

1971

## Claude Pepper and the Florida Canal Controversy, 1939-1943

Alexander R. Stoensen



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

### Recommended Citation

Stoensen, Alexander R. (1971) "Claude Pepper and the Florida Canal Controversy, 1939-1943," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 50 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol50/iss3/3>

## CLAUDE PEPPER AND THE FLORIDA CANAL CONTROVERSY, 1939-1943

by ALEXANDER R. STOESEN\*

**T**HE DREAM OF a waterway across Florida from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico long has captured the imagination. In 1595 Spanish cartographers depicted one across the peninsula, a mistake assumed correct for nearly 200 years. During the British period in Florida, the royal government conducted a survey to determine if such a route existed, and in 1788 the United States army produced a sketch map of the area, although by that time it was clear no watercourse existed. Later, Thomas Jefferson's administration exhibited the first high-level American interest in the construction of a waterway— an interest which has continued to the present. Four surveys were completed in the nineteenth century, including one in 1832 while Florida was still a territory. All called for further information and skirted the issue of actual construction of a canal. The first twentieth-century study was made in 1913, a second was completed in 1924— both noncommittal as to construction. But in 1927 another survey was authorized, which has been described as the beginning of "concrete efforts to complete the 400-year-old dream."<sup>1</sup> This survey came during the tenure of Florida Senator Duncan U. Fletcher, a long-time supporter of the project.

In 1935, \$5,000,000 in federal relief money put 6,000 men to work on what Franklin D. Roosevelt hoped would "become one of our greatest national achievements."<sup>2</sup> The result was a year of desultory effort which produced a work camp, 4,000 acres of cleared right-of-way, 13,000,000 cubic feet of earth moved by primitive methods, and the construction of four concrete

---

\* Mr. Stoensen is associate professor of history at Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina.

1. Charles E. Bennett, "Early History of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (October 1966), 144.
2. Franklin D. Roosevelt to Duncan U. Fletcher, September 23, 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, PPF 1358.

bridge piers.<sup>3</sup> But in 1936 the President backed off and informed Fletcher that after checking the figures, "it was really impossible to go ahead with the canal project . . . under the Work Relief Act of 1935." He advised the senator to seek "direct Congressional action."<sup>4</sup> Fletcher took the advice and secured senate approval of a \$10,000,000 appropriation, but it failed in the house, June 17, 1936, on the very clay that Fletcher died.<sup>5</sup>

The start in 1935 was not a serious one by any stretch of the imagination. The complex and expensive nature of the project had precluded making it a relief measure. Roosevelt's support came partly from his interest in maritime affairs, but there was also a note of deference to Fletcher. In 1933 the senator, as chairman of the senate banking and currency committee, had rendered vital services to the New Deal when the financial structure of the nation was being overhauled. Later Roosevelt wrote Harry Hopkins saying that if the public works bill of 1936 did not include the canal, workers on the site should be given "permanent, useful work" elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The President's caution, despite his apparent belief in the need for a canal, seemed to indicate that he knew it could become a political liability.

Fletcher had died at the age of seventy-seven, only six weeks after the death of Park Trammell, Florida's other senator. In the political maneuvering that followed, Claude D. Pepper, then a young Tallahassee attorney who had been defeated by Trammell in 1934, emerged unopposed for Fletcher's seat. The other seat was won by Charles O. Andrews of Orlando, thus preserving the tradition of having one senator from the northern part of the state and the other from the southern.<sup>7</sup>

The canal had been a muted issue during the primaries and general election of 1936, and Pepper was "clean" on one of the most potentially dangerous issues in the state. One analysis held that Andrews won by coming out for it at the last minute, while

---

3. Benjamin F. Rogers, "The Florida Ship Canal Project," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (July 1957), 19.

4. Roosevelt to Fletcher, February 24, 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, PPF, 1358.

5. Rogers, "Florida Ship Canal Project," 19.

6. Roosevelt to Harry Hopkins, March 19, 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, OF 635.

7. Alexander R. Stoesen, "The Senatorial Career of Claude D. Pepper" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1965), 28-54.

another explained that Pepper's potential opposition was squelched by Jacksonville canal supporters and thus he was able to come into office without having to take a stand.<sup>8</sup> This was vital to his political future since he would have to run again in 1938. The state was divided. People in counties through which the canal would pass favored it, thinking construction would put money into depression-empty pockets. But residents of south Florida, fearful of the damage it might do to their water supply, fought it.

