings of politics and social attitudes has been brought home by the sharp change in the Supreme Court's approach to Indian cases since the mid-1980s. By getting actively involved in the cases and trying to do what is best for mainstream society, rather than continuing the tradition of upholding Indian rights and sovereignty unless Congress has clearly divested the tribes of them, the Rehnquist Court has begun to erode the foundations of Indian law.⁵⁶ The contrast with the prior century and one-half of Indian law is striking. It may be too early, however, to conclude that the Court's departures of the last fifteen or so years have permanently changed the course of Indian law. In any event, seeing the Supreme Court as an institution willing to elevate Indian cases above the broader social and economic context accurately portrays the legal milieu of *Winters*.

B. *Winters: In the Indian Law Tradition*

United States v. Winters is one of the bulwark cases of Indian law. It preserves tribal water rights that were not expressly ceded by the Indians or extinguished by the government. It applies ancient canons of construction that favor interpretations resolving ambiguities "from the standpoint of the Indians."⁵⁷ The agreement between the tribes of the Fort Belknap Reservation and the government was silent as to water rights. So the Indians' right to sufficient water to fulfill the intent of their agreement survived the cession of land.

The Supreme Court opinion was written by a westerner who understood the profound impact the decision would have on settlers who

53. *Merrion v. Jicarilla Apache Tribe*, 455 U.S. 130 (1982).

54. *Ramah Navajo Sch. Bd., Inc. v. Bureau of Revenue*, 458 U.S. 832 (1982).

55. *Washington v. Wash. State Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessel Ass'n*, 443 U.S. 658 (1979).

56. See David H. Getches, *Conquering the Cultural Frontier: The New Subjectivism of the Supreme Court in Indian Law*, 84 CAL. L. REV. 1573 (1996).

57. 207 U.S. 564, 576 (1908).

had homesteaded former Indian lands.⁵⁸ He knew that the water rights perfected by the settlers under state law were already being used by them. He knew how disruptive it would be if the settlers' water rights were subordinated to future rights reserved for irrigating Indian reservations. He understood the equities. The non-Indian settlers had been drawn West by the promise of homesteads where they could farm and prosper, and their livelihoods and investments were at stake. Everyone knew that successful farming would take irrigation and the settlers had been told that they only needed to claim water rights for their homesteads under state law.

The government had created an impossible situation where its implied representations to the settlers could not be fulfilled if the intent of the agreement with the Indians was satisfied. Justice McKenna wrote: "We realize that there is a conflict of implications, but that which makes for the retention of the waters [by the Indians] is of greater force than that which makes for their cession."⁵⁹

The Indian law principles used by McKenna to reach his decision were not revolutionary. Although *Winters* was the first case to apply these principles to water rights, they can be traced to some of the oldest cases in Indian law.⁶⁰ The concept that Indian rights predated the United States and that the United States is obliged to protect them against encroachment by those asserting state law, and the rule that these rights must be explicitly extinguished by the Congress, trace to the *Cherokee Cases*.⁶¹ So does the instruction to read provisions in Indian treaties favorably to the Indians,⁶² which had been reiterated by the Court in other cases by the time of *Winters*.⁶³

Yet, there is no doubt that *Winters* stunned McKenna's fellow westerners. Shurts sees the opinion as "unremarkable" in the sense that the theories had been vented in the lower courts and were merely applications of McKenna's decision in *Winans* (p. 144). But observers found plenty about which to remark. Shurts says that after the court of appeals decision there were "stories and editorials of criticism and outrage" in nearby towns, although some newspapers treated it with a more neutral tone (pp. 104-05). If the reaction of communities along the Milk River was mixed, criticism across the West was generally vehement. For instance, a Wyoming Congressman called the decision

58. Shurts reports that Justice McKenna was solidly connected to the establishment of western economic interests and political influence. P. 163.

59. 207 U.S. at 576.

60. See Richard B. Collins, *The Future Course of the Winters Doctrine*, 56 U. COLO. L. REV. 481, 482-83 (1985).

61. *Worcester v Georgia*, 31 U.S. (6 Pet.) 515, 544-49, 551-54, 562 (1832).

62. See *id.* at 551-54; *id.* at 582 (McLean, J., concurring in the judgment).

63. *E.g.*, *Jones v. Meehan*, 175 U.S. 1, 11 (1899).

“monstrous,” because it “may stay development until the crack of doom because there is somebody too indolent or too indifferent to develop or allow development” (p. 66). To this day, the legal literature seethes with commentary on the decision and its consequences.⁶⁴

I cannot agree with Shurts’s conclusion that “*Winters* fit right in” because at the time there was a “diversity of viewpoints” on water (pp. 163-64). First, I have questioned in the preceding section whether, by the time of *Winters*, the existence of a few vestiges of riparian law left open a viable debate over whether prior appropriation would predominate. Second, the decision was treated like a bombshell that did not fit in at all with the water rights trends of western water law. If *Winters* “fits” anywhere, it is within Indian law’s historical tradition of sustaining tribal rights whether or not broader policy interests are served.

