

CHAPTER THREE

FORESTER-KINGS?

Fire Suppression and the State

From Gifford Pinchot on, the chiefs of the Forest Service have been as monarchs on the richest areas of the public domain. It is a field of authority which Presidents and departmental secretaries seldom invade, in which even Congress treads with care.

From "The Lumber Business," unpublished manuscript by James Stevens and Robert E. Mahaffey, public relations counsel to the West Coast Lumbermen's Association, 1946

As Americans, and westerners in particular, started to hear about the "forest health crisis" and fires began to take on more spectacular proportions, a dominant narrative emerged to explain how it all went. The specific mix of culprits responsible for the increasingly unmanageable behavior of wildland fire varies and in some cases is hotly argued. Two hundred years of fossil fuel combustion and the associated carbon dioxide emissions resulting in climate change must take some of the blame. Climate, however, reacts with an altered landscape to produce current fire patterns. Primary responsibility for the production of that landscape, and thus for catastrophic wildfires and declining forest health in general, has been laid largely on the shoulders of the nation's public land managers in the USFS. Most versions of the history frame the situation as a tragedy: a case of noble intentions thwarted by a fatal flaw—usually cast as a misguided belief in human domination of nature.¹ For the dean of US fire history, Stephen Pyne, the story is one of technocratic rule by a Forest Service forever scarred by the experience of the Great Fires of 1910, discussed later in this chapter.² A few interpretations see the situation in slightly more malevolent shades, highlighting the

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politically motivated suppression of a sound but heretical science³ or presenting it as a simple case study on the evils of public meddling in affairs better dealt with by the private sector.⁴

In this chapter I examine these accounts of fire history and unpack their sociological and political assumptions. In particular, I look at three elements held in common among accounts of US fire policy: (1) the extraordinary degree of autonomy accorded the USFS, (2) the argument that fire policy was a product of technocratic rule by an organization with too much faith in its own scientific expertise, and 3) the argument that fire policy was rooted in an ideology of conservation that was drilled into a highly professionalized and missionary USFS corps and that had the support of a group of northeastern elites. Together, these three claims form the backbone of the dominant narrative of fire in the United States expressed in scholarly, journalistic, activist, and policy/technical literatures.

Without explicitly doing so, this narrative draws upon and reinforces a specific theory of the state. While this may seem like a completely academic issue, it has enormous implications for the way activists, scholars, and practitioners approach the important question of fire policy reform. Reformers both inside and outside the Forest Service are actively shaping their strategies and making demands with an unacknowledged model of state behavior, capacities, and goals in the background. We need to ask whether this model accurately reflects the history of fire and forest policy. Are the wildfires of today really the product of an agency executing its own ideologically motivated agenda? Furthermore, does the underlying theory contain an accurate assessment of the scope for autonomous action by a state agency in the United States? If it does not, then strategies for reform need to be reshaped with a more realistic (empirically verified) assessment of how the state is likely to behave within the political-economic context of capitalism.

The next section briefly reviews state-centered theory. Those familiar with this body of work or those interested primarily in the history of fire management might wish to skip to the section “The Fire Narrative: State-Centered Commitments.”

STATE-CENTERED THEORY: A BRIEF REVIEW

The theory of the state supporting (and drawing support from) the dominant narrative of fire can be broadly characterized as “state-centered.” That is, in contrast to theories of the state that see elements of civil society acting through the state

to pursue economic and political resources (“society-centered” theories), state-centered theories suggest that the state matters in and of itself. Policy outcomes, in the state-centered approach, are causally affected by the structure of political institutions (parties, bureaucracies), the intentional and unintentional effects of the behavior of state actors, or both. Within this theoretical framework, the state is an effective and significant actor in its own right, with interests and agendas specific to the various agencies and institutions that compose it. This theory contends that the state is not an agent of some other social principal; nor is it merely an institutionalized space in which various interests struggle. In the words of an early proponent of centering the state in political analysis, Eric A. Nordlinger, “the preferences of the state are at least as important as those of civil society in accounting for what the democratic state does and does not do; the democratic state is not only frequently autonomous insofar as it regularly acts upon its preferences, but also markedly autonomous in doing so even when its preferences diverge from the demands of the most powerful groups in society.”⁵

State-centered political theory as a “self-conscious”⁶ field of scholarship emerged in the 1980s, largely in response to perceived shortcomings in Marxist, elitist, and pluralist approaches to theorizing the state. In particular, scholars who became associated with the state-centric approach were critical of Marxist and neo-Marxist conceptions of the state as an instrument of capitalist class power and were equally critical of pluralists for understanding the state as an arena in which interests struggle over the allocation of government “outputs.”⁷ According to state-centered theorists, both pluralists and Marxists, along with the rest of western social science, failed to recognize the “explanatory centrality of states as potent and autonomous organizational actors.”⁸ In response, an eruption of scholarship began in the late 1970s and attained full flow during the 1980s and 1990s, in which a number of dependent variables—mostly policy outcomes—were explained primarily by reference to the structure of political institutions associated with the state (e.g., parties, bureaucracies) and with the will and capacity of state actors and organizations.

Scholars in this tradition staked out their claim to sociological legitimacy based on the canonical figure of Max Weber who, writing in turn-of-the-century Germany, had made the initial claim for the centrality of the state, both as an expression of domination through (legitimated) violence and also in structuring relations between elements of civil society itself.⁹ Weber also argued that the power of a bureaucracy relative to those it “serves” (here he used as an example a state bureaucracy in the service of either a democratic or an aristocratic ruler), while theoretically up in the air, is “always great, under normal conditions over-

towering.”¹⁰ In making this argument, Weber located the basis of this power in the bureaucrat’s control over knowledge of both systems of administration and their objects.¹¹ There is undoubtedly much ambiguity in Weber’s discussion of state bureaucracy with regard to its autonomy and power, particularly in that while he claimed that in the modern era rulers are increasingly dependent on the bureaucracy and that the bureaucracy contains its own “pure power interests” (which are not necessarily in line with the interests of those who formally rule), he also discussed the bureaucracy as a “highly developed power instrument in the hands of its controller”¹² and claimed that the economic effects of the structure of bureaucracy vary largely in accordance with the economic interests of the ruling class.¹³

The recent surge in state-centered theory following this Weberian path has been most empirically active in the areas of social policy—especially the development of the welfare state¹⁴—industrial policy,¹⁵ and revolutions.¹⁶ This largely comparative and historical work presents claims more unequivocal than Weber’s: that the state—both in its organizational structure and its willful actions—significantly affects policy outcomes in ways that do not allow those outcomes to be attributed to either class-based interests (as they allege Marxists would have it) or the relative power of other non-state interest groups (as they allege the pluralists would have it).