In the fall of 1936 the canal emerged from its grave, and the controversy began anew when the army engineers reported on November 1 that construction was feasible at a cost of \$163,000,000.<sup>9</sup> Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan claimed the engineers' report was "full of holes," and he denounced the project as being not only illogical but an "indefensible expenditure of public money." As a senator who had fought it earlier in the name of government economy, Vandenberg would continue to make this the chief issue in his battle against the canal. In December, he vacationed in south Florida and found the people "up in arms" against the "menace of the canal."<sup>10</sup> Pepper took high umbrage at Vandenberg's remark and assured him that he could leave to Florida's senators "any questions regarding the internal interests" of Florida.<sup>11</sup>

During 1937 Pepper remained silent on the canal even though the engineers reaffirmed its feasibility at a higher price—\$190,000,000, and the house rivers and harbors committee reported a canal bill favorably.<sup>12</sup> The bill did not receive consideration in the senate, which fitted Pepper's political needs. The Democratic primary the next year pitted Pepper against four opponents, including popular Miami Congressman Mark Wilcox and former Governor David Sholtz. Victory required Pepper to walk a political tight rope on the canal issue. In January Pepper mentioned in Ocala, a canal town, that he favored construction, a remark which the *Miami Herald* took to be a "swat at the people of this end of the state" by a man who had

---

8. *Orlando Sentinel*, February 1, 1938.

9. House Documents, 75 Cong., 1st sess., No. 194, 149.

10. *Miami Tribune*, December 22, 1936.

11. *Ocala Star*, December 28, 1936.

12. *House Document* 194, 4; *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 1st sess., 5464.

“cast his lot definitely with north Florida interests.”<sup>13</sup> The *Tampa Tribune* said, to its “regret,” that the young senator had “sung his swan song in South Florida.”<sup>14</sup> But by mid-April, Pepper had so skillfully avoided an outright commitment that a Fort Myers editor concluded: “It isn’t an issue.”<sup>15</sup> The *Herald*, realizing an imminent Pepper victory, cautioned that it would be a “sad day for Florida if New Dealism should go down as the political movement that ruined the peninsula.”<sup>16</sup> The 1938 primary proved to be Pepper’s most brilliant political campaign; he defeated all four contenders without a run-off.

Although the canal had been avoided during the campaign, Pepper was committed to it in his own mind. He believed it had commercial and defense value, and relative to maritime dimensions of the day, it was not beyond reason. Yet equally important was the benefit he knew it would bring to the people of Florida and the added prestige that would accrue to him if he succeeded in obtaining it. The possibility of winning a \$200,000,000 project was something that could not be passed over lightly, no matter how much the interests in one section of the state might oppose it. Almost from his arrival in Washington he had worked with Henry H. Buckman, engineering counsel to the Florida Ship Canal Authority, a semi-official body formed in 1933 to push the proposal. In the summer of 1938 Buckman pointed out that Senator Royal S. Copeland of New York, chairman of the commerce committee, and a “bitter, determined, and effective opponent” of the canal, had died, and “the attitude of the succeeding chairman” would be of “primary interest to the canal.” Among Copeland’s possible successors were Senators Morris Sheppard of Texas, Josiah Bailey of North Carolina, and Bennett Clark of Missouri. Bailey was considered the most likely to become chairman, and Pepper was advised to “begin at once the cultivation of Senator Bailey’s friendship for the canal.”<sup>17</sup>

---

13. *Miami Herald*, January 26, 1938.

14. *Tampa Tribune*, January 29, 1938.

15. *Fort Myers News-Press*, April 15, 1938.

16. *Miami Herald*, May 9, 1938.

17. Henry H. Buckman to Pepper, June 21, 1938, Claude Pepper Papers, Federal Records Center, Suitland, Maryland. Hereinafter referred to as Pepper Papers; with the exception of the item cited in footnote 68, all references are to the Pepper Papers located here.