III. RESERVED RIGHTS IN PRACTICE

For all the fears it has evoked, and its purported potency, one would think that in ninety years *Winters* would have produced tangible results. Indian reservations would have blossomed and their economic advantages over neighboring non-Indian communities would be apparent. The opposite is true. At least for the past few decades, reserved rights claims have become a central, and complicating, factor in adjudications of water rights, yet the consequences in terms of Indian benefits or disruptions of non-Indian uses are sparse. This is partly owing to the paucity of capital for tribes to invest in the infrastructure to develop and use water. It is also because only a few dozen tribes have been able to achieve adjudications to make their reserved rights enforceable. The blame has generally been placed at the feet of the federal government for failing to assert reserved rights until recently. That failure, in turn, has allegedly lulled non-Indians into a false sense of security that would be unfairly disrupted by latter-day assertions of reserved rights.

Shurts’s research belies claims that the sudden invocation of reserved water rights in the late twentieth century constitutes an unfair attempt to disinter an arcane and unripe principle. This answers arguments that, if the doctrine is to be applied at all, it should be modified to avoid disruption of non-Indian uses. Now, I never could subscribe to the unfair surprise ground for objecting to reserved rights claims. Since 1908, no one could read *Winters* and miss the fundamental point: all water rights on streams near Indian reservations are potentially subject to superior Indian claims. Whether or not the government actively pursued Indian water rights on reservations around the West af-

64. I have found at least forty-five law review articles focusing primarily on aspects of the reserved water rights doctrine that have been published in the last twenty years.

ter it won *Winters* should not matter. It is the job of investors and lawyers to inquire into the nature and security of property rights and to take account of the risks. A long delay in enforcement while tribes suffered an incapacity to develop their water rights should not evoke too much sympathy — especially for non-Indians who were beneficiaries of federally subsidized water development on many of the same streams where Indian claims lie.⁶⁵

Whatever the merits of the argument might be, Shurts attempts to show that the government was, indeed, actively involved in advancing reserved water rights claims in the several years following the decision. He acknowledges that the government did not press reserved rights in water litigation in the first years following the decision and thus the doctrine “remained a misunderstood novelty” (p. 185). Shurts argues, however, that the doctrine was not entirely moribund. He cites a failed attempt by an Indian affairs official to get legislative recognition of reserved rights, a flurry of rhetoric in Congress on the same subject, matched by opposing rhetoric glorifying prior appropriation law, various examples of congressional and Indian agency awareness of the need to litigate Indian water claims, and discussions of extending reserved rights claims beyond Indian reservations to federal lands (pp. 184-222). This proves that members of Congress and Indian affairs officials were aware of the reserved rights doctrine and that eventually some water rights claims were, indeed, pursued.

Shurts concludes that the government did use the doctrine, “often, and to some effect” (p. 252). He illustrates with a case study of the government’s litigation of claims for the Uintah Reservation of the Northern Utes in Utah. This case study is meant to exemplify that “contrary to conventional understanding of what happened to *Winters* in the first decades after the original decision, in this instance [federal] officials aggressively pursued a *Winters* claim” (p. 246). The Ute case shows, instead, how unaggressive the United States was, notwithstanding its potent victory in *Winters*. The story reveals that the government selectively advocated reserved rights to advance the welfare of non-Indians.

After agonizing over whether to assert rights for the reservation at all, the government attorney decided not to insist on all of the reservation’s legal entitlement (p. 230). He felt that it would “not be just” to the settlers because they had come there “practically under an invitation from the Government” (p. 238). Of course, this was exactly the situation of the upstream settlers who lost out in *Winters*. Moreover, it appears that the reserved rights claims for the Uintah Reservation were made primarily for the benefit of non-Indians who had leased

65. See UNITED STATES NATIONAL WATER COMM’N, WATER POLICIES FOR THE FUTURE — FINAL REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT AND TO THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES 474-75 (1973).

most of the irrigated land on the reservation (pp. 233-34, 239). The government invoked the doctrine to give the non-Indians who occupied Indian lands the advantage of an earlier priority under the umbrella of Indians' reserved rights so they could use water to the detriment of other non-Indian farmers off the reservation whose water rights depended on state law.

