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**VIEW FROM THE
HIGH COUNTRY**
BY MICHAEL H. LEVIN

View From the High Country

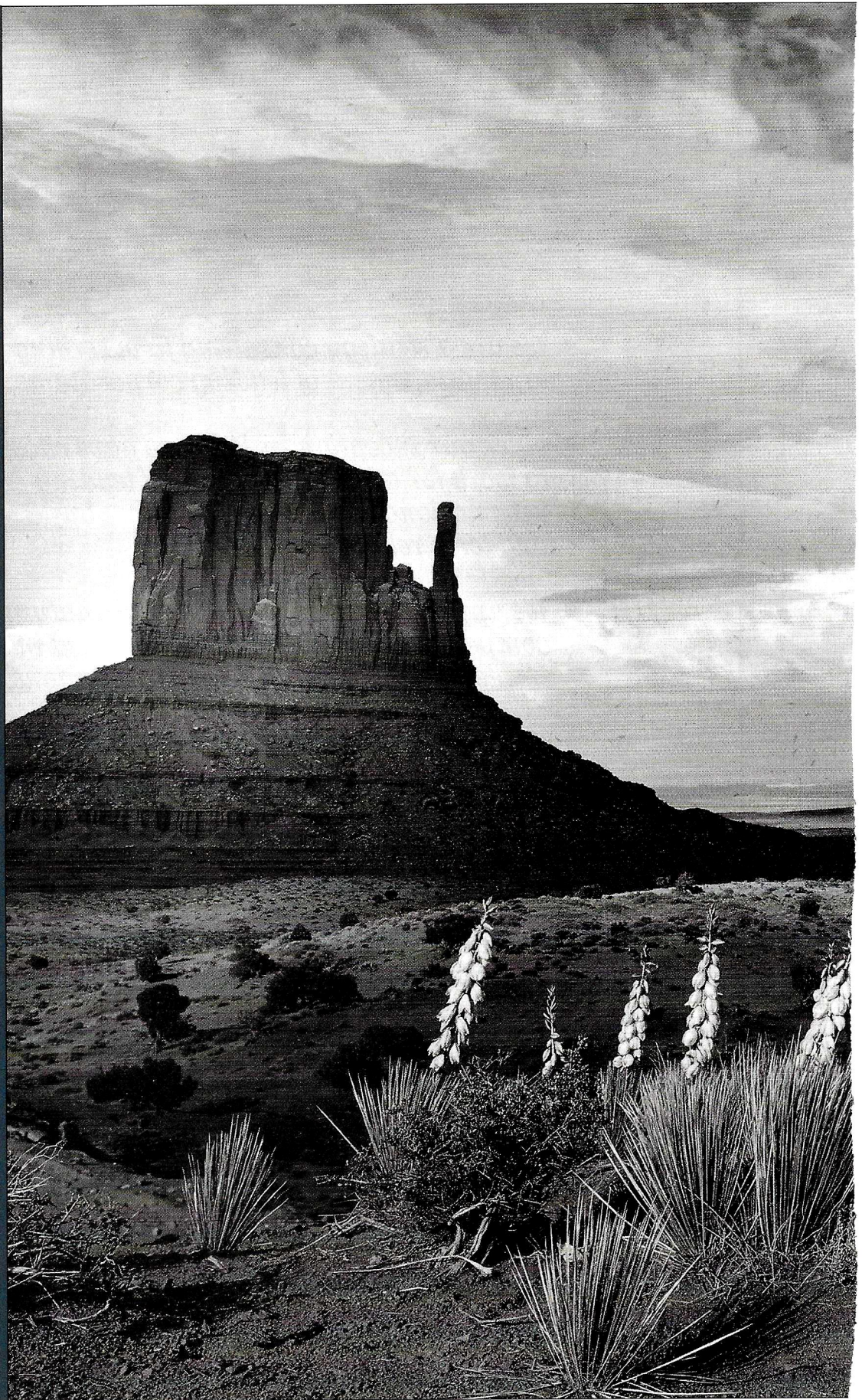
When Easterners go West, they can learn a lot from the land—if they have the eyes to see.

