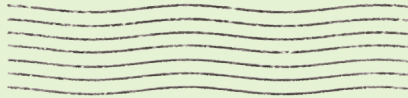
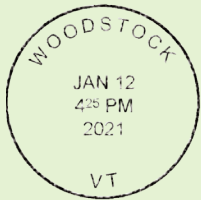




## LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



FORT SUMNER VISITOR EDUCATION CENTER, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

### A MOST WORTHY SERVICE—IN AN ERA OF UN-HEALTHY PARKS, UN-HEALTHY PEOPLE, AND A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE FOR DEMOCRACY

Rolf Diamant

The current issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* focuses on the relationship between public health, nature, and parks, spearheaded by the healthy parks/healthy people movement. Ironically, we are having this conversation in the midst of a global pandemic, the most serious public health crisis in living memory. The combined impacts of rampant Covid-19 infection, concomitant economic pain, climate destabilization, and the cumulative weight of systemic racial injustices have severely stressed the health of American society and its people. At a time when large numbers are turning to nature and national parks to seek refuge and rejuvenation, the public health measures and messages of a weakened and demoralized National Park Service (NPS) have often been inconsistent and politicized.<sup>1</sup> This conversation on parks and public health is also occurring at a moment when there has been a concerted attempt to discredit the legitimacy of the November presidential election in the United States and disenfranchise millions of citizens who voted by mail in the midst

of the pandemic. Accordingly, I shall focus this 24th Letter from Woodstock on the relationships between a well-functioning NPS and the future health of American democracy.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 election, losing candidate Donald Trump orchestrated various efforts aimed at overturning the results of a free and fair election; first in courts, bombarded with baseless allegations and conspiratorial fabrications; then in state legislatures and the US Congress, pressured to usurp the popular vote. These efforts were punctuated with seditious calls for martial law and suspension of the Constitution. All this culminated on January 6, 2021, the day

The public health measures and messages of a weakened and demoralized National Park Service have often been inconsistent and politicized.

This has been an electoral season not unlike the Secession Winter of 1860–1861, when the continuity of constitutional government, and democracy itself, was in genuine jeopardy. Though it will take time and perspective, the story of the 2020 election will need to be told.

Congress formally certified Joe Biden’s election victory. Launched by an aggrieved and vengeful Trump, thousands of his frenzied followers, from MAGA Moms to Proud Boys, surged down Pennsylvania Avenue and stormed Capitol Hill. A combat-clad vanguard of ultra-nationalists, battling police in a scene of medieval violence, smashed their way into the capitol building itself. Once inside they rampaged through corridors and offices, actually breaching the inner sanctum of the House and Senate chambers just moments after legislators evacuated. Five people died, including a US Capitol police officer; a much bloodier outcome was avoided by the narrowest of margins. That evening, with the last of the mob expelled, Congress re-assembled and codified the results of the November election.

Though this live-streamed dystopian rising was short-lived, the trauma inflicted on the American psyche will not be. A transition to a new administration, despite every obstacle placed in its path, will take place. People across America, however, are profoundly shaken by the precarious state and vulnerability of America’s laws and institutions. This has been an electoral season not unlike the Secession Winter of 1860–1861, when the continuity of constitutional government, and democracy itself, was in genuine jeopardy. Though it will take time and perspective, the story of the 2020 election will need to be told. “Ignoring near misses,” warned a writer for *The Atlantic*, “is how people and societies get in real trouble the next time.”

It is difficult to say how long it might take to directly acknowledge and interpret the disturbing events following the 2020 election, or where and how NPS might eventually become involved.

Trying to make sense of America’s complex and often turbulent history is a perennial task for NPS as the nation’s preeminent truth tellers. National parks have struggled with this responsibility. In the case of Fort Sumter National Monument, created in 1948, early park interpretation made the mistake of avoiding any reference to the actual causes of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> “Park rangers preferred to discuss battlefield strategy and gallant actions by fallen heroes,” wrote former Sumter Superintendent John Tucker, “rather than discuss the actions and events that truly led to the opening shot at Fort Sumter.”<sup>4</sup> It was not until 2002 that an exhibit specifically addressed the central issue of slavery and the drive to nullify, by means of secession and insurrection, the 1860 election of President Abraham Lincoln.

It is an open question as to how long it might take to directly acknowledge and interpret the disturbing events following the 2020 election, or how NPS might eventually become involved in this project. In early November, not long after the election, I ran across an online petition to place Four Seasons Total Landscaping Company, the incongruous site in Philadelphia of one of Rudy Giuliani’s dissembling press conferences, on the National Register of Historic Places. After the events of January 6, the US Capitol Building becomes the obvious location for NPS to place an interpretive panel and perhaps assign a park ranger to explain to future visitors, including students, the actions and events that led to what has been described as a “near-death experience” for American democracy.<sup>5</sup> Of course this ultimately depends on whether these anti-democratic machinations will be remembered as a one-off coup attempt, or as a prelude, like the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, to a more competent and dangerous second act.