The most shocking story of all in the aftermath of *Winters* seems to have occurred back on the Fort Belknap Reservation itself. Shurts explains that after the court entered a final decree giving the reservation 5000 inches of water (almost all the average flow during the irrigation season) the upstream non-Indian irrigators refused to obey the decree and took all or most of the water out upstream. Federal officials quickly compromised and settled for 2500 inches — half the amount of water the reservation was entitled to receive (pp. 107-08). It was a dry year and so perhaps the officials felt obliged to compromise. But there are enough other facts that, when pieced together, arouse concern about the good faith of the federal officials with respect to the Indians who should have benefited from their ostensible water-rights victory.

Shurts could find little evidence of an Indian stake or involvement in the litigation. He tells us that non-Indians farmed about half of the irrigated lands at Fort Belknap at the time. Indeed, the superintendent himself grazed cattle on the reservation. Most of the farmers were there under leases arranged by the reservation superintendent, and some were there because they had married Indian women. Indians objected to the superintendent's leasing program for the reservation (pp. 27-33).

While Shurts disputes the basis of another commentator's conclusion that the *Winters* litigation was motivated by a desire specifically to benefit the downstream and on-reservation non-Indians, he agrees that the outcome favored non-Indians. We know, too, from his research that some years after the decision an inspector reported that Indians had heard of the decision but had not seen its fruits. One Indian said: "This year all these ditches are dry, and we will not raise anything, and I think we will starve off this winter" (p. 187).

A project ripe for Shurts or another historian is an exploration of what went wrong after *Winters*. If Indians did not benefit, why? Who did benefit? Did officials at Fort Belknap continue to settle for half of the tribe's entitlement after the drought year? Did they settle for half because that was enough for the half of the reservation land that was then being cultivated by non-Indians? Did the flaccid federal support for Indian irrigation have anything to do with the fact that Congress was considering, at the behest of non-Indian neighbors, legislation to open up the irrigable lands of the reservation for non-Indian settlement and ownership?

The most vexing question of all is why, eighty years after they theoretically won the best water rights in the West, most tribes are on

Indian reservations that are parched and undeveloped? In the 1970s, the National Water Commission concluded that: "In the history of the United States Government's treatment of Indian tribes, its failure to protect Indian water rights . . . is one of the sorrier chapters."⁶⁶ The Commission put much of the blame on the fact that the United States was focused on developing the very same waters that could be claimed by Indians to be used instead in big water projects for the benefit of non-Indians. The political dynamics that contributed to the failure to develop Indian water rights are thoroughly examined by Daniel McCool.⁶⁷ The problem has even darker causes; it is well documented that the United States has actually compromised its legal advocacy of tribal water rights when faced with conflicts of interest.⁶⁸ Whatever the causes, the reality is that a tiny percentage of irrigable acreage on reservations is actually irrigated — only seven percent as of 1984.⁶⁹ This includes acreage served by the meager irrigation systems that have been built on reservations, but even these are in such disrepair that they approach uselessness.⁷⁰

Most observers would have to agree that in the last two decades of the twentieth century, Indian reserved rights were more frequently and vigorously applied than at any other time. One major case went to judgment in the Wyoming Supreme Court, which awarded a large share of the water from the Big Horn River to the Wind River Indian Reservation.⁷¹ The decision was affirmed by the Supreme Court but nearly was reversed because the Justices were worried that the judgment portended dislocations for non-Indian irrigators. An opinion demanding "sensitivity" to the impact on non-Indian appropriators in the application of reserved rights was almost issued.⁷² Today, there are some sixty Indian water-rights cases pending in courts around the West. Potentially at stake are claims to water totaling more than four times the annual flow of the Colorado River.⁷³

66. *Id.* at 475.

67. DANIEL MCCOOL, *COMMAND OF THE WATERS: IRON TRIANGLES, FEDERAL WATER DEVELOPMENT, AND INDIAN WATER* (1987).

68. *See* SUBCOMM. ON ADMIN. PRACTICE & PROCEDURE OF THE SENATE COMM. ON THE JUDICIARY, 91ST CONG., *A STUDY OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE CONFLICTS OF INTEREST IN THE PROTECTION OF INDIAN NATURAL RESOURCES* 5-19 (Comm. Print 1971) (written by Reid Peyton Chambers).

69. MCCOOL, *supra* note 67, at 159

70. WESTERN WATER POLICY REVIEW ADVISORY COMMISSION, *WATER IN THE WEST: CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT CENTURY* 3-48 (1998).

71. *In re Gen. Adjudication of all Rights to Use Water in the Big Horn Sys.*, 753 P.2d 76, *aff'd mem. by an equally divided Court sub. nom. Wyoming v. United States*, 492 U.S. 406 (1989).

72. *See* Getches, *supra* note 56, at 1640-41.

73. WESTERN WATER POLICY REVIEW ADVISORY COMMISSION, *supra* note 70, at 2-28 (stating that claims could affect 60 million acre-feet of water).