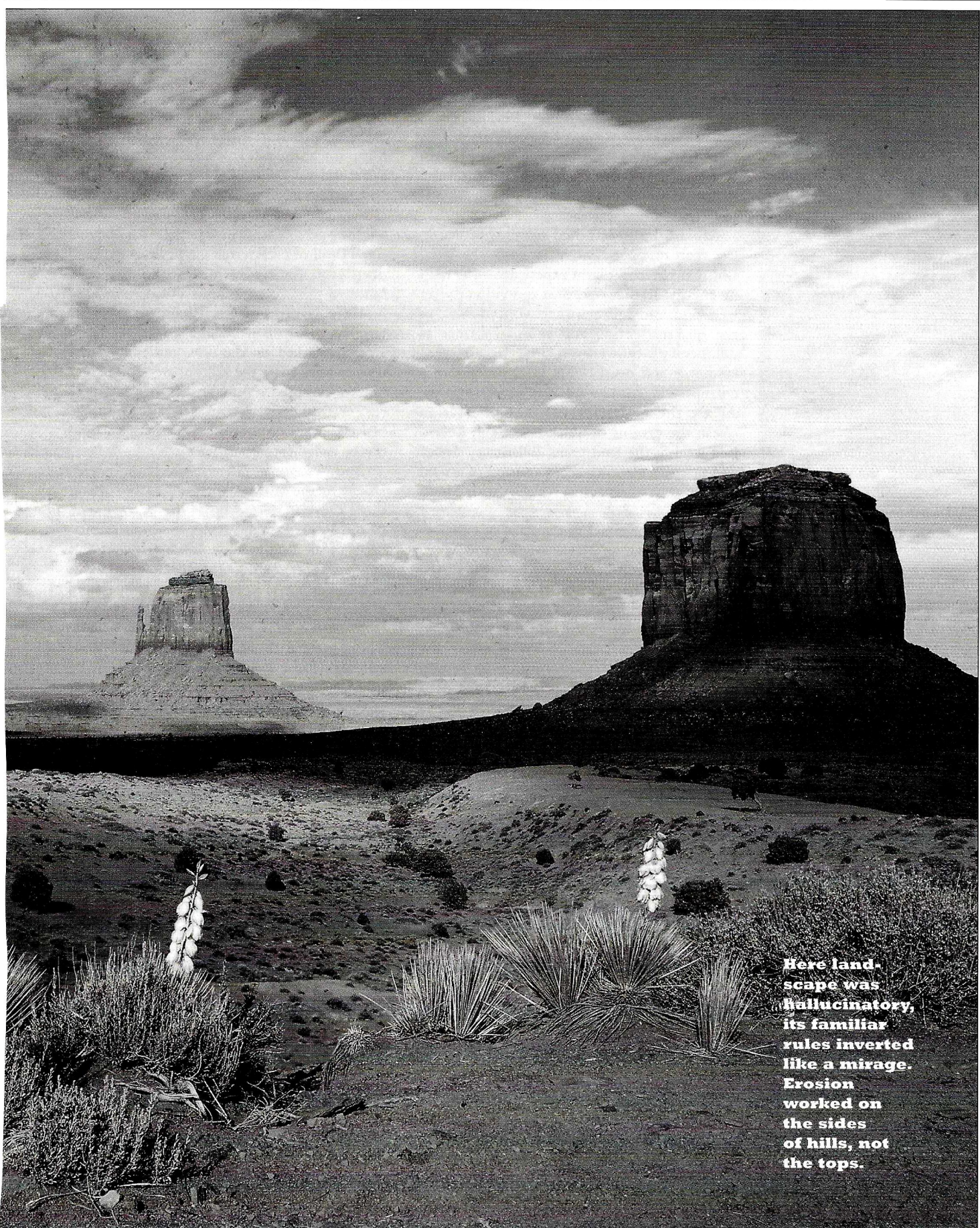
By Michael H. Levin

The high parts of Utah are different from the Smokies or the Sierras. Not different in degree, but as different from California and the Alleghenies as the craters of the moon. That difference of scale and vista, hue and shape and range—the spookiness of a landscape that dismisses the traveler while enlarging his soul—can change how people see. And that changed vision—literally, perspective—changes how people behave.

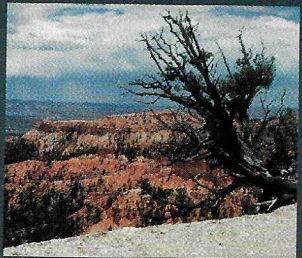
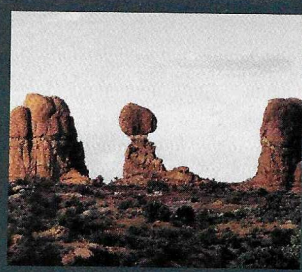
These effects are not trivial. They flow in a

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Here landscape was hallucinatory, its familiar rules inverted like a mirage. Erosion worked on the sides of hills, not the tops.



We gape at the balance-rocks poised like thousand-ton hammers on the ridges above us. We stop at rain seen for the first time as it walks down side cuts, trailing drapes of clouds from the valance of the sky.

short, swift line to the Sagebrush Rebellion, the property-rights movement, and that Contract With America whose advocates have conquered the House of Representatives and seem poised to remake—as their forebears did in successive waves of Free Silver, prairie populists, and LaFollette progressivism between the 1880's and the 1920's—the nature of Government and its role in American lives.