A classic example is the contribution of state-centered theorists to the debate over the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, or “Wagner Act”) of 1935. Theda Skocpol and Kenneth Finegold argue in this context—against Michael Goldfield’s class-based account¹⁷—that the form and timing of the state’s response to increasing strike militancy in the 1930s cannot be explained except through reference to state autonomy from class interests. In Skocpol and Finegold’s analysis, class conflict, manifested in the militant mobilizations of radical and communist organizers, is seen as having infinitely less influence on the formation of the NLRA than the internal machinations of state-employed lawyers and economists. Furthermore, they argue that New Deal labor legislation, far from an attempt on the behalf of capital to chill radical labor organizing and militancy, actually facilitated growth in union membership (and was an intentional effort by state actors determined to fill the void in labor relations left behind by the collapse of the National Industrial Recovery Act and “helped to make industrial workers more amenable to radical organizers than they otherwise would have been.”¹⁸

Similarly, in another study Skocpol rejects class conflict as a significant cause of the early emergence of “social provisioning” in the United States. In *Protecting*

Soldiers and Mothers, Skocpol dismisses arguments that attempt to explain this emergence using the strength of organized labor in class struggles, the “enlightened self-interests” of welfare capitalists, or the subordination of the state to capitalist class interests.¹⁹ She also sets aside non-Marxist explanations based on the particular character of “national values” alone or the mechanical unfolding of welfare along with industrialization and the rise of wage labor.²⁰

Rather, she argues that each of these society-centric models of policy development erroneously sees the state as an arena of conflict or as the agent of other social interests rather than as an agent with its own goals and capacities for autonomous action. She thus argues, in putting forward her own “structured polity” approach, that any theory of policy formation must take into account the ways political action is mediated by the interests, structures, and capacities of the state.²¹

Her argument is based on the historical development of Civil War, widows’ and mothers’ pensions in the United States and the failures of labor-led attempts to gain “paternalist” social provisioning (provisioning attached to participation in the wage labor force—a predominantly male role). The argument privileges the agency of middle-class activists and professionals in policy formation. According to Skocpol’s account, particular characteristics of the US state (its loosely federated structure, women’s complete exclusion from the franchise, the male working class’s early inclusion in the same, and the drive to move away from party patronage) lent themselves to provide leverage for federally organized voluntary associations of middle- and upper-class women in their drive to extend a maternally and domestically based version of morality into the public sphere. She states: “Longstanding political structures—including early democratization for white males, along with a federal state that divides authority and gives legislatures and courts pivotal policymaking roles—have not encouraged U.S. industrial workers to operate as class-conscious political forces. The operations of political parties have also persistently discouraged class-consciousness, even though parties have become less patronage-oriented during the twentieth century.”²² On the other hand: “National and local groups claiming to speak for the collective interests of women were able to mount ideologically inspired efforts on behalf of maternalist social policies. Patterns of exclusion from—and temporary incorporation into—electoral politics shaped the possibilities for women’s political consciousness.”²³ Thus the key political actors in Skocpol’s analysis include not only class-based actors (they are present, but they take on a much diminished role relative to Marxist and power elite accounts of policy development) but also politicians, reform-minded professionals and intellectuals employed by the state, and power-

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TABLE 3.1. Commitments of society- and state-centered theories

<i>Conceptual Issue</i>	<i>Society-Centered Theoretical Commitments</i>		<i>State-Centered Theoretical Commitments</i>
	<i>Marxist</i>	<i>Pluralist</i>	
View of the state	State is a tool or partner of the capitalist class	State is an arena	State is potentially autonomous
Origin of policy Agenda	Defined by ruling-class interests	Defined by interest groups	Defined by state officials
Source of power of state officials	Power derived from organization of conditions for accumulation	Power derived from society, especially interest groups	Power derived from occupation of state offices
View of politics	Reflective of class struggle over exploitation, surplus, labor process, and so on	Struggle waged by organized interest groups over allocation of resources	Frequently involves a struggle over institutions and rules of process

fully organized associations of the middle class—in this case, organized around gender.

The claims of most state-centered theorists have mellowed somewhat since the early flourish of strong language represented by Nordlinger's formulation. Rather, a central claim has become not that the state is always and everywhere autonomous but instead that state autonomy varies historically, even within capitalism, a single nation, or a single agency. Gregory Hooks, for example, argues that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) set up the conditions for its own "capture" by societal interests (in this case, the American Farm Bureau Federation), resulting in a loss of autonomy between the New Deal Era and the immediate postwar period.²⁴ Even as early as 1985, in her introduction to *Bringing the State Back In*, Skocpol was introducing a more nuanced approach to state-centered theory that backed away from blanket claims that the state was always and everywhere autonomous. Reflecting on her research with Finegold, which also focused on the relationship between the USDA and the American Farm Bureau Federation, she claimed: "In short, 'state autonomy' is not a fixed structural feature of any governmental system. It can come and go." This is true, she argued, because "the very *structural potentials* for autonomous state actions

change over time, as the organizations of coercion and administration undergo transformations, both internally and in their relations to societal groups and to representative parts of government.”²⁵ In a similar vein, C. Edward Paul has suggested that state autonomy should be understood as an interstitial phenomenon, with its potential located between the tensions of pluralist, democratic pressures and the power of the ruling elite. As such, Paul argued, the state’s autonomy will vary widely across issues and decisions.²⁶ Claims have, in fact, been watered down to the extent that G. William Domhoff felt justified in stating that by advancing her “structured polity” approach in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, Skocpol had sucked the content out of state autonomy theory and stuffed its empty husk with pluralism.²⁷

State-centered theorists, however, claim otherwise—they claim that they hold to a distinct set of theoretical commitments, apart from those of society-centered scholars. Hooks painstakingly set out the distinctions between society- and state-centered theories.²⁸ I have adapted his table by distinguishing between Marxist and pluralist variants of society-centered theory in table 3.1.