But the saga of the *Big Horn* decision seems to have moved many Indian water rights cases out of the courts. Daunted by what the case shows about the potentially huge quantity of a tribe's reserved right, non-Indians may be more cautious about resolving these matters in the courts. The tribes, now aware that the Supreme Court came close to diluting the doctrine substantially, have been open to non-judicial resolutions as well. Lloyd Burton has studied many of these efforts in detail and analyzed their relationship to the law.⁷⁴

Since the 1980s, more than a dozen settlements effecting major quantifications of Indian water rights have been reached by negotiation and typically followed by implementing federal legislation.⁷⁵ Each settlement is different and attuned to the local situation. Yet the most common feature of the settlement packages is a federal subsidy for development of water facilities or purchase of water rights so that non-Indians can continue using water unmolested by the development of Indian water rights. Generally, the settlements have "enlarged the pie," so that non-Indians gain in the process. It is fair to say that if a tribe wants to quantify, use, and enforce its water rights it must find a way to collaborate with non-Indian neighbors and make them whole, or even better off.

The most recent chapter in the *Winters* story mimics the first. Many reservations languish without water that could nourish their economic security and improve their lifestyle. Federal assistance to the tribes has been inadequate. In its 1998 Report, the Western Water Policy Review Advisory Commission described the continuing failure to resolve reserved rights claims as creating "an inequitable situation for Indians and considerable uncertainty among all other water users."⁷⁶ The commission called for the government "to fulfill its trust responsibilities to Indian nations and tribes to secure and protect tribal water rights and to assist the nations and tribes in putting those rights to use."⁷⁷ The fruition of the tribes' paper legal rights depends, as it always has, on federal assistance, which is not likely to be forthcoming unless it will result in tangible benefits to non-Indians.

74. LLOYD BURTON, *AMERICAN INDIAN WATER RIGHTS AND THE LIMITS OF LAW* (1991).

75. See DAVID H. GETCHES ET AL., *CASES AND MATERIALS ON FEDERAL INDIAN LAW* 844-852 (4th ed. 1998); David H. Getches, *The Metamorphosis of Western Water Policy: Have Federal Laws and Local Policy Eclipsed the States' Role?*, 20 *STAN. ENVTL. L.J.* 3, 52 & nn.240-43 (2001).

76. WESTERN WATER POLICY REVIEW ADVISORY COMMISSION, *supra* note 70, at 2-28.

77. *Id.* at xix.

CONCLUSION

John Shurts has advanced our understanding of the reserved rights doctrine by illuminating the milieu of its formulation and early days. He adds several new perspectives. By explaining that the prior appropriation doctrine was not the only brand of water law that could fit the West's conditions or, indeed, that had been considered, he deflates a popular western myth. Although other writers have mustered a wealth of contemporary criticisms of the *Winters* decision to show how eccentric it was, Shurts's research reveals that it was not, in fact, uniformly disdained in Montana in 1908; the most outraged observers were politicians from outside the state. A final project of Shurts's important study was to show how *Winters* was applied in the few decades after the Supreme Court decision.

Shurts is surely correct that the West's aridity did not make inevitable the universal adoption of prior appropriation. But that adoption was nearly complete in Montana, and I continue to be among the unreconstructed types who believe that by 1908, departures from the prior appropriation doctrine were truly aberrational in western water law. Yet I do think *Winters* logically followed the traditions and precedents of Indian law. My view of the government's deportment once the Court armed it with reserved water rights is more cynical than Shurts's; I am moved less by the fact that it was invoked at all and more by the way it was used primarily to benefit non-Indians.

Although some of my conclusions from the penetrating research presented by the book differ from the author's, I nevertheless find it to be a rich and well-presented source. The research provides an impressive and sound basis for drawing one's own conclusions.

Important lessons flow from learning about the local social and economic context. One is that *Winters* might not have been advanced by the federal officials and attorney but for the potential alignment of Indian and non-Indian self-interest. Another is that once federal litigation on behalf of Indians is unleashed, its unpopularity or potential for disrupting larger regional or national policies of social and economic importance may not hold it back. Federal litigators and, most significantly, the United States Supreme Court have often resisted political winds to hold the line on depreciation of Indian rights absent clear congressional instructions otherwise. This phenomenon and the legal principles invoked by the Court make *Winters* a coherent part of Indian law jurisprudence, if a water law aberration.

Another lesson from this new history is that, having won the case, the government applied it selectively where and when it would pro-

duce substantial benefits for non-Indians. That history seems to be repeating itself in the way the doctrine is applied today. This lesson is at once troubling in its crassness and instructive to Indian law tacticians who are seeking ways to give value to the tribes' potentially vast water rights estate.