We are long detached from agriculture; less than one per cent of us work the land. But that westering farm experience—the faith in energy, hard work, and individuality; in free land and self-help and voluntarism; in the quarter-section and yeoman farmer as democracy's bulwarks against the absentee landlords and overbearing governments of a corrupt Old World—are very much with us. As are the undersides of that libertarian quest: the dreams of quick riches and unlimited wealth; the land grabs and survey frauds and title speculations; the confusion of armed defense with liberty, and violence with Manifest Destiny.

Both sets of values run deep in our character. And both of them broke and were remade—are still being remade—west of the Hundredth Meridian, on the high plains of Kansas and Nebraska, Colorado and the Dakotas. Our westward tide first splintered there on the hard fact of *lack of water*, the inability of wet-weather tradition to sustain settlement or life. But that tide stopped dead at the dikes of Utah's Plateau Province—which still has much to teach us, if we have eyes to see.

My wife and I had none of this on our minds when we decided, at a Washington dinner party, to spend part of a summer traipsing south Utah. The Continental Divide was still to us scenes glimpsed from portholes. Then our hosts started pulling out folios on canyons, telling us to move west from the high blinding dryness of the mesas around Moab to the emerald folds of Zion National Park. That way, they said, we would go out in greenness, not that moonscape of rock atop rock that exhausted the brain. Since our host was an ex-Mormon who'd grown up there but fled, while our hostess was the ex-wife of an Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn, we figured they had the facts bracketed.

But nothing could prepare us for the physical shock of the High Country, its huge spaces and scale: The views cut by bluff after cliff after plinth after pediment, like the workshop of a giant Praxiteles. The sharp

strokes of valleys, as though scribed by quill pens. The light and heat that hit us like linebackers, driving the breath from our ribs.

We were the Innocents of the East, creatures of tame climates and comfortable proportions, prone to lock keys in rental cars or hunt for sunglasses perched on our caps. What did we know of a land where weather and terrain change every five minutes, and change can mean death? Of whirlwinds that sail four-person tents into gorges? Or the terrified thrill of cliffs a mile high; or canyons so deep even their aura makes one dizzy; or hundred-mile vistas without a blade of grass?

Here "landscape" was hallucinatory, its familiar rules inverted like a mirage. Here erosion worked on the sides rather than the tops of hills, since the hilltops were flat. Here "mesas" seemed mountains, not tables: they rose 7,000 feet, ran in 50-mile reaches. "Rivers" were ribbons of moisture that would not be called creeks farther east.

And "canyons" did not touch the reality. Down to the streams that still carved them, those canyons were deep as the Front Range of the Rockies. Seen from the high points, they cut the land in convolutions, leaving fins and hogbacks, spires and pinnacles, battalions of grinning stone goblins or hoodoos, shapes that should not have been stone at all. Seen from below, they made bewildering mazes. Their gorges snaked in from unexpected salients. Their salients were intersected by tributary canyons. Their rims stepped back or beveled, till the channel could barely be discerned.

Vegetation was equally disorienting. Sage, buffaloberry, wind-wracked piñon or juniper, it was alkali-gray but for rare alpine saddles or the lipstick blooms of Indian paintbrush in waterpockets or cliff seeps. Instead, all the hues of New Hampshire autumns were spread permanently and extravagantly through the rocks themselves, candy-striping buttes with thousand-mile swaths of pink, yellow, green, white, and all possible shades of brown and red, laid down when Utah sat on the Equator beneath shifting Saharas or the waves of warm fresh-water seas.

This land was a new box of colors, spread on a vast different canvas. And as Fremont and Bridger discovered when their reports home were laughed at, it required a wrench in perception even to be conceived.

But we were not wrenched yet. We did not know to keep wetting our neckerchiefs, or carry Gatorade instead of water, or pack a dozen quarts in our rented Explorer. Or why the shady side of canyons was important. Or the difference between *on rim* (exposed to

sunstroke and lightning), *under rim* (exposed to rock falls), and *getting rimmed* (unable to move forward or back, when attempting to climb to the rim).

We'd barely heard of John Wesley Powell, though his name links dozens of landmarks in that Great American Desert between Colorado and the Cascades. Though he's the animating spirit of that place which scale forgot.

But in a 2,000-mile loop from Salt Lake, we learned.

Let Major Powell stand for that *transforming experience*. His name marks the huge dammed turquoise lake in the heart of the Grand Canyon. And if one-armed, Shiloh-maimed, preachy, eminently Victorian John Wesley Powell is remembered in person today, it's for the most spectacular adventure on the continent: his audacious four-month run down the two-vertical-mile drop of the canyoned Green and Colorado Rivers, from Flaming Gorge in Wyoming Territory to Grand Wash in the flats of Arizona, through more than a thousand miles of unmapped rapids, on the constant edge of disaster, down gorges wrapped with mystery. When the Major and his surviving crew floated out to the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret in August of 1869, he was an instant national hero, Lindbergh and Teddy Roosevelt combined.