Scholars in the state-centered tradition held to these basic commitments as their agenda began to shift toward explaining not only the consequences of state autonomy (such as the passage of the NLRA or the reorientation of industrial research and development) but the causes of its variation across time and place.²⁹ State-centered theorists have presented a number of hypotheses in their pursuit of this research agenda. Michael Mann, for example, suggests that the degree of state autonomy depends upon the growth of state capacities (because of the state’s functionality for powerful groups) and the powerful groups’ subsequent loss of control of state agencies (because of the latter’s increasing ability to access and mobilize resources).³⁰ He argues that the increase in state capacities in the industrialized West has not enabled states to overcome the power of the capitalist class.³¹ Drawing heavily on organizational theory, Bruce Carruthers approaches the causality question by suggesting three major determinants of state autonomy: homogeneity of personnel group affiliations (especially class background), the state agency’s structural dependence on elements within its operational environment, and “possession of recognized expertise”³² that allows states to produce their own independent definitions of problems and solutions. To this, Carmenza Gallo, in the context of arguing that power is an attribute not of organizations (such as the state) but rather of relationships, adds that autonomy vis-à-vis an economic elite is more likely if the state has access to other powerful allies.³³

THE FIRE NARRATIVE: STATE-CENTERED COMMITMENTS

The dominant narrative of fire in the United States rests on a number of the theoretical commitments listed in Hooks's schema (see table 3.1) and suggests a variety of sources for the Forest Service's autonomy that reflect state-centered theorists' broad classification of causes. First, the state is held to have an extraordinarily high degree of autonomy, in that the policy agenda of fire suppression originates with state managers and is carried out despite opposition from timber owners, livestock producers, and the agency's own scientists. Second, the bases of the Forest Service's autonomy are its "recognized expertise" in the field of forestry, its control over a large portion of the nation's timberlands, and its control over the funding for fire research. USFS autonomy is enhanced through the development of strong organizational loyalty among employees, at the root of which is a missionary ideology of conservation. This ideology was shared by influential north-eastern elites who shored up the Forest Service's power relative to timber capital. Third, the USFS successfully developed the infrastructural power to accomplish its policy agenda, after which it grew even more insular and autonomous, escaping effective oversight by the US Congress and eschewing input from external sources on the issue of fire protection. These three claims, which clearly put the state at the center of the action, form the backbone of the dominant fire narrative. Each is treated in turn in the next sections.

Extreme State Autonomy

First, the Forest Service displays an extreme version of autonomy in the dominant fire narrative, in line with Nordlinger's early formulation. This makes for an odd split in assessments of the Forest Service's autonomy. On the one hand, many authors recognize the USFS's deep interdependence with, and in some cases subservience to, outside interests when it comes to timber, recreation, and grazing.³⁴ On the other hand, most accounts of fire policy specifically are focused heavily on the organization, ideology, and behavior of the agency acting in relative isolation. In the dominant account, from the beginning the Forest Service has not only executed fire policy but has also *determined* it. This has allegedly been the case despite opposition to USFS policy by a number of constituencies, including the immediately affected public (those who inhabit the fire-prone and fire-adapted landscapes of the West), class-based interests (private timber and ranching industries), and other state elites (particularly in the Department of the Interior).

For example, David Clary's critique of the Forest Service's perpetual fear of "timber famine" makes an unequivocal claim for the organization's general

autonomy. “Convinced that it was right, fired with a sense of mission, and free of interference from others, the Forest Service addressed the national forests,” he declares.³⁵ Robert H. Nelson, after noting the pervasive nature of fire in the pre-settlement West, summarizes the complexities of wildland fire policy: “Then, early in the twentieth century, the federal government introduced a policy of active suppression of fire . . . As a result, over the course of the twentieth century, fire was largely eliminated from most western forests.”³⁶ He goes on to make the case that given this colossal blunder by the USFS, 80 percent of US national forests should be handed over to state, local, or private managers.³⁷ David Carle, while unearthing a history of dissent over fire policy from within the USFS and other federal agencies, similarly claims that the war against fire was “declared . . . by the young profession of American forestry” embodied in the ranks of Pinchot’s agency.³⁸ The Forest Service’s view of fire as an unmitigated evil became institutionalized following the massive 1910 fires in the northern Rockies, according to Carle. Carle is re-treading ground already crossed by Ashley Schiff in his organizational study of the USFS, *Fire and Water: Scientific Heresy in the Forest Service*, in which he claims that “to the Service, the Coeur d’Alene conflagration of 1910 confirmed the necessity for absolute protection; fire, man’s universal enemy, would be attacked with equal vigor on all fronts.”³⁹ Stephen Pyne adds the weight of his formidable scholarship to the dual consensus that all-out fire suppression in the United States had its genesis organizationally within the Forest Service and historically in the events of the 1910 “Big Blowup.” Pyne makes particularly strong claims for the role of the 1910 fires in setting federal fire policy on the fixed rails of suppression. He argues that the “memory of the 1910 fires,” as experienced by key USFS personnel, “became embedded in institutional fibers through statutes and manuals and bureaucratic records . . . The Big Blowup [a particularly intense period of the 1910 fires from August 20–21] persisted in influencing the Forest Service because those who experienced it continually reminded the Service by waving, as it were, the bloody red shirt of 1910.”⁴⁰

In his deeply researched *Fire in America*, Pyne takes a more structural approach to explaining fire, although he is less concerned about explaining the Forest Service’s original commitment to the policy of total suppression than he is with the historical variation in the particular “fire problem” to be addressed. His explanation for the shifts in the USFS emphasis from the problems of “frontier fire” to “backcountry fire” to “mass fire” to “wilderness fire” rests on the agency’s access to various kinds of available surpluses (land, money, manpower, machinery, information).⁴¹ Still, Pyne contributes to the dominant fire narrative’s foundation in state-centered theory by focusing on the particular people and organi-

zational structure of the Forest Service to explain fire policy. Nancy Langston, in her classic work on forest management in the Blue Mountains of Washington and Oregon, focuses as well on the Forest Service's championing of fire suppression—whose apotheosis was the USFS's 10 AM Policy—against the opposition of local land users and industrial foresters.⁴² All of these accounts suggest that the Forest Service developed and successfully pursued a policy of out-and-out fire suppression in the face of opposition from all sides.

