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Title
The Modernization Era: The Great Acceleration to the Anthropocene (1920-1960)

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4n76q0zb

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Publication Date
2026

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The Modernization Era: The Great Acceleration to the Anthropocene (1920-1960), Chapter 3, IN *Lessons for a Warming Planet: A Vital History of U.S. Environmental Law*, by Alejandro E. Camacho and Brigham Daniels, New York: New York University Press, 2026

Chapter Abstract

The four decades stretching from the Roaring Twenties through the postwar boom were, in environmental terms, a long retreat from the Progressive Era's gains. This chapter traces how law underwrote the physical transformation of America — suburbs, highways, dams, automobiles, chemicals, nuclear power — making the United States simultaneously the world's greatest economic superpower and its greatest polluter.

The era's central paradox is the New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt's administrative revolution built the modern federal bureaucratic state — and built it primarily as an instrument of development. The TVA, the Hoover Dam, the rural electrification programs: these projects flooded ecosystems, displaced communities, and locked in fossil fuel infrastructure whose consequences the planet is still living with. Yet the same administrative machinery, built to facilitate exploitation, would later become the scaffolding on which modern environmental law was constructed. The engine of destruction carried within it the tools of repair.

Federal policy during this era also systematically racialized the "American Dream." FHA mortgage programs, interstate highway routing, and racially restrictive covenants concentrated pollution burdens in communities of color while delivering the benefits of suburbanization almost exclusively to white Americans — a pattern that environmental justice advocates are still fighting decades later.

The chapter closes with the era's accumulating disasters: the Donora death fog of 1948, the proliferation of synthetic chemicals with minimal legal oversight, and the nuclear fallout that would eventually inspire Rachel Carson's generation. Even in the anti-conservation atmosphere of these decades, undercurrents of reform persisted — modest federal experiments, early state air and water regulations, scattered legislative responses to industrial disaster. These inadequate but persistent efforts would prove essential to what came next.