Yet that Colorado expedition was merely a prelude to one of the most extraordinary careers in our history. Over the next two decades, short, homely Wes Powell—a self-educated Illinois farmer's son, without wealth, family connections, or formal credentials—created key institutions of modern American governance, articulated the role of science in a democracy, laid foundations of the twentieth-century state.

Director of the Topographical Survey of the Colorado River of the West; organizing genius of the United States Geological Survey; first head of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology (now the Museum of the American Indian); founder of the Cosmos Club; father of modern reclamation, conservation, linguistics, cartography, cultural anthropology, geology, Powell was protean and incorruptible, tireless in his conviction that science could not be left to universities or corporations. In public lands, irrigation, and a hundred other areas where the private sector would tread only if companies could monopolize benefits, he insisted Government had a part to play. It would organize knowledge, pass it to the small farmer in water

charts and workable land rules, give ordinary citizens starving on desolate claimstakes the "gift of hope." Government science was the guarantor of modern democracy, guardian of the public trust.

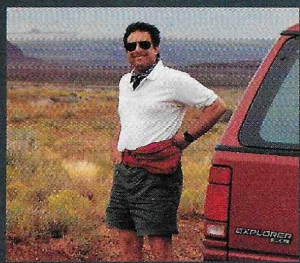
That was a remarkable notion in a Gilded Age of cynical exploitation. But not as remarkable as the way Powell elaborated it. Your cost-benefit analysis is skewed, he told an 1885 joint committee that sought to cut his research budget: "[What] one man gains by discovery is a gain of other men. And these multiple gains become invested capital, the interest on which is all paid to every owner. . . . [For] the revenue of new discovery is boundless." Three years later he bluntly informed a hostile Senate commission that a Homestead Act that worked well in Missouri was an invitation to disaster on the arid high plains. "It would be almost a criminal act to go on as we are doing now," he said, "and allow . . . hundreds of thousands of people to establish homes where they cannot maintain themselves" for lack of water.

To deliver the "gift of hope," Powell begat new bureaus that became models for the Forest, Park, and Soil Conservation Services; and later the Tennessee Valley and Bonneville Power Authorities; and, later still, N.A.S.A., the National Science Foundation, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and dozens of labs or institutes, Los Alamos among them. He wrote those bureaus' enabling laws, shepherded their budgets, devised seminal cooperative agreements with jealous states, handpicked his division chiefs. One of those chiefs became president of the National Academy of Sciences. Two others founded the disciplines of earth geology and radioactive volcanism. His expedition illustrators, Thomas Moran and Henry Holmes, achieved respective fame as the quintessential painter of the American West and the first curator of the National Gallery of Art. His Geological Survey clerk became "Pinchot's brain," architect of the 1907 Conservation Congress, the National Park system, the modern Department of the Interior.

And for six months at the tail of the Eighties, Powell was the most powerful man in America. As head of the 1888 U.S. Irrigation Survey, he suspended all title claims until Government lands could be mapped for irrigation. In other words, *he halted the tide of westward expansion*, asserting—as Congress had inadvertently authorized—that only clear water rights could prevent millions of acres from falling to land cartels when homesteads were starved or thirsted out.



After Powell's journey down more than a thousand miles of unmapped rapids, he was an instant national hero, charter of the last blank map of the West—Lindbergh and Teddy Roosevelt combined.



We thought we knew what we were doing. But nothing friends or books said could prepare us for the shock of the High Country, its huge spaces and scale. We were, after all, the Innocents of the East. . . .

That ended Powell's career. For not even settlers wanted to hear that nature was to blame for failed farms. Much less that hundreds of thousands of square miles of the Golden West were unfit even for grazing. But the Major stuck to his message. In his insistence that "the future has a claim on us," he fathered sustainable development too.

The point, of course, is that *Utah made Powell*. Before the Colorado, he was little more than an amateur fossil-hunter, small-time secondary-school principal, adjunct professor at a university barely risen from Bloomington mud flats. After the Plateau Province, he was a force of nature, rattling off scientific and organizational insights like some inextinguishable Chinese firecracker. In Utah's electric vistas—from the tiny surprise of flowers in creases of hot slickrock, to the Grand Staircase stepping back from the Colorado's rims in thousand-foot rainbow risers—Powell found not merely the sere beauty of erosional skeletons, the "bones of earth laid bare." He saw the slow pulse of the earth itself, ceaselessly rising and falling only to rise and be stripped away once more.

Did High Country streams plunge into cliff faces, defying the rule that water runs downhill? That was because the streams were there first, Powell concluded, and cut the cliffs like buzz-saws as the land arched upward. Did canyons bend on themselves in oxbow mazes? That was because their meanders were set when brooks flowed through sluggish tropic deltas, which held those patterns while the mesas arose.

In Powell's Pythagorean vision of an earth always in motion, everything was connected. Geology was not scenery but destiny; aridity was fate. Each acre irrigated at the Colorado's headwaters would also reclaim an acre in its Mexicali delta. Each principle validated in the canyons could be reapplied elsewhere to chart fault zones, identify stable dam sites, forecast underground springs.

