

Tollgate of Free Waters

The United States has moved another step toward complete federal control over the nation's rivers by enactment of the stream pollution bill.

As Business Week points out: "By the simple process of chipping in toward construction costs, Washington has bought a varying degree of control over developments in navigation, reclamation, hydroelectric power, flood, control, and now, under the Vinson-Lonergan bill, stream pollution. At present federal control is scattered; the next step will be to consolidate it, as has already been done in the Tennessee Valley."

It should be clear by now that development of our inland waterways has far outgrown State lines. But must it be concluded, therefore, that federal control is demanded? Not by the economist. He knows that the United States, far from being a homogeneous entity, is a vast empire, a commonwealth of economic regions, each with its peculiar resource structure, each with conditions which vary from those in the others. He knows that each region obtained its frontiers by the limits set by the exchange of goods and services between one section and another at whatever level of productive efficiency prevailed.

He knows that the outward march of these frontiers found no permanent barriers in the archaic lower political divisions which had their origin

in the whims of land-granting kings or the schemes of land-grabbing railroads. He knows that were it not for the artificial walls erected against international trade, these frontiers would not even be contiguous with the boundaries of this empire.

Obviously, the progressive step would be to vest control over the interstate waterway in the community which is economically dependent upon it—the region whose economy is built up upon it. Only then would the proper supervision be exercised over the control of the waterway; only then would the control be by the public rather than the bureaucracy.

But this would raise questions which the advocates of federal, and the defenders of State control would rather see unasked. If the region is dependent upon the waterway, why does it not have free access to it? Though title to the waters and the land under the waters be vested in the sovereign; that is, the people, they do not own it and cannot have free access to it so long as its margins, the land on its shores, are owned and controlled by the quasi-monopolists who have title to waterfront sites. You can sail your boat or your barge where you will once you get on it—but to get on it you must pay tribute to the keeper of the tollgate of the waters—the landowner.

And if the possessors of these sites, and of sites and resources throughout the region, are benefited by the existence of an improved waterway, why should they not bear the expense of establishing and maintaining it? Indeed, if they benefit from the presence and activities of people attracted to a region favored with the existence of a waterway, why should they not bear the expense of providing for the communal needs of just those people? And bear them in proportion to the benefit?

But this would be too clear, too logical. So the politicians who do the political jobbery for the real owners of the waterways clamor for State "control" or campaign for fed-

eral "control". To them it makes little difference if patronage fat is added to the fire of political centralization, and either form is a convenient disguise for the waterway owner.

So long as the Great White Father is Lord of the Waters, why should 120,000,000 persons be interested in the petty fortunes of little Joe Doaks, who owns the 60x100 parcel at the corner of Front and Water Streets? The Joe Doaks' find themselves in the position of being the Barbary Pirates of our day but they need not worry. If the Navy is sent after them it cannot enter the publicly-owned and federally controlled waterways without faithfully paying the usual toll to the privately-concerned keeper at the gate. —W. L.

See: "Social Problems," p. 174; p. 193.
"Science of Political Economy," pp. 23-25; 31-33; 292-312.
"Thou Shalt Not Steal."