Accounts focus in particular on the debate, with its epicenters in California and the South, over “light burning,” which the Forest Service presented as a dangerous and backward practice that—like its Native American practitioners—should be removed from the land without exception. The colonial imagery the Forest Service deployed during this debate was striking. Fire suppression was equated with the march of civilization. Burning, on the other hand, was primitive, ignorant, and equated with the imagined savagery of aboriginal peoples. Henry Graves and William Greeley both disparagingly referred to light burning as “Paiute forestry” in their public salvos against the practice.⁴³

Indeed, it is not surprising that the Forest Service mobilized a racist, colonial discourse, given the intellectual soil in which US forestry took root. US forestry's genealogy runs through the foundational figure of Gifford Pinchot back to his mentor, Dietrich Brandis, reported as having had “a more profound influence on Gifford both as a forester and as an individual than anyone except his family and Theodore Roosevelt.”⁴⁴ Brandis was a German-trained forester hired by imperial Britain to manage the forests of Burma and its “crown jewel,” India. The British crown's goals in forest management followed the logic of colonialism: to extract the maximum value possible from the reserves it had established, and to use the raw resource for its own strategic needs (particularly during World War I, during which India's forests were heavily deforested for military purposes).

While celebrated as pioneers of environmentalism by Gregory Barton in *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*,⁴⁵ British colonial forestry was just as much an act of enclosure as a policy of forest conservation, since it reserved access to nature for the colonizing state at the expense not only of logging interests but often also of local populations, whose use of the forests the Imperial state saw as wanton. “Empire forestry's” first task was to catalog and inventory the forest resources of new colonies to rationalize appropriation by the Imperial state, generally under a system of scientific management. The latter, according to Barton, had its origins in the cameral sciences, “a system of science applied to governmental offices attempting to devise a profit to the state through methods of strict quantification and regulation.”⁴⁶ In the case of India under the

British, forestry's primary motive was initially the reservation of wood supplies for military use and then, during the heyday of the Indian Forest Service, the establishment of a system of forestry designed to generate a perpetual stream of revenue. According to James Scott, it is only a slight exaggeration to claim that "the crown's interest in forests was resolved through its fiscal lens into a single number: the revenue yield of the timber that might be extracted annually."⁴⁷ The scientific forestry championed by Barton was founded in a logic of accumulation that could do nothing but reduce forests from multifunctional complexes of ecological processes to an "abstract tree representing a volume of lumber or firewood."⁴⁸

US forestry replicated this model—including its commitment to apply the principles of industrial scientific management to nature—in establishing its own forest reserves, although forests were reserved to ensure the perpetuation of capital's access to raw inputs rather than for the generation of use or exchange value by the state itself. Pinchot, in his autobiography, expressed his desire to replicate in the United States Brandis's accomplishments in Burma and India. The earliest US-trained foresters absorbed their lessons from the *Manual of Forestry* written by Brandis's successor in the Indian Forest Service, William Schlich. Part of the European colonial legacy to US forestry was the idea that the Imperial state, in order to be seen as a responsible steward of its resources, was obligated to protect them from wasteful use and destruction. Primary among the agents of the latter was fire. As Pyne related,

Foresters know fire as it threatened their trees, a danger bred by pastoralists, slash-and-burners, travelers, charcoalers, and miscellaneous transients, and those other competitors for the woods, such as gatherers of honey, nuts, and medicinal plants. Foresters feared and detested flame. Thrust into fire-blasted colonies, they became nearly apoplectic with outrage. Nothing could be done about honest forestry until fires were controlled.⁴⁹

According to the dominant narrative of fire, the Forest Service took on this burden of control wholeheartedly and worked diligently—and, in the long run, mistakenly—to establish a policy of fire exclusion and the means to carry it out even deep in the backcountry. As the dominant narrative presents it, lined up against the USFS's push for fire eradication was an array of opponents ranging from local ranchers,⁵⁰ lumbermen, and "practical foresters" led by such figures as T. B. Walker and George Hoxie⁵¹ to the Department of the Interior,⁵² prominent political figures such as John Wesley Powell,⁵³ and even a small cadre of the Forest Service's own scientists.⁵⁴ Many of the light-burning advocates, particu-

larly ranchers and lumbermen, established their own racialized discourse of fire, referring to light burning as “the Indian way” and appealing to the effectiveness of Native American burning practices in reducing the threat of big summer fires.⁵⁵

As related in chapter 2, the Forest Service nailed down the lid on light burning at its Mathers Field Conference in 1921, committing to run instead with DuBois’s hours-based full-suppression model of fire protection; from there, the USFS embarked on building up its infrastructural capacities. In an encapsulation of the lines drawn in the struggle over fire policy by the weavers of the dominant narrative, Carle explained: “On one side were lumbermen and ranchers who had historically burned their privately held lands to control wildfire or to clear lands for grazing. The fire control bureaucracy ultimately succeeded in suppressing those light burning advocates.”⁵⁶