And if the planet's crust was flexible, so should American institutions be. Men might mitigate climate, but could never remake it. Better to begin with the possible than founder on fantasy at the start. The stanzas of Utah's strata were a poetry of limits—the "gift of hope" a message that dreams not based on reality die fast.

From the beginning, Powell's Colorado runs sought more than adventure. He meant to show that truth can crowd out wish-fulfillment, that "rain *does not* follow the plow." He aimed to prove that scientific method

scrubs the scales from men's eyes—that science can make us free.

Powell's battleground happened to be topography. But the terrain could equally be Affirmative Action or health-care policy or welfare reform. For his issues remain ours. They were the tensions between central authority and individual empowerment, preservation and development, private enterprise and social safety nets; between free choice in free markets—and the compulsory information needed to make them free. He was most at home in that cauldron-boil of local versus national interests, the proper Government framework to promote responsible personal action. The web of dams that waters the Western basins to Baja California, that made Phoenix and Los Angeles possible, is the least of his legacy.

Let the elements sing it. For Utah is nothing if not elemental, as anyone flayed by a climb through its ridges can attest.

Earth. It's mid-July as we head south from Salt Lake down Highway 19, an easy shot towards Arches National Park. We gape at the balance-rocks poised like thousand-ton hammers on the ridges above us, though they'll seem common as salt in a week. We stop at rain *seen* for the first time as it walks down side cuts, trailing drapes of cloud from the valance of the sky. But it's the pulse of this valley which dominates.

Suddenly the land opens up. Right and left of the highway, at the margins of the floor along which the Price River trickles, ledges the hue of Crest toothpaste rise without preliminaries, and keep rising, and rise to white capstone beyond. They do not just rise but *rear*, sweeping for miles in battlements that recall Fafnir's labors at Valhalla. They gather to themselves all the mass and light of the terrain.

These are the Book Cliffs. At their feet a four-diesel express freight crawls like a toy. Yet they're minor buttes, their impact an overture.

They do not match the astonishments of Arches, where stone the color of dried blood forms hundred-foot fins like the plates of stegosauri, pierced by windows which admit an amethyst sky. So otherworldly is this prospect—pocked with clusters of beaked, hooded columns; enfiladed by the wind-carved reliefs Powell named "mural escarpments"; utterly still one minute, blasted the next by whirled tumbleweed or *verga* (rain-clouds that don't reach the ground)—that visitors become paralyzed. Unnerved by

nature, hikers get lost on marked foot trails, stop dead on thoroughfares, citing sandholes, flash floods, catamounts.

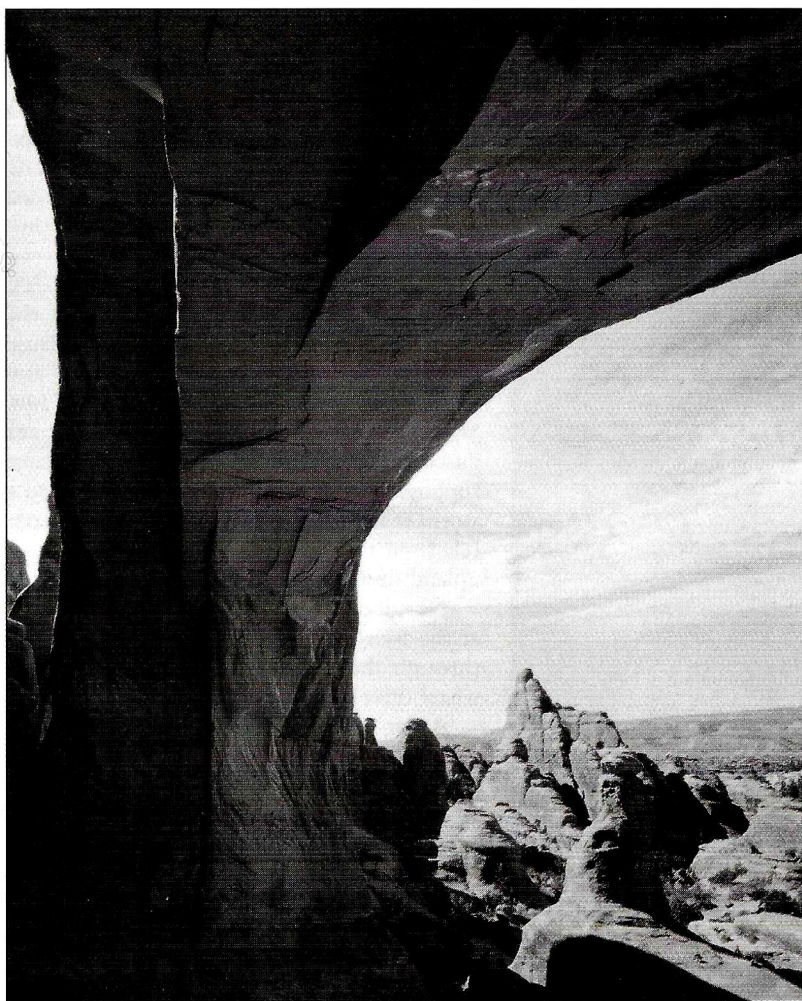
They do not match Capitol Reef's badlands, where the terrain coils like droppings on the long east slope of Waterpocket Fold. Metallic, oppressive, brooding, the land lurks in twisted fields of spewed rock—scenery playing Richard III. In a 40-minute hike below the gleaming Capitol Dome, across slopes strewn with black-lava boulders, our skin becomes parchment, perspective turns flat. Not even buzzards ride these blast-furnace updrafts. But in the shallow gorge of the Fremont River, deer forage in abandoned orchards below cliffs cut with petroglyphs, carved in the first millenium by clans that christened this place. *Land of the sleeping rainbow*, they called it.

