

The River Dammed: The Proposed Removal of the Lower Snake River Dams

by

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Congresswoman Madeline Gibson of [Washington's 5th District](#) stood in the busy hallway outside the hearing room surrounded by aides all talking at the same time. In 10 minutes, the [House Committee on Resources](#) would vote on the fate of the lower Snake River dams. But Madeline was miles away, reflecting on the past weekend at her folks' home in Pasco, Washington.

Gibson family reunions were increasingly infrequent. Madeline bounced between Spokane and DC. Her family was scattered throughout the Snake River valley from Washington to Idaho. And her daughter was on the other side of the mountains attending the University of Washington in Seattle. Only her parents still lived at the home place in [Pasco](#), not far from where the [Snake spilled into the Columbia River](#). Madeline's family cherished these reunions. But, like a bomb, this get-together had suddenly blown up in everyone's face. And her daughter had pushed the button.

"The [dams](#) should be [removed](#)—or at least breached," Britney all but shouted at her uncle Roger, Madeline's brother. "They're killing our [salmon](#)!"

The dining room grew silent. All faces turned toward Britney. Roger, red-faced, was choking on his answer. Madeline's siblings, Ted and Amy, were stone-faced. Britney's older brother, John, glared. Madeline's mother, Louise, studied her coffee. And the various cousins who had been drifting into the room quickly drifted the other way. Madeline's father, Thomas, glanced her way and raised an eyebrow. Madeline sighed.

Thomas looked back to Britney. "Those dams did a lot for us," he said mildly. "Why, Roger here gets [irrigation water](#) from the lake. Ted runs wheat [barges](#) from Lewiston. Amy works for [Bonneville Power](#). Your grandmother runs a shop and a boat ramp at the [Sacajawea reservoir](#). And your brother works for the [Army Corps](#). Seems to me that a lot of folks around these parts depend on those dams."

Dams you helped build, Madeline added silently. They're the only reason you and Mom moved to Washington. Settled. Started a family. Built a dam. Moved to Spokane. Worked for [Kaiser Aluminum](#) after the dam was done. Came back to start a hardware store. It was a life utterly entangled with the Snake River and its dams, [economically](#), socially, and personally.

John cleared his throat hesitantly. All heads swiveled toward him.

"Uhm, well..." he stammered. "Things are a bit different since the corps issued their [report](#). Not everyone is necessarily wedded to keeping the dams. Keeping them like they are. I mean, there are ways of making up for what we lose...." John's voice trailed off. While some of the new folks were ready to breach or draw down the reservoir, Madeline had a feeling that the thought of deconstructing a dam really rubbed a lot of Army Corps engineers the wrong way, even her son, who spent every spare moment running rapids in a kayak.

The atmosphere in the kitchen grew tense. Britney and Roger exchanged increasingly less polite comments. John looked pained. Sensing that it was time for a reprieve, Madeline's mother, Louise, slowly sat forward and, while still studying her coffee, spoke diffidently, "You know, the [sports fishermen](#) have complained about the dams for years, not to mention a bunch of old [ranchers](#) who lost some of their best bottomland. Supporting a bunch of salmon and steelhead fisherman would be a whole lot of business for me and your Dad." She shrugged. "It'd be a lot of changes, though. Not sure what I'd do. I might even have to paint the place. Probably easier just to sell and retire." She smiled.

Everyone chuckled, though a bit self-consciously. Retirement was an ongoing, comfortable joke, always good for a laugh. Everyone figured that the only way Louise would leave her business was in a box. But it calmed the waters and allowed others to back off and converse rather than confront. Roger could fret about increasing costs for irrigating and shipping crops. Ted could lament the loss of barges and talk about going into trucking. Amy could wring her hands over the loss of power generating capacity, especially with the problems in California. Thomas could speak about the wholesale change in a way of life, a life based on the dams and everything they brought with them. And the grandchildren could lay low and sip their beers, safe for the moment.

Madeline listened in silence. For her, the entanglement was both personal and political. The Resources committee would decide the fate of the dams next week. Would they keep them as is? Would they manage the discharge? Would they carry the fish around the dams? Would they breach them? Would they tear them down? Would they delay and call for more study? Would they do *anything*?

And what would *she* do? At every meeting, each member of the committee looked at her from the corner of his or her eye. After all, she had lived most of her life on the Snake. What did she think? What did her constituents want? And, the question most often lost in the muddle of political calculation and maneuver, what *was* the right thing to do?

The discussion and the beer were still flowing when Madeline made her escape. Under the pretense of getting a fresh drink, she slipped unseen through the back door and drove to the lake. A few minutes later, she glided silently through the waters of the [Sacajawea reservoir](#) in a borrowed canoe. The water was so still she could hear fish jumping a mile away. The sky was cloudless. The sun shone orange and red as it sank beyond the [Ice Harbor Dam](#), the last dam on the [Snake River](#) before it emptied into the Columbia River. On either shore, the dying light colored the grass of the treeless hills gold.

She was almost alone on the water. One other boat floated in the distance. In the quiet she could still hear in her mind the sound of her family's voices. So she was startled when Sam Tewe's canoe pulled up beside her.

"Kinda late for fishing," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm thinking ... about the dam." She looked at him. Sam was a [Walla Walla](#) Indian, one of the few left. To his tribe and others the salmon were sacred. The fish were a source of food but also a symbol of life, of the seasonal cycle. Yet Sam's father had worked on the dam just like hers. And he had worked on the other dams and in the towns that the dams helped build. She asked Sam what he thought about the dams.

Sam sighed, "A hard question. The Cayuse, the [Walla Walla](#) and the Umatilla all want the salmon. I, a Walla Walla, would like to see the salmon run once again. And I, a citizen of Pasco just short of retirement, would like to keep my job and the fairly comfortable life to which I've grown accustomed."

They both sat silent for a moment watching the sunset. Sam squinted into the setting sun, lips pursed. He spoke again, "I stood beside my father in '62 and watched as LBJ praised the good these dams would bring. I remember the whole town cheering. I remember your father cheering. I remember my father said nothing. It was a job and there weren't many of those for us. But we lost something, too. We lost something with every dam between here and the ocean."

Sam looked at Madeline.

"What do I think, Congresswoman?" he said. "I think we should have thought a lot harder about our choices forty years ago."

With that he nodded politely and pushed off. She watched him diminish to a point on the darkening waters.

And here she was, days later and thousands of miles away, standing outside the committee room in the House half listening to her aides' low-voiced yet impassioned debate, still trying to decide how she would vote.

Her top aide, Gerald, with some vehemence, was stating once again that ecological improvements and the gains in commercial and sport fishing would balance the loss of irrigation, navigation, and the rest. Equally adamant, her aide Heather was letting fly a string of statistics to show the long lasting economic losses and general turmoil that any change would bring. The rest of her aides seemed to have staked out incremental positions between Gerald and Heather's extremes.

Madeline sighed. Her aides were divided. Her district was divided. Even her own family was divided. Whether she supported breaching, spilling, flow augmentation, removal or drawdown and bypass structures, she could very well be out on the street after the next election, voted out by whichever faction she had made most unhappy. No matter. Making decisions was, in fact, her job. Best she get to it. She waved her aides to silence and entered the hearing. It was time to vote.

Note: Although the issues addressed in this case are actual, the characters are fictional.

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