Right now, however, there is much work to be done repairing the wreckage left behind by the

outgoing administration. Noting that NPS has not had a permanent director in four years, National Park and Conservation Association (NPCA) President and Chief Executive Officer Theresa Pierno attempted to summarize the outgoing administration's comprehensive assault on conservation and national parks. "Pro-industry appointees at the top levels of the Interior Department," stated Pierno, have hobbled or erased "more than one hundred environmental protections," impairing everything from clean air and water, to park wildlife, to national monuments. In the absence of agency leadership, the department's partisan ideology, blatant self-dealing, and intimidating micro-management have been responsible for, in Pierno's words, "creating instability and damage that could take years to reverse." As she grimly acknowledged, "The last four years have been brutal."<sup>6</sup>

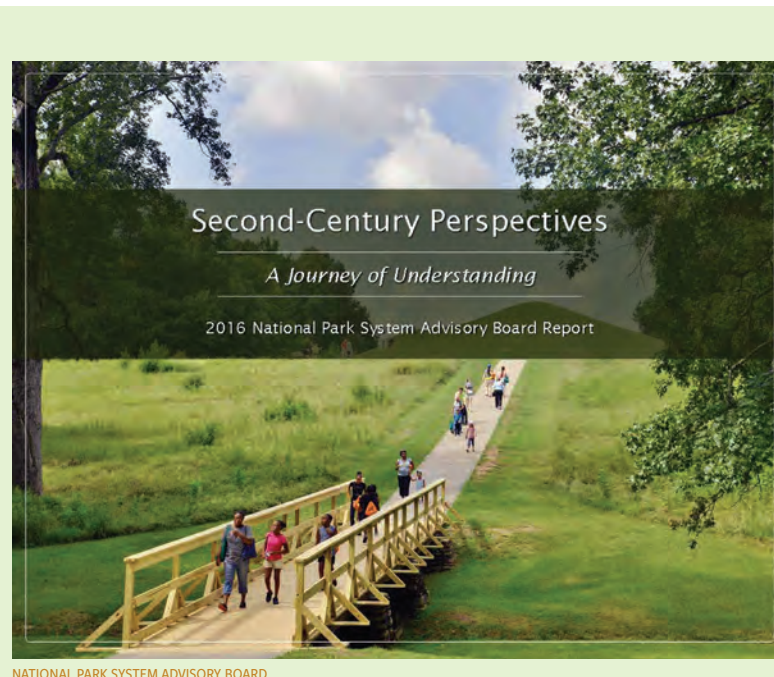
In the run-up to the 2020 election, Harvard Law School's Environment & Energy Law Program drew up an early roadmap for NPS recovery. Their white paper,<sup>7</sup> written for President-Elect Biden's transition team, called for restoring institutional capacity and professional leadership, substantially broadening public accountability and engagement, elevating science and refocusing on climate change, and re-invigorating the nation-to-nation relationship with tribal nations. In particular, the program recommended re-issuing Director's Order 100 (DO-100), rescinded by former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. DO-100 directed that national park natural and cultural resource stewardship be based on best available science and scholarship, fidelity to the law, and long-term public interest. Not a bad place to begin.

Both NPCA and Harvard Law School noted the promise of the recently passed Great American Outdoors Act and looked forward to the act's full reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the substantial funding committed to address the daunting NPS maintenance backlog. However, as a well-informed friend wrote me recently, it is one thing to fix pot-holes and build new water systems, it's another to pay for the salaries of rangers, interpreters,

resource managers, and maintenance workers, along with all the other operational needs of a park. Across the system operational budgets have been squeezed for so many years that nearly every park and program is under-resourced and under-staffed. To its credit, NPCA has been a consistent advocate for increasing NPS operating budgets even as the outgoing administration sought to slash them every year it was in power.

At some point transition planners will need to look beyond recovery and return NPS once more to a path of reimagination and continuous improvement. In doing so they would be well advised to revisit the extraordinary work of the previous National Park System Advisory Board, chaired by former Alaska Governor Tony Knowles. Most of that board's membership resigned en masse in early 2018 after Secretary Zinke refused to meet with them.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, the board left a well-documented legacy of insightful recommendations. Their summary report, *Second Century Perspectives: A Journey of Understanding*, released in 2016, surprisingly survived the last four years on an NPS webpage.<sup>9</sup>

The report should be required reading not only for the transition planners but all who care about the future of NPS. Included in the board's broad remit was a framework for a new comprehensive



NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD

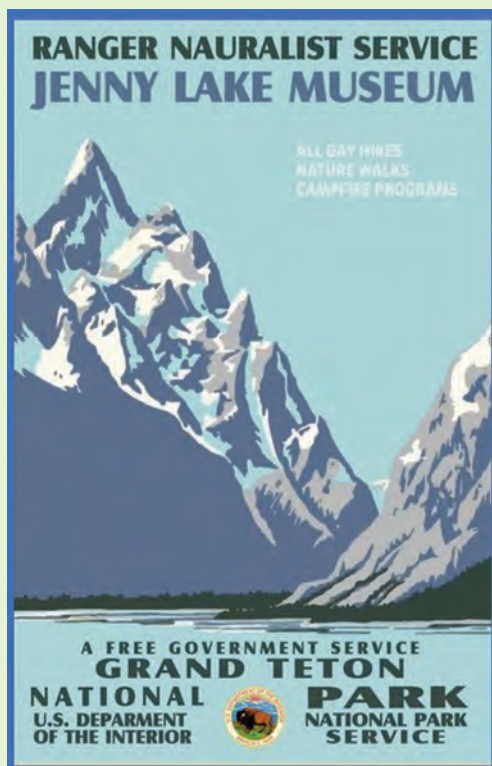


national park system plan; an integrated strategy for science, scholarship, and resource stewardship in response to a changing climate (the basis for Director’s Order 100); direction for building institutional capacities and new alliances to strengthen the nation’s education system; a roadmap for broadening community relationships; and an urban agenda for making NPS a more relevant and effective part of city environments and urban life. The NPS Healthy Parks/Healthy People Program was envisioned as a vital part of this urban agenda and was launched with the expectation, shared by the advisory board, that national parks “contribute to a healthy, just, and sustainable world.”<sup>10</sup> By incorporating into its mission the pursuit of health, justice, and sustainability, NPS is functioning as a *service* in every sense of that word.

It is worth noting that NPS was not called “National Park Bureau” or “Department of National Parks” when it was established in 1916. The very word *service*, defined as “an act of helping” and “supplying a public need,” was embedded in the new agency’s name, though it was not really until the crisis of the Great Depression of the 1930s

that government started to appreciate all that NPS could offer as a service. Moving beyond its traditional role as custodian of the national parks, the NPS portfolio stretched to include supervision of the Civilian Conservation Corps’ emergency conservation work, including building more than 700 state parks and recreational demonstration areas. NPS was also given responsibility for developing a comprehensive plan for the nation’s future recreation needs with an emphasis on serving fast-growing metropolitan areas—an effort initially directed by George Meléndez Wright. “Few present-day undertakings,” declared Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes in 1934, “possess such social importance to the Nation.”<sup>11</sup>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Administration sought to popularize and democratize the perception of national parks and have NPS more closely identified with the programs and services of the New Deal. When Works Progress Administration artists created a series of posters introducing NPS and national parks to a broader audience, they incorporated the clear message that this was “a free government service.”



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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In the context of our current crisis, it is time to look for new ways the lands and human resources of NPS and partners can be deployed today in service to the nation. Facing the combined effects of novel coronavirus, rapid destabilization of climate, and undermined confidence in democratic institutions, the national park system is uniquely positioned to bolster civic literacy, including respect for science, social justice, and basic democratic values. When the Declaration of Independence stated “that all men are created equal” and have other “unalienable rights,” it also asserted that “these truths are self-evident.” I would suggest that fundamental truths are rarely self-evident. Each generation of Americans must learn them: the value of honesty, research and scholarship, critical thinking, ethical and equitable behavior, and common purpose practiced in the public realm. Places as diverse as Gettysburg, Women’s Rights, Washita, and Stonewall can be very effective venues for much of this social learning. I wrote in an earlier Letter from Woodstock that “our national park system is both Independence Hall and Manzanar Internment Camp: one representing ideals of freedom and justice for all, and the other the hard lessons learned when both are denied to any group of Americans.”<sup>12</sup> Concurrent with a mission to

reinforce civic literacy and democracy, all national parks, large and small, have an equally crucial role in building climate literacy as the global climate emergency deepens and accelerates around us.

As efforts are renewed to rescue public health, strengthen climate resiliency, and once again work towards achieving that elusive “more perfect union,” the future of NPS has never been of greater consequence to the nation. A decade ago, the National Parks Second Century Commission, echoing Harold Ickes, expressed its great faith in NPS. “Our vision of the National Park Service and the national parks in American life is animated by the conviction,” the commissioners wrote, “that their work is of the highest public importance. They are community builders, creating an enlightened society committed to a sustainable world.”<sup>13</sup> A most worthy service by any measure.



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*The views expressed in editorial columns published in Parks Stewardship Forum are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, the Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.*





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