Fundamental differences existed between Bailey and Pepper that were destined to boil over into open animosity as the 1939 session wore on. If the liberal and ardently pro-New Deal Pepper had an opposite number among southern Democrats in the senate, it was Josiah Bailey. The senator from North Carolina was one of the originators of the famous "Conservative Manifesto" of 1937, a New Dealer strictly on his own terms, and, according to James T. Patterson in his study of congressional conservatives of the New Deal era, the seventh most conservative Democrat in the senate.<sup>18</sup> When Bailey became chairman of the commerce committee in January 1939, there was little Pepper could do to influence him, much less gain his friendship. Despite the appointment of Lister Hill of Alabama and James M. Mead of New York to the committee, both of whom were sympathetic to the canal proposal, the real problem was the conservatives' economy-in-government forces led by Vandenberg and aided by Bailey who held the reins of power in the committee.<sup>19</sup>

The 1939 session became the battleground for the ship canal. Even before a bill was introduced in the senate, Vandenberg attempted to create obstacles by calling for expert opinion on the canal's possible effect on the south Florida water supply and its practical value to shipping interests.<sup>20</sup> Pepper complained bitterly that this was interference in the affairs of his state, but the resolutions were approved.<sup>21</sup> Vandenberg justified his action by remarking that he had an interest of at least \$10,000,000 in the project—his estimate of Michigan's share of the cost.<sup>22</sup> Thus the congressional conservatives turned the canal issue into a clear-cut fight over federal spending and, in particular, over relief projects. They did not need the ecology arguments that had already begun to appear.

Pepper had no cause for alarm; the reports called for by Vandenberg were highly favorable. The Bureau of Foreign and

18. John Robert Moore, "Senator Josiah W. Bailey and the Conservative Manifesto of 1937," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXI (February 1965), 20, 21; James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington, 1967), 349.

19. *Congressional Directory*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 178.

20. U.S. Senate, "Resolutions 63 and 64." 76 Cong., 1st sess.

21. *Congressional Record*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 473.

22. *Ibid.*

Domestic Commerce found that, "had it been open to traffic in 1937," the canal would have created savings of \$14,934,000 not counting "indirect general benefits."<sup>23</sup> The geological survey explained that construction would not have a generally adverse effect on the peninsula as some thought it would. Moreover, a lock canal would avoid water contamination altogether.<sup>24</sup>

One approach in gaining approval for the canal was to seek presidential support. Pro-canal forces needed a statement from Roosevelt affirming its virtues. The President responded to the request by sending letters in mid-January 1939 to the chairman of the senate commerce committee and the house rivers and harbors committee, urging them to give "renewed attention" to the canal. He observed that it was "justified by military and commercial needs" and that the government could construct it over a ten or fifteen year period "using as far as possible relief labor."<sup>25</sup> The last point was probably a political error. Roosevelt thus had played into the hands of the economy conservatives when he could have left it purely a defense and commerce measure.

Roosevelt's letters did not ripple the waters of congress, but created a wave of response in south Florida. A renewed drive for the canal was "regarded as a betrayal of their interests by south Floridians."<sup>26</sup> Individuals, civic groups, and garden clubs flooded Pepper with letters and petitions expressing alarm over the prospect of construction and demanded that he stop advocating it.<sup>27</sup> The *Miami Herald*, the most extreme anti-canal voice in Florida, went on to say, "The argument that shipping . . . needs a protected route is slightly more than goofy . . . [and] the idea that the canal would have any military value is even goofier. Ships wouldn't trust it during the hurricane season and could make better time in good weather going through the straits of Florida." Moreover, a sea level canal would require a cut to a depth of 170 feet, thus destroying the underground

23. *Senate Documents*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., No. 35, 3.

24. *Ibid.*, No. 37, 2, 3.

25. Roosevelt to Josiah W. Bailey, January 16, 1939, Pepper Papers.

26. *Miami Herald*, January 18, 1939.

27. See for example Carter Bradford (secretary, Winter Park Chamber of Commerce) to Pepper, January 20, 1939; John L. Morris (general manager, Miami Chamber of Commerce) to Pepper, January 20, 1939; Mrs. E. E. DeKlyn (corresponding secretary, Miami Beach Garden Club) to Pepper, January 18, 1939, Pepper Papers.

water supply.<sup>28</sup> Pepper, opposed by both the preservers of the Florida water supply and the preservers of the national money supply, refused to turn back. For him, 1939 was the best possible moment to seek canal legislation. To obtain the support of south Floridians in the next election, he needed to prove both the maximum time for the canal to be completed and its value to the entire state.

