

Muscle Shoals—Ours

"IF I were greedy for power over my fellow-men I would rather control Muscle Shoals than to be continuously elected President of the United States." So Newton D. Baker, the Secretary of War under whom the power project was begun, wrote last spring to the Committee on Agriculture of the Senate. This enormous power was nearly sold for a song to Henry Ford at the last session of Congress. The House passed a bill to that end, and there was strong sentiment in the Senate for similar action. Fortunately Senator Norris induced the Committee on Agriculture to favor instead a continuance of government control, but the danger of selling a national birthright for a mess of nitrate was not averted until Ford himself withdrew his offer.

Nor was it more than temporarily averted then. There were three detailed offers before Congress last winter besides that of Ford. Ford's offer was, in fact, the poorest of the lot, although it carried the most prestige because of the myth which had set up the auto-maker not only as an industrial superman but as a philanthropist to whom almost any power might safely be intrusted. The three other offers have not been withdrawn, and an effort is being made to induce the present session of Congress to turn over to private control the great power development in northern Alabama. But it is predicted in Washington that the offers will not again be pressed in competition with one another but will be superseded by an amalgamated plan having certain definite farmer support and strong business backing.

We are not especially interested in the details of this possible new plan or in the features of any of the old ones. We think it beside the point to contrast them, for one can be better than another only in that it offers a little more money—soon spent and forgotten—or a little more possibility of regulating a power so vast and vital that its complete control ought always and indisputably to be vested in the public. Let it not be forgotten that such control is vested in the public now. The problem is not like that of the railroads. There is no proposal that the nation buy at a huge outlay and plunge into the operation of a great privately owned industry. The nation *owns* Muscle Shoals. The question that it faces is the maintenance of that ownership and the gradual conversion and transmission of power, with plenty of time to work out a policy and a personnel as the size and importance of the project increases. It can sell out at any future date if it wants to, but it is safe to say that if it waits twenty years it would no sooner think of selling something of such paramount national interest than it would think today of selling the Panama Canal. On the other hand, if it sells Muscle Shoals now, Congress will within twenty years have to meet an insistent demand to buy it back at enormous expense and difficulty. Let us remember that we are now trying to recover two great oil basins that were too lightly disposed of.

The comparison with the Panama Canal is a good one. The public is still too little informed as to what Muscle Shoals actually is and can be. The power development there was begun in war time to furnish nitrates for making munitions. After the armistice the notion was spread that Muscle Shoals had lost its value and should be sold like our wooden ships for whatever it would bring. Ford's offer cleared away a little of that mist, for the public knows that

Henry Ford is not collecting a menagerie of white elephants. But Ford put his emphasis entirely on producing cheap fertilizer for the farmer and so obscured the immensely more important facts about Muscle Shoals as a source of electric power for half of the United States.

Muscle Shoals is probably our greatest single water power. There is a drop in the Tennessee River at that point of 130 feet in thirty miles. The dam is 5,000 feet in length, or nearly a mile, impounding an estimated horse power of 850,000. Less than an eighth of this is needed to manufacture the amount of fertilizer promised by Ford.

The power has a transmission radius of 500 miles and an incalculable bearing not only upon the future evolution of all of the Southeastern section of the United States but upon virtually all of the country east of the Mississippi River except New England. The power at Muscle Shoals is far too great for any one State to use or control. It is the king-pin in the forthcoming development of electrified industry. It is fully comparable to the Panama Canal in its national significance and its possibilities of commercial revolution. To quote Newton D. Baker again:

To grant Muscle Shoals to any individual or company for a hundred years, or even fifty years, grants to such company or individual industrial dominance for that period of the whole Southeastern portion of our country. . . . All the figures one sees about the gifts in present values in money to Mr. Ford or other proposed lessees are trifling as compared with the growing value of the industrial power that any such lease necessarily entails. . . . I am therefore clearly of the belief that Congress should retain Muscle Shoals, provide for its operation directly by the corps of engineers of the army or by a public corporation analogous to the Panama Railroad Company, and through such operation deal with the power produced in the mass, without entering into retail operation. By so doing the public interest, which we now see to be large, will be continuously served, and as the importance of this power source grows the hand of the Government will be free to make it continuously serviceable in the highest degree as the changing public interest demands.

The chief of engineers of the army has just reported that current expenditures at Muscle Shoals are at the rate of about \$800,000 a month and that the electric-power and nitrate plants will be completed by next October but could be hurried through so as to be ready by July 1. More than \$150,000,000 will probably have been expended upon Muscle Shoals by the time the work is done. There will be a tremendous drive upon the present Congress to turn this enormous undertaking, with its still greater potentialities, over to some private financial group to exploit for its own profit. Only a determined show of popular opposition can prevent this tragedy and this betrayal. *The Nation* has pointed out several times within recent months the striking economies and benefits that have been obtained in the province of Ontario through the public development and sale of power from Niagara Falls. Mr. Underwood's bill—supported by President Coolidge—to deliver Muscle Shoals into private hands under a fifty-year lease would tie it up for too long a period. Senator Norris has a better plan for continued government ownership, with the option of operation by the government or by private agency under government control.