The story, then, is of an overly powerful, independent state agency trampling the practically grounded, experiential folk knowledge of private producers, with disastrous results. It is a familiar discourse of state villainy in the United States, one vigorously propounded by capital—not least by elements within the timber industry. Whenever relations between the USFS and timber capital became rocky, the latter would raise the Weberian specter of bureaucracy run amuck. To take just one example, R. A. Colgan, executive vice president of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association, argued before the Agricultural Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations that the Forest Service was becoming too powerful and expansive. “I have witnessed the gradual and progressive development of this department into a strong and powerful organization. Each year I have been able to watch its development into a more domineering and expanding bureau,” Colgan stated. “The accelerated increase in the size and scope of the Forest Service, its constant efforts to expand its activities and influence beyond limits set by Congress, have raised the question in many minds as to the ultimate purposes of this governmental organization. Is its real purpose to serve the interests of the country by working sincerely with all agencies interested in the perpetuation of our forest resources, or,” he insinuated, “is it aspiring to take over and control one of our basic industries?”⁵⁷

The State’s Interests: Conservation, Efficiency, and the Domination of Nature

State-centered theories of political outcomes, in addition to having to demonstrate the state’s willingness and ability to formulate and execute its own policy agenda, require an explanation of motivation. Marxist theories of the state view the state’s motivation either as a mediated reflection of particular capitalist class

interests or as based in the structural requirement to maintain conditions for the accumulation of capital. Pluralist models tend to cleave to a rational choice motivational model in which interest groups struggle to maximize their access to political and economic resources. State-centered theories, on the other hand, suggest that politicians and bureaucrats have their own distinct interests. Having made the case that the Forest Service was able to exercise its will independently and indeed, in some cases, against the grain of capital's expressed preferences, the dominant narrative of fire must also answer this question: why was the Forest Service so hell-bent on what seemed to many a useless, expensive, and quixotic campaign to purge the forests of fire?

The interests of the Forest Service, in the dominant account, are derived almost entirely from the culture and ideology propagated by its leadership and successfully cultivated within the ranks of its employees. A material interest is related as well, based on the agency's addiction to wildland fire suppression funds, but it does not come into play until late in the story, and it is always secondary. The genesis of fire protection, in the dominant narrative, is a tale of state-based ideological fervor. The ideology in question is said to have two major, intimately related elements: a belief in the scientifically informed human domination of nature, and a belief in the righteousness of a utilitarian version of conservation.

The theme of fire protection as a product of human pretensions to dominate nature carries loud echoes of Carolyn Merchant, who, in *The Death of Nature*, stressed the power of metaphor in shaping not only our understanding of nature but also nature itself. The shift from an organic to a "clockwork" nature—from seeing nature as maternal to viewing it as a machine to be controlled—is decisive in Merchant's view, having lifted the moral constraint the image of nature as a "nurturing mother" had imposed on its unrestrained, utilitarian use.⁵⁸ Merchant thus lays out a historical movement from a relationship with nature characterized by maternal reverence and restraint to one characterized by a utilitarian pretension to control through scientific rationality, with its embodiment in the new sciences of environmental management, whose flagship was forestry. For Merchant, the controlling aspirations of modernity for order and progress are brought to bear on nature, as they are on all spheres of life.

In the literature on fire, this metaphorical shift is given pride of place. According to Nelson, for example, "the campaign against fire was . . . a campaign against nature out of human control. If the forests were to be deliberately managed to achieve goals for human use, the destructive actions of fire would have to be controlled. This would be a task that depended on the application of the expert skills of the forestry professionals newly staffing the Forest Service."⁵⁹ Langston,

while arguing persuasively that the “forest health crisis . . . is political more than ecological,”⁶⁰ goes on to place the explanatory weight for forest management on the ideology of domination: “The troubled history of land management has its roots not in ignorance but in American visions of the proper human relationship to nature. Americans shaped the western landscapes according to a complex set of ideals about what the perfect forest ought to look like and what people’s role in shaping that perfect forest ought to be . . . in other words, this is not just an ecology story; it is a story about the complex metaphors people use to mediate their relationship to nature.”⁶¹ Domination was presumed to follow from scientific knowledge—a presumption usually traced back to Francis Bacon—and the Forest Service is held up as a leading example of the state’s penchant during the Progressive Era to push a technocratic model of administrative governance over both laissez-faire economics and democracy. The proponents of progressivism, and its champions in the Forest Service, “believed in science with all the fervor of a religion . . . and sought to elevate scientific expertise to a controlling role.”⁶²

The complement to this ideology of domination within the dominant narrative is an ideological commitment to activist government in the service of the public. The state, it is argued, viewed itself as the sole agent capable of undertaking the subjugation of nature to human ends while simultaneously ensuring that doing so was in the service of the public good rather than of particular interests. A 1905 letter that outlined management guidelines for the national forests, signed by Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson but actually written by Gifford Pinchot, supports this interpretation: “In the administration of the forest reserves it must be clearly borne in mind that all land is to be devoted to its most productive use for the permanent good of the whole people, and not for the temporary benefit of individuals or companies . . . Where conflicting interests [between potential users] must be reconciled the question will always be decided from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.”⁶³

The assumption that the USFS’s policy decisions were driven by a religious commitment to these guidelines—which are said to embody the principles of the conservation movement and progressivism more broadly—runs deep through the literature on the Forest Service and on fire. Christopher Klyza, for example, argues that “the drive for autonomy by the forestry agency during this period [1898–1907] was based on a coherent conception of the public interest. The idea was that the public interest was best served by having the government retain ownership of large tracts of forest, and that these forests be managed for the greatest good of all society by foresters.”⁶⁴ Pyne argues similarly that the “philosophy of conservation” was responsible for not just the US practice of reserving forests but

for that of other colonial powers as well. In this understanding, it is the imperial state's belief that it and only it can successfully manage resources for the "commonwealth" that leads it to reserve and protect forests.⁶⁵

Not only did the philosophy of conservation provide a basis for the policy of full suppression, but it is also claimed to have played a pivotal role in maintaining the Forest Service's autonomy relative to timber, mining, and grazing interests. Much is made in the literature about the USFS's focus on instilling both a missionary zeal for conservation and a deeply held professionalism among its employees. This fits well with state-centered theory, in that the development of an ideologically committed professional corps within the state—one without personal or economic ties to the dominant class—is theorized to increase the autonomy of the state and help it avoid capture.⁶⁶