A canal bill was introduced in the senate on February 1, by Texas Senator Sheppard. In late March and early April the commerce committee held six days of hearings on the bill.<sup>29</sup> Buckman had urged Pepper to seek quick action in January, preferably without a hearing, but with the growing power of the conservatives this was out of the question.<sup>30</sup> That the hearings were completed in early April was something of an accomplishment for Pepper, but the speed with which they were completed could be attributed instead to the desire by conservatives to hurry the proposal through so it could be crushed in the name of economy. On April 27, the Sheppard bill was reported out of committee and placed on the calendar without recommendation.<sup>31</sup> Pepper claimed that this was a "great step forward for the project . . . a victory for those supporting the cause; it demonstrates the strength of sentiment behind it."<sup>32</sup> But the *New York Times* made the somber comment that no recommendation meant "in essence the vote would be a test of Senate sentiment on spending versus economy rather than a vote on the canal itself."<sup>33</sup>

Pepper knew he had to work from several angles. The best way was to make the canal vital to national defense; another was to demonstrate savings to the consumer. On May 11, in order to convince his colleagues of the value of the project, he held a "series of conferences suggestive of classroom lectures" in the rear of the senate chamber. "On the wall, [and] suspended from the railings of the galleries was a series of maps showing the relative commercial and defensive features of the proposed

28. *Miami Herald*, January 18, 1939.

29. U.S. Senate, Committee on Commerce, *Florida Ship Canal, Hearings on S. 1100*, 76 Cong., 1st sess.

30. Buckman to Pepper, November 12, 1938, Pepper Papers.

31. *Congressional Record*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 4819.

32. Pepper "Press Release," April 27, 1939, Pepper Papers.

33. *New York Times*, May 18, 1939.



canal, compared with similar works at Panama and Suez.<sup>34</sup> This was an unusual thing for a senator to do, but Pepper got away with it because he was generally well liked and had ingratiated himself with the leadership.

The most difficult angle was to turn the canal vote into a party issue. Pepper worked to line up support. In mid-March he took a delegation of twelve senators headed by Majority Leader Alben W. Barkley to Florida. At Ocala he hinted that the Kentuckian might make a good Democratic nominee in 1940. Taking high umbrage at this, the *Miami Herald* called Pepper "the high priest of the canal coterie" who had "pontificated at the anointing of the Barkley" for 1940. The *Herald* doubted Barkley's qualifications and denounced him for saying he was "not only down here to inspect the canal but to build it."<sup>35</sup> After the senatorial junket Pepper sought President Roosevelt's support for the trouble-ridden house version of the bill. He did not want to miss the "decisive impetus" the President could give it.<sup>36</sup> But it is probable that any impetus from the White House would have assured the death of the project, since congressional conservatism was not limited to the senate. Roosevelt did nothing.

Pepper's effort to make the canal a party issue was designed to divide the conservatives, who had turned the 1939 session into the "Zenith of Coalition."<sup>37</sup> In this, Vandenberg's opposition and his dabbling in the affairs of the South could be helpful. The Washington correspondent of the anti-canal *Miami Herald* was impressed by Pepper's energy and drive:

Seldom does a Senator work as Pepper has done for the canal. There was no statesmanlike reserve about him as he dug in from the White House down to put over this development. He pulled every string he could. There was something refreshing about the way Pepper battled. It reminds one of Old Bob LaFollette and the way he fought for everything he could lay his hands on . . . . The energetic Florida Senator would make no predictions about the canal vote in the Senate. He had a check on every colleague. All he said was "I hope."<sup>38</sup>

34. *Ibid.*, May 12, 1939.

35. *Miami Herald*, March 14, 1939.

36. Pepper to Roosevelt, March 17, 1939, Pepper Papers.

37. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, 288-324.

38. See Radford Mobley's column, *Miami Herald*, May 14, 1939.

But in the end hope was not enough. The Florida ship canal was a project on which few senators were willing to compromise their opinions, since it was seen as a spending program. As most senators "had made up their minds on the canal project" there was little Pepper could do to sway them.<sup>39</sup>

On May 12, Senator Sheppard led off debate with a three-hour speech that covered every possible aspect of the proposal. He concluded: "It is my belief that no project has ever come before Congress more thoroughly considered by expert and official reviewing authority, more logically justified or more replete with benefit to the American people."<sup>40</sup> Several days later, Senator Vandenberg got to the heart of the matter, the cost of the canal. The point at issue was not the canal itself, but economy. Vandenberg said it was his "prayerful hope that the tax resources of seventy-five per cent of the American people will not be dissipated by the Senate of the United States" in this manner.<sup>41</sup> He had another source of enormous leverage although never stated, which was that \$200,000,000 was more than most senators, liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, northern or southern, were willing to authorize for a single project in any state. It was reported that "at no time in current memory has the Senate undertaken consideration of a costlier measure involved in a shorter bill."<sup>42</sup>