Nor do they match ultimate earth, Tropic's flat little burial ground near Bryce Canyon. Like most hamlets on the rugged Aquarius Plateau, Tropic was not reached by roads till the Sixties. Until then, rare visitors could pack or jeep (or try to fly) in. But that was before Bryce's rouged amphitheaters with their serried ranks of attentive hoodoos—vast parodies of audiences waiting for the curtain to rise—became stops on the tourist trail. Now several hundred daily gawkers tramp Bryce's rims or dare the steep descent to those orchestra pits.

I end my day at Bryce in Tropic's cemetery, after the rodeo, under a double rainbow that spans the sheared pink ends of the Kaiparowits Cliffs. There, hand-cut headstones bear the same names as riders in the local rodeo. And beside each male marker lie rows of wives and infants, dead of childbirth or overwork or untreated diseases: witnesses to Mormon fertility, and the price of these stubborn settlements.

Air. There are few places where air is a character in the scenery, capable even when still of eerie concentration, like a great turning lens. Due to low water vapor, *average* visibility here is 100 miles, versus 15 in the East, meaning that on good days mortals can see twice as far. That's enough to hold the whole High Country in a glance if we could get high enough. But even grasped vistas work their magic.

From the rim of Bryce Canyon, I can see straight down the Paria Valley to the Vermilion Cliffs falling to the Grand Canyon, a view framed by buttes geometric as staves. From the sleek green meadows of Boulder Mountain, yellow and blue with alpine flowers, I overlook stands of white aspen, past the palomino rise of Waterpocket Fold to the

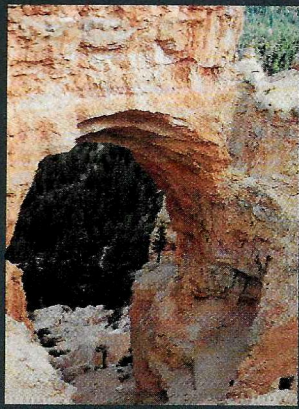


Henry Mountains and the Abajos 50 miles beyond them, lavender triangles climbing the sky. I am not viewing scenery. I am seeing earth whole, a creature of flanks and shoulders, breathing and twitching as it sleeps.

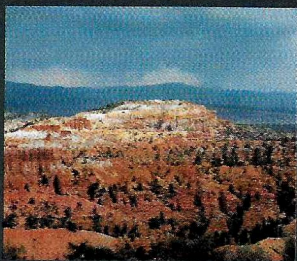
But the air is not still. Clear as it is, it is always in motion, a double deceiver. Funneling down canyons, cornering the mesas, it gathers in whirlwinds, sudden dust storms, thunderheads that form and march in squadrons, flooding one valley while the next remains dry. Only the birds reveal it: when their rasps fall silent, attention must be paid.

Water. At Timpanogos Caves, visitors hike to the entrance a dizzy half-mile above the canyon floor. Park Service pamphlets call this a two-hour trek. But the Innocents pump to the top in forty minutes, hyperventilating all the way. The effort is worth it. For ahead lies wonder, caverns set not with normal stalagmites but branched corkscrews and sheets of flowstone, glinting sulfur, bronze or coral. All the colors of the rocks outside are present here but muted, still slick with fluids, as though waiting to be born.

Such visions spring from the terrain itself, which defies disbelief and fosters a sense of different connections. One might as well deny the brushfires that roar through the passes.



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In the last cave, a great chambered heart of alabaster—three melded stalactites—hangs from the ceiling, pulses amber and garnet as we move. It is an apt metaphor for Powell's restless, beautiful land of upthrust and slip fault, in caves opened by water trickling through limestone, now filling with stone again. Then they'll open once more in some incalculable future. If the planet holds.