Pinchot, in building up the trained workforce required to manage the national forests (and to push the practice of forestry among private owners), undertook a number of measures to increase the professionalism of the USFS. He refused to undermine the merit-based application system for USFS positions by giving way to patronage appointments⁶⁷ and expected that "passing a civil service examination, after undergraduate and perhaps graduate study, would reinforce the professional ethos that he expected to dominate the service's actions."⁶⁸ Pinchot was said to have "moved vigorously to keep any taint of political favoritism from his agency, making it distinctly different, to his mind, from the corrupt General Land Office" from which he had wrested the forest reserves.⁶⁹ In addition, he drew on his parents' fortune to underwrite forestry education in the United States with the establishment of the Yale Forest School in 1900. Here, as in foresters' summer assistantships in the woods and their early employment with the service, they had the ethic of professionalism whipped into them. Yale provided every Forest Service chief up to 1940, and its graduates populated the faculties of other colleges of forestry throughout the United States.⁷⁰ Finally, Pinchot was responsible for setting up the Society of American Foresters in 1900, with an initial meeting of seven members in his office. Through these institutions, Pinchot pushed the ideology of conservation on his employees, and it came to infuse the practice of federal forestry. Langston outlines a view of the way the ideologies of conservationism and domination wrapped the young Forest Service in an insulating layer woven of professionalism and belief:

Gifford Pinchot's foresters were extraordinarily optimistic. They shared with Pinchot a firm faith that science would allow them to understand everything worth knowing about the world. Redesigning wild nature as an orderly, effi-

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cient machine was at the heart of their efforts . . . Science, conscious purpose, and human reason would engineer a new world out of the chaos of laissez-faire economics and short-term selfish interest. The conservationists felt theirs was an almost sacred mission: to perfect nature and civilization both . . . As scientists who had the interests of America and American forests at heart, they felt they were beyond criticism. Their very enthusiasm and faith—qualities that made them extremely effective—fostered an arrogance that often blinded them to the consequences of their actions.⁷¹

The Forest Service, although it came to represent an active manifestation of the conservation movement, did not represent the entire movement. In the dominant narrative of fire, the USFS's autonomy was bolstered by strong public support—which it actively generated through its public relations efforts—in particular by the support of a corps of elite northeastern intellectuals devoted to the cause of conservation, not the least of whose members was President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a committed conservationist and a great friend of Pinchot's. It was only after he took over as president following William McKinley's assassination that the US Congress eventually authorized the transfer of the forest reserves to the USDA. McKinley had been reluctant to support the transfer in the face of initial western opposition, whereas Roosevelt recommended the transfer within three months of taking office.⁷² In addition to powerful allies in the executive branch (who included Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson and Secretary of the Interior Ethan Hitchcock—the two departments involved in the proposed transfer), the Forest Service drew on the support of “progressive reformers” in the East, who saw Pinchot and the Bureau of Forestry as exemplars of the progressive spirit.

Klyza cites gushing editorials in publications such as *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* as evidence for public support in the East.⁷³ According to Samuel Hays, this eastern support began to rally strongly behind conservation and the Forest Service in 1908 and was based in the ranks of “middle- and upper-income urban dwellers. Most of the organizations recruited their members and obtained their financial support from urbanites, and many of their leaders had been active in other types of urban reform.”⁷⁴ Hays specifically cites the prominent role of women's organizations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs and Daughters of the American Revolution, in the conservation movement.⁷⁵ These groups—concerned about the rising preoccupation with all things material in the United States at the expense of the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual—lobbied hard for conservation and were great supporters of the Forest Service. This alliance may have been fully cemented by the fact that Gifford Pinchot's mother was chair

of the Daughters of the American Revolution's Committee on Conservation.

Thus the forest health crisis is laid at the feet of a well-meaning but misguided state with an ideological conviction that it should and could act in the interests of the public as a whole. The poor state of US forests flows directly from the problems of technocratic environmental and social engineering by government agents. Flush with unfounded optimism about the possibilities of scientifically guided manipulation of nature and of its own ability to perform that manipulation in the service of human progress, the Forest Service became blind and deaf to dissenting opinions about the ecology of forests—both scientific and experientially grounded. As a result, forests are in a state of decay, overcrowding, and sickness—the natural equivalent of a misbegotten urban housing project. The primary pathology of the ecosystem is the absence of fire.

The commitment to fire suppression, springing from the connected ideologies of control/domination and conservation/efficiency, was then hardened in the crucible of the 1910 fires, in which all USFS chiefs up to Ferdinand Silcox (whose tenure ended with his death in 1939) played some role.⁷⁶

State Resources and Capacity

With its course set, the Forest Service embarked on a century-long crusade to clean the smoke out of the forests, becoming more and more insulated from other elements of civil society as it became the dominant national force in fire research and protection. According to Pyne, "The Forest Service came to dominate the national fire establishment by virtue of its mandated responsibilities, its disbursement of Clarke-McNary funds, its supervision of the Cooperative [Forest] Fire Prevention Program (Smokey Bear), its control over the production of essential information and research, and its responsibility for fire equipment development and distribution."⁷⁷ The Forest Service had fought to accrue all of these responsibilities unto itself; as such, it presents a strong case for the notion of state autonomy. Having successfully positioned itself as the arbiter of human-fire relations in the US wildlands, the USFS worked to maintain its legitimacy in the face of challenges that arose in the late 1960s and 1970s from fire ecologists and a new wilderness-based environmental movement. The Forest Service's response to these challenges as they have mounted since that time is the subject of chapter 6.

