



Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch: The Panama Canal Treaties and the Rise of the Right

Adam Clymer

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Considered one of America's engineering marvels, the Panama Canal sparked intense debates in the 1970s over the decision to turn it back over to Panama. In this remarkable and revealing tale, noted journalist Adam Clymer shows how the decision to give up this revered monument of the "American century" stirred emotions already rubbed raw by the loss of the Vietnam War and shaped American politics for years.

Jimmy Carter made the Canal his first foreign policy priority and won the battle to ratify the Panama Canal treaties. But, Clymer reveals, the larger war was lost. The issue gave Ronald Reagan a slogan that kept his 1976 candidacy alive and positioned him to win in 1980, helped elect conservative senators who made a Republican majority, and fueled the overall growth of conservatism.

In telling the story of America's reconsideration of the 1903 treaty that gave it control of the Canal "in perpetuity," Clymer focuses on the perspectives of six key players: Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker, political candidate Gordon Humphrey, and Terry Dolan of the National Conservative Political Action Committee. His narrative illuminates many aspects of American politics during the Ford and Carter years—especially regarding Senate elections—that have been largely overlooked. And his chronicling of the emergence of political action committees on the right reveals their often-awkward relationship with the GOP and the uneasy alliances that helped the Republicans win control of the Senate in 1980.

Clymer explores how the uproar over the Canal episode foreshadowed perennial partisan attacks over intense, emotional issues from abortion to gun control to same-sex marriage. He also shows that people who hated the idea of giving up the canal gave birth to the NCPAC approach of beating up on an incumbent long before an election, often assisted by independent spending and outside advertising.

As Clymer argues, "The Panama Canal no longer divides Panama. But the fissures it opened 30 years ago have widened; they divide the United States." His even-handed account offers new insight into the "Reagan Revolution" and highlights an overlooked turning point in American political history.

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