But High Country water moves in less deliberate ways. Driving the Trail of the Ancients, we find the pass above Moki Dugway hedged with black-eyed susans—and blanketed with fresh snow, at the end of July. Shiny rills of runoff cross our switchback descent towards Monument Valley, an area supposed to be dry. All day we've dodged a storm that rumbled behind the mesas; in our relief not to be rained on, the significance of upland thunder does not register.

Nor does it register as we take a sharp left at the foot of the Dugway, onto a dirt track through the Valley of the Gods. Our four-wheel-drive can go *anywhere*. *Si!*

A flat red plain opens before us, dotted with miles of snakeweed, pyramids that rise to magenta sentinels. In that telescoping scene no object moves, no wisp of smoke rises. We breast the first rise, the car's snout aimed at heaven, then swinging down with a lurch. We ford our first wash, just three yards of mud, a trickle at its center. We cross larger washes, hubs thumping. Nice, we think: someone pitched hay to level the fords. But it isn't hay. It's a thick, frigid gravel of hail, pine needles, and mud, rolled by the waters that surged past minutes before.

Not registering this either, we reach the next wash, whose currents race between steeper banks. This does not deter us. Like figures in a two-reeler, we scramble out, clear a track, churn through the current—and get stuck in a trice on the far bank, high-centered on yielding gravel, ten miles from nowhere, with no supplies and night coming on.

This is the moment that lies in wait for all voyagers in the High Country. It could be burst tires or a rock slide or the deceptive smooth hydraulics of canyon rapids. But *moving water* where none usually moves bears a special aura: the threat of flash floods, those walls of water that cannot be outrun. Suddenly the clues link. They are sealed by a distant crack of thunder whose long water arm could sweep us from here. We pack up, slide down the bank, start walking.

Only then do we spot the Range Rover behind us, its occupants muffling laughter at our comic distress. They are Ike and Jane Fordyce from (of all places) Carefree, Ari-

zona. He is a huge balding free-lance photographer, whom we mistake for a retired defensive tackle. She is an apparent ex-model with the classiest checkbones since Hepburn. They've followed us because they wanted some view shots. But their whim is to us divine intervention. They are our transport to civilization, our guests that night at an exuberant dinner of fried Navajo bread and Kraft salad in the town of Bluff. The only cloud is our trusty Explorer, still hunkered on the lip of a nameless wash on the far side of West Fork Creek. For the Innocents did not think to pack tow chains, either.

Even this shadow is dispersed next morning when Jim and Louanne Hook clatter up to our cabin in their battered eight-wheel Suburban, loaded with shovels and chains and a 20-gallon water jug, ready to rescue our steed. Equally ponytailed, lean as lodgpoles, they came to Bluff running trail llamas for the Bureau of Land Management. Now they run Recapture Lodge and rent llamas on the side, resident gurus on the area's wildlife and cinematic history. For this is Hollywood country, where almost every Western from *Stagecoach* to *The Magnificent Seven* was shot.

Then down we go into the valley, Jim tossing off mini-lectures on stratigraphy. He indicates the minor wash that trapped an ex-Afrika Corps commander, who spent two days building a stepstone bridge, then hiked back, exulting: "I haff neffer had such good a time since Tobruk."

We ford Lime Creek, where an inch of current still slides. We approach the West Fork, where hail gravel plasters two hundred yards of road. Jim's wheels slew in the stuff; even he nearly gets stuck. Every few minutes he glances out over the valley, murmurs, "Um—moving water there too." It turns out yesterday's thunder was a 50-year flood. Up the valley of the Fremont, expert hikers almost drowned when a 20-foot wall of water boiled through, taking out half a mile of interstate.

But our steed is perched where we left it, above an arroyo, sizzling in the heat. Better yet, the treacherous hail gravel itself has melted into an amalgam unyielding as concrete. On that hard surface a single push dislodges us. I rock free, follow Jim and Lou out. At Mexican Hat they refuse any reward but breakfast. Already, dust devils rise from the washes, reminding that water sustains life more than it threatens here.

Fire. At Anasazi State Park archaeologists have uncovered a hundred linked wattle-and-clay rooms running a U round their outcrop. In the living areas, worn tracks lead