A final explanation for the USFS's interest in full suppression, one usually relegated to the back pages in the narrative of fire,⁷⁸ is that fire suppression opened up what appeared to be a limitless reservoir of money and resources for the Forest Service. In 1908 the US Congress authorized the USFS to deficit spend

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on emergency forest fire suppression. This authorization was put to the test two years later, when the Forest Service handed Congress a bill for a whopping \$1.1 million resulting from the 1910 Big Blowup. Congress obligingly handed over the money. This had enormous implications for the Forest Service's approach to fire, providing an incentive to spend less on prevention and more on suppression after-the-fact. The USFS is normally allocated an amount for emergency suppression based on a five-year average funding model. If requirements exceed this amount, as they do in above-average years, the Forest Service transfers funds from other budgetary pots, and Congress has never failed to make an additional appropriation to pay the money back.⁷⁹ The Forest Service, some argue, became addicted to these seemingly "free" emergency suppression funds, and without a fiscal check on its pursuit of fire, the agency is prone to spend lavishly on putting out fires. As Pyne put it, fire protection grew around the 1908 deficit-spending provision "like crystals on a string."⁸⁰ He has argued that "the 1908 act made fire management what it became: the agency went with the money. It did what it was paid to do, which was suppression."⁸¹ Indeed, a commonly advanced theory about state bureaucracies is that their interests are largely reducible to budget maximizing. The Forest Service's budget, as well as its accrual of other kinds of resources (labor and machinery in particular, as discussed in chapter 2), has benefited enormously from the war on fire. Appropriations related to the fire war now account for about half of the Forest Service's budget. The agency's interest in fire suppression, then, does go beyond the ideological in the dominant narrative of fire. It is argued that as a maximizing state bureaucracy, the USFS has an interest in pursuing the war on fire, just as the Department of Defense has an interest in pursuing war on people.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS IN THE NARRATIVE OF FIRE

How well does the dominant narrative of fire explain the development of fire policy within the Forest Service? There is no question that the Forest Service chiefs were forceful advocates for fire suppression; nor is there any doubt that the agency built itself (both financially and in terms of the development of an identity) on the back of its provision of that service—both directly and through cooperative arrangements—on public and private lands. It is starkly clear that the USFS worked effectively within the US Congress to gain the capacity to chase smoke into the most remote corners of the backcountry. I do not dispute that the Forest Service had considerable success in infusing its employees with a sense of pure purpose and of their place in the great struggle for conservation. Nor do

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I dispute that the Forest Service drew on Pinchot's connections to the northeastern elite to shore up its struggles with other state agencies and with the US Congress. However, the tale of the USFS as the primary actor in the narrative of fire in the United States raises troublesome questions.

First, why was the USFS able to act with such autonomy with regard to fire policy, given that it showed a complete lack of autonomy on other forest management issues? How was the Forest Service able to win its battle over light burning and successfully institutionalize the policy of full suppression, especially against the interests of timber barons and railroad companies?

The fact that the USFS is seen as a highly autonomous actor, its chiefs as "monarchs of the public domain," is surprising, given the well-known and well-documented intimacy of the agency's relationship with the timber industry.⁸² There are some organizational accounts of the Forest Service that argue for its autonomy from special interests,⁸³ but as Paul Hirt points out, these studies pay no attention to the broader political context in which the USFS operates.⁸⁴ Herbert Kaufman's classic *The Forest Ranger*, for example, focuses on how the Forest Service produces compliance among its geographically dispersed employees with a centrally determined policy. He provides no analysis of what or who actually makes the policy in the first place. Paul Culhane also focuses on the local level, looking at how the Forest Service, in making specific resource allocation decisions, plays special interests against one another to maintain its autonomy. Again, this is about the USFS's ability to implement policy in the face of local resistance rather than about the establishment of policy and purposes at a higher level.

Christopher Klyza has looked at the higher level of political struggle, and he argues that the Forest Service displayed a high degree of autonomy during the decade 1898 to 1907, as evidenced primarily by its ability to facilitate the transfer of the forest reserves from the General Land Office of the Department of the Interior to the USDA and its ability to free itself from the US Congress by generating its own revenue. However, he demonstrates that the Forest Service was able to accomplish its goals only after radically changing the extent of commercial exploitation of the forest reserves that would be allowed to appease western resource-extracting capital and its allies in the US Congress.⁸⁵ Initial legislative efforts to affect the transfer had failed in 1901 and 1902, foundering on the shoals of western opposition. The deal succeeded in 1905 only after key capitalist organizations had agreed to support the transfer based on promises of continued access to the reserves, proclaiming their support at the 1905 American Forestry Congress.⁸⁶ The bill's final modifications prior to passage addressed min-

ing interests' concerns about their ability to access timber.⁸⁷ This certainly calls into question the claim of "autonomy." While a convincing case can be made that the USFS created some wiggle room for itself vis-à-vis the US Congress by freeing itself temporarily from dependence on annual appropriations, history is less supportive of a claim of autonomy from capital. Furthermore, Klyza argues that the "window of autonomy" enjoyed by the USFS closed in 1907, well before it became a major player in US forestry.⁸⁸

In an opposite view, scholarly accounts of the Forest Service that focus on forestry's broad historical and political context suggest that the agency was captured by the timber industry⁸⁹ or that from the beginning the agency and the industry were characterized by a unity of ideology and purpose.⁹⁰ Even the Forest Service's greatest champion, Gifford Pinchot, as early as the 1890s, saw the danger of capture lurking in the close ties between the timber industry and the public forestry agency. By 1914 (several years after his tenure as chief of the Forest Service had ended), he was convinced that his fears had come to pass. As Char Miller points out in his biography of Pinchot, "Although as chief he too had been interested in cooperative programs with the timber industry, and had sought ways by which to encourage the creation of a mutual agenda because of the power that lumbering lobbyists held in Congress, he was now [in 1914] convinced that accommodation meant capitulation."⁹¹ Another key figure in the early political battles over forestry agreed. Raphael Zon, a close friend and ally of Pinchot's following the latter's departure from the USFS, argued in a letter to diehard conservationist Major George Ahern that "there was a time when the Forest Service and the progressive elements in Congress were fighting side by side. Today the leaders of the reaction and conservatism are the friends of the Forest Service. The Service must regain its independent position and rely upon popular support, instead of the support of [National Lumber Manufacturers Association secretary-manager] Dr. Compton and similar pillars in the lumber industry."⁹² I return to the actual degree of autonomy the USFS enjoyed up until the postwar period in chapter 4.

Despite widespread recognition of the timber industry's influence on the Forest Service generally, when it comes to analyzing the history of fire policy, there is a marked tendency to either claim or assume that the USFS had both the will and the capacity to unilaterally develop and execute a policy of total fire exclusion. The class-based interests vanish from the picture as the focus moves to a detailed account of organizational struggles within the USFS and the power of the agency's ideological convictions about the control of nature. Among spinners of the dominant narrative, only Pyne offers concrete explanations of how fire policy was institutionalized against the preferences of "the vast majority of

the American public." His explanation, however, resorts to the "immense conviction" of suppression's advocates in the USFS and the agency's alignment with the general "sentiment of the nation at large" in favor of activist government during the Progressive Era.⁹³

Immense conviction among proponents, it must be admitted, cannot explain victory or defeat in the political arena, particularly since the policy's opponents were equally firm in their own conviction. Equally, the "sentiment of the nation" in favor of activist government in the Progressive Era is a fairly thin string on which to hang an explanation. As we shall see in chapter 4, all of the Forest Service's proposals for activist government in the realm of timber harvesting and forest management more generally during the Progressive Era, the New Deal Era, and the early postwar period were soundly beaten back, despite the agency's strong conviction that the proposed measures were vital and its alleged monopoly over forestry expertise. Why, then, did fire suppression alone sail through so successfully on the winds of national sentiment? The issue was highly contentious. There was no national consensus, either scientific or in public opinion, on the issue of fire, as Carle, Schiff, Pyne, Steen, and Langston have taken pains to establish. As a result, the eventual policy outcome must have been the product of power. The basis of the Forest Service's power in the establishment of fire policy remains unclear.

It could be argued that fire was viewed as an insignificant part of the Forest Service's role in forest management more broadly, and as such it flew under the radar of forest politics. However, nearly everybody agrees that fire was *the* central organizational task of the Forest Service, at least following the 1910 fires, and was seen as a foundational prerequisite for the viability of timber growing rather than timber mining. The historical record certainly supports this argument. Both the USFS and the major voices of timber capital saw fire protection as key to the fate of the forests. Thus the question as to why the Forest Service was permitted to do what it wanted over the opposition of capital (timber and ranching in particular) in one area and not in any others needs a more robust explanation than the dominant fire narrative has offered.

A second troubling question is, why did an organization with such a strong ideological commitment to science as the guiding force for public policy suppress its own scientific research? Both Carle and Schiff describe in great detail the internal struggles within the Forest Service over the science of forest fires. They conclude that the USFS steered scientific research and its conclusions toward support for a preexisting commitment to fire suppression.⁹⁴ This suggests that the Forest Service's mania for fire suppression was not simply a product of an ideo-

logical commitment to scientifically guided human control over nature. Those within the USFS pushed for a national policy, despite the fact that scientists both within and outside the agency told them that this plan was misguided and that different forest ecosystems required different approaches to fire. Herman H. Chapman, an assistant professor at Yale; Harold Biswell, former Forest Service scientist and then a forestry professor at Berkeley; and Harold Weaver, a Bureau of Indian Affairs forester, have been singled out for their role in pursuing research on the benefits of fire in forests, and they all faced difficult institutional barriers in publishing their research. They were all attacked by the Forest Service for their advocacy of an ecosystem-specific approach to fire.⁹⁵ In the face of practical evidence from the southern longleaf pine forests and California's dry forests that fire was vital to the rejuvenation of some forests, the Forest Service pursued a policy of fire eradication.

Why would an organization so committed to the scientific mastery of nature refuse to acknowledge its own researchers' results? If science was not to dictate USFS fire policy, then what was? The obvious response of an "ideological commitment to conservation" holds no water, since research had demonstrated that in some ecosystems fire was key to the growth of new timber—the very thing the USFS claimed to be supporting with its policy of full suppression. An agency ideologically committed to the most efficient use and perpetuation of resources, and one characterized by technocratic rule, would not have been so selective and biased in its attention to science. Fire suppression was not the policy most reflective of the best available science on the conservation and perpetuation of forests—even reduced as they were to units of merchantable timber. This was a fact many in the Forest Service were well aware of before, during, and after the public debates over fire suppression and controlled burning.

It would be rash to argue that the actions of the USFS were irrelevant to the current state of US public forests and even more so to generalize from this case and suggest that the state simply does not matter. Work within the "state-centric" tradition by people such as Peter Evans, Gregory Hooks, Jeff Goodwin, and others have put that idea to rest.⁹⁶ In some ways, the case of fire provides additional support for the idea that the state matters. Undeniably, the decisions taken by USFS leaders, and their translation into practice, have greatly transformed many western landscapes. The question of autonomy, though, begs more than this rather simple conclusion. A full inquiry requires us to investigate fully the context in which state managers operate. We need to examine the limits of their power. To what extent can the state be understood to have distinct interests? To what extent are state agencies able to develop an agenda and have that agenda

recognized as constituting the legitimate set of political questions and objectives, to the exclusion of others? To what extent is the state able to influence the preferences and expressed interests of other parties? Finally, to what extent are state administrators able to exert their will and realize their preferences over those of others? Answers to these questions will help establish a context for state action. When it comes to the question of state autonomy, then, the key question is not so much *what* the state does (and its results) but *why*.

These questions must prompt a deeper look into the historical, social, political, and economic contexts in which fire policy developed. The politically important question of how we ended up with conflagrations like the Biscuit and Rodeo-Chediski fires—and thus how we might cope with them or change course in the face of their cautionary tales—seems only partially answered by references to the isolated figure of the Forest Service. In chapter 4, I propose an alternative explanation. Rather than focus on the internal organization of the Forest Service as it pursued the policy of full suppression, I advance a more relational explanation—one that takes seriously the idea that policy outcomes, and in this case the landscapes one such outcome has created, are the products of power and interaction. Rather than a powerful state agency rushing headlong into the backcountry with its Pulaskis and air tankers, chapter 4 documents the struggles of a state agency as it negotiates the tensions of its required functions of accumulation and legitimation in a capitalist society.