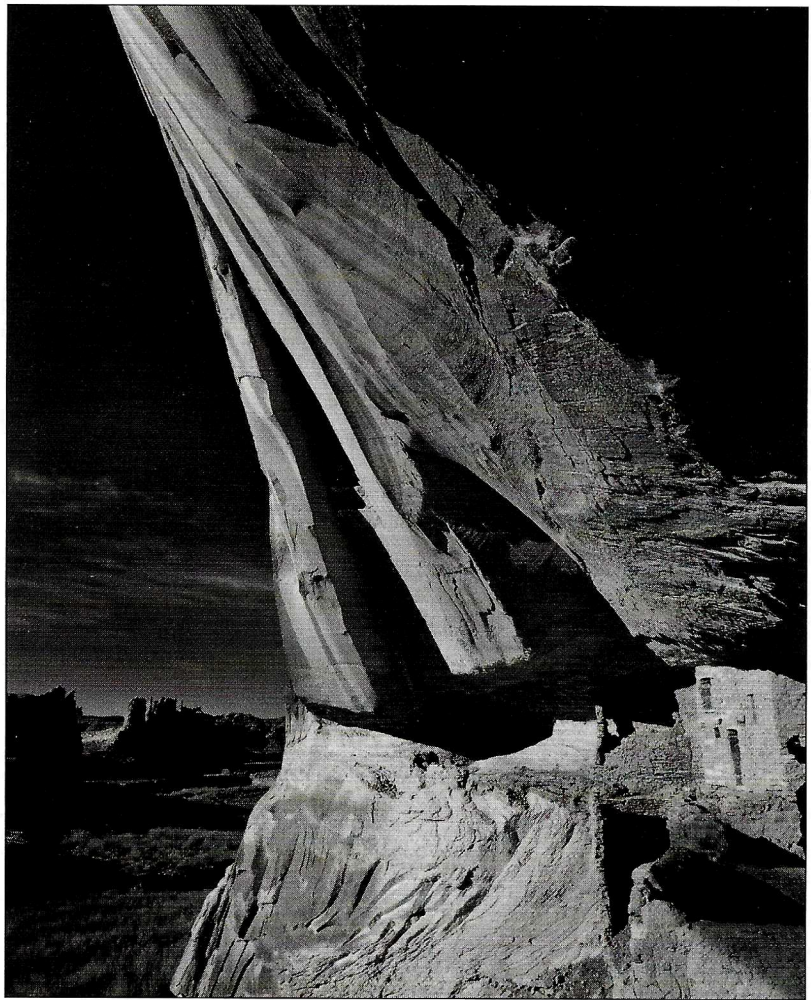
to central firepits. Niches in stone foundations mark where baskets held seeds or grain. In this land bay in the side of the Aquarius, sheltered by circling peaks from the lashing weathers of the high range, generations gathered piñon nuts, trapped bobcat, bagged bighorn sheep with throwing sticks, raised corn and beans on plots fertilized by turkey flocks, traded as far south as the Yucatán. The ornaments, stone tools, and geometric pots from their trash-heaps are a treasure trove.

About 1200, the entire village burned to its roots and was abandoned. Experts think residents did the burning; its causes are unknown. But standing in those rooms among the black stumps of wall poles, I sense with eerie certainty what occurred. I can see the smoky interior, the anger of clan rivals, the slash of a flint knife, a sprawled surprised twitching, the required expiation. I hear the band chant hymns of cleansing as it fires each post, every lintel, before the slow trek south to unpolluted terrain.

Where farsight is a natural state, it is difficult to deny such visions. They spring from the terrain itself, which defies disbelief and fosters a sense of different connections. One might as well deny the brushfires that roar through the passes. Or the herds of wild mustangs that crowd out commercial cattle. Or the anger that tinges every conversation touching Government rules against thinning those mustangs or clearing the deadfalls on which brush fires feed.

Yet the High Country is deeper than rhetoric, more complex than talk radio. It rests on the whole web of Utah's history, from the tribes who left their names on the mesas, to their ancestors the Anasazi (Ancient Ones) and *their* ancestors the Hohokam (Vanished Ones); through the streams of commerce that swept in railroads and uranium mines and computer companies, and swept out ranchers and farmers, and still sweep the territory—taking much, leaving much in return. The Spanish *entradas*; the trappers and mountain men, driven half-crazy by nature and loneliness; the Mormon columns forcing their wagons through impassible rock; the settlers who hacked out homesteads only to see their children or children's children drift to the cities, pushed by solitude and the limits of desert economies—all those lines of hope and loss mingle here.

Which is why Powell's odd little figure has become my personal symbol for American renewal. For the High Country is a clarifier: choices are stark here, options more plain. Whatever the stupidities of attempts by the few to govern the many, life could not



exist on these ranges without Government dams, roads, conservation, power. So the things Government takes or distorts are only part of the story. The rest is the possibilities Government gives.

Powell understood the need to keep resolving such tensions. He knew that in politics, as in geology, it is the nature of pendulums to swing back. He knew that the way to deal with such swings was to hold what one finds true and speak it plainly. From Utah's unforgiving hazards he took that grave courtesy of lives lived on the edge—the sense that each has value in some larger round, that no individual thrives apart from the whole. He wove those strands of frontier interdependence into a paramount political virtue: the conviction that honest debate will transcend personal attack and reflexive bias; that from it, community will emerge.

So for those who seek clues to the next American century, the High Country is not a bad starting point.

In that elemental setting, even Innocents can find truths. END

Yet the High Country is deeper than rhetoric, more complex than the fulminations of talk radio. The big sky may breed small minds. But it's better at large hearts and helping hands.