Pepper, who must have been aware of this trend of sentiment, spoke only briefly. A great admirer of Senator Fletcher, he gave him tribute and referred to the canal as "the great dream that throbbed" in his predecessor's breast. Pepper made a series of broad concessions on the means of financing the project, aimed at making it self-amortizing through the collection of tolls, and he concluded by appealing to the "fair-mindedness . . . sound judgment . . . good sense . . . and patriotism" of his colleagues.<sup>43</sup>

When the vote was taken before filled galleries on May 17, Pepper was defeated. This was his first effort to obtain a major piece of legislation, and he had thought it had a chance; defeat was a bitter disappointment. The bill lost by a forty-six to

39. *New York Times*, May 17, 1939.

40. *Congressional Record*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 5502.

41. *Ibid.*, 5586.

42. *New York Times*, May 17, 1939.

43. *Congressional Record*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 5606.

thirty-six vote, and Pepper's effort to turn it into a party issue had failed. Of those voting "nay" twenty-three were Democrats, seventeen of whom were considered conservatives.<sup>44</sup> Pepper had managed to wean only three conservative Democrats from the coalition, and two, Tom Connally of Texas and Richard Russell of Georgia, were from states which would benefit from the canal. If the seven paired were added to the thirty-six "ayes" on the roll call the total would have been forty-three, only three short of the forty-six Pepper had claimed earlier. But no amount of figuring could change the margin of defeat. Pepper told a Miami Beach constituent that he had "always been at a loss to understand the bitterness with which you and certain others . . . have approached this subject." He said that his "course" in public life would continue to be to use his "best judgment" to work for "those things which I believe to be for the best interest of our State and Country."<sup>45</sup>

In a sense it was a classic example of the conservatives at work. In the long list of roll call votes on New Deal proposals, the bills always had included items that made conservatives as well as liberals jump from one side to the other, but this was a significant test of economy sentiment "freed of the usual considerations in legislation involving group interest."<sup>46</sup> It generally was viewed as a strong victory for opponents of the administration and a "feather in the hat of Vandenberg."<sup>47</sup> In examining the significant roll call votes of 1937, 1938, and 1939, the ship canal vote offers a distinct roster of the so-called coalition. It coincides almost to a man with James Patterson's list of the obstructionist group of conservatives.<sup>48</sup> For once they could line up in opposition to a single issue without fear of group interests or dissent at home. Even so, it was to be a meaningless victory in the effort to hold back the tide of spending.

As the session moved into summer, Pepper's anger over the inactivity of congress increased. The loss of the ship canal added to his bitterness. In the waning moments of the session, on August 5, 1939, despite several efforts to stop him, he obtained the floor. He was "unwilling," he said, to go home without

44. *Ibid.*, 5649.

45. Pepper to Agnes Parnell, May 25, 1939, Pepper Papers.

46. *New York Times*, May 17, 1939.

47. *Ibid.*, May 18, 1939.

48. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, 349.

lifting his voice "to decry the unrighteous partnership of those who have been willing to scuttle the American government . . . because they hate Roosevelt and what Roosevelt stands for." He continued:

I accuse that willful alliance of a designed attempt to withhold aid and a meager succor from the unemployed and aged . . . .

I accuse that designing alliance of a deliberate attempt to sabotage the first real effort . . . to secure . . . industrial democracy and economic emancipation.

I accuse them of having prostituted their power to serve the United States Chamber of Commerce, the Manufacturer's Association, and the beneficiaries of special privileges . . . .

As his accusations mounted Pepper was stopped, and a roll call vote was taken on the question of allowing him to continue. His right was affirmed, thirty-four to fifteen, and, amid the jeers and taunts, the *j'accuse* speech continued.

The "alliance" was accused of intriguing to strike down the Fair Labor Standards Act, "giving aid and comfort to the enemy," "deceiving the American people," crucifying the lending program, and a host of other charges. He concluded they had "sacrificed humanity and human value to reaction, property and Hooverism." Through the rumble this caused in the chamber the voice of Senator Bailey could be heard asking if it would be in order to characterize Pepper's remarks as "cowardly and mendacious." Then, to the relief of the leadership, the messenger from the house arrived with news of agreement to adjourn.<sup>49</sup>

Pepper's speech has been described as a "fitting climax to a stormy session, and a liberal dose of acid on the already frayed bonds tying together the Democratic Party."<sup>50</sup> On some issues the Democrats had voted the party line, but on others a hard core of conservatives had voted with twenty-one senate Republicans who usually held together. The conservatives as a group never had a consistent ideology despite the efforts of Senator Bailey, but the ship canal vote was an example of why some liberals such as Pepper thought of the conservatives as

49. *Congressional Record*, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 11165, 11168.

50. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, 326.

a well-organized conspiratorial coalition. A leading authority on the conservatives has observed that "Pepper was right about conservative success," but that for a variety of reasons he was wrong in the idea that a conspiracy existed.<sup>51</sup>

After May 1939, the idea of a ship canal, if not dead, was in its death throes. Never again would this grandiose scheme be brought to congress. But Pepper was not yet ready to give up. Shortly after the defeat of the canal bill, he had offered a resolution to have the interoceanic canals committee study means by which the federal government could "finance or participate in the financing of" the canal.<sup>52</sup> Henry H. Buckman, who was given to sending Pepper long memoranda, advised "that we take this one step at a time, and that we do not divulge our entire plan, especially the political phases, until after the approval of the resolution." Important to Buckman was a careful approach to certain key senators on the commerce committee, especially Carl Hayden of Arizona and Bennett Clark of Missouri. Buckman also thought it would be possible to demonstrate the "self-liquidating" nature of the project and to have the ship canal authority issue bonds on which the interest would be guaranteed by the federal government.<sup>53</sup> However, the first step of getting the resolution favorably reported out of committee by January 15, 1940, never took place. Pepper then obtained the signatures of "about thirty Senators to a letter to the President requesting the appointment of a board" to study the defense aspects of the project.<sup>54</sup> Even though Pepper's star was rising in Democratic party councils, the President did not act on the request.

The Florida senator was mentioned as a vice-presidential possibility that year, and at the Democratic convention he made a seconding speech for Roosevelt, which the President said was "like a refreshing breeze."<sup>55</sup> This caused one editor to hope the young senator had "not been so blinded by the national spotlight . . . that he can't see that this is the strategic and propitious time for the canal issue to be brought up."<sup>56</sup> Pepper as-

51. *Ibid.*, 327.

52. U.S. Senate, 76 Cong., 1st sess., "Resolution 145."

53. Buckman to Pepper, June 21, 1939, Pepper Papers.

54. Pepper to executive committee of the canal district counties, August 28, 1940, Pepper Papers.

55. Roosevelt to Pepper, August 3, 1940, Pepper Papers.

56. *Jacksonville Journal*, August 21, 1940.



Claude Pepper's 1938 campaign for the United States Senate against Governor David Sholtz and Congressman Mark Wilcox of Miami. Pepper is pictured speaking at Bartow. (*Time* magazine cover, May 2, 1938).



Pepper in the U. S. Senate in May 1941. (*Time* May 19, 1941).

sured canal supporters: "I have always been for the Canal, I am for it, and I shall continue to be for it, because I think it of vital importance to the country's commerce and safety." He urged patience and reliance on his "ability and judgment" in the "arduous, tedious" work of canal legislation. Nothing seemed to be happening, but he spent a "great deal of time upon one detail or another . . . every week if not every day" in working for it, and a major speech was in the offing as soon as he thought the "occasion appropriate."<sup>57</sup> The appropriate occasion did not arise. When Harold Stassen made a derogatory remark about it in his keynote speech at the Republican national convention, Pepper wrote Roosevelt that if he did "not want to do anything about the canal until after the election, I shall not bring up the matter again."<sup>58</sup>

The idea that the canal was vital to defense was probably the most valid reason for its construction. Had the canal been ready when the war began, it could have eased wartime transportation problems. Pepper deserves credit for his foresight in trying to obtain it in 1939, but the project remained in limbo as the war began. It was not until March 1942, that Pepper found the appropriate occasion to broach the subject again. He quoted a letter from Major General Edward M. Markham, former chief of United States army engineers, who could not understand why "so many people in Congress have never been willing to regard the canal on its own merits." Pepper's sights by this time had been lowered to a barge canal, and he offered a bill to complete one at the "earliest possible time" prior to which a pipeline would be laid along the route of the proposed canal.<sup>59</sup> The bill languished in the commerce committee in spite of Pepper's efforts to get it out. He sought to make it clear that it was not the old ship canal bill, adding that responsibility for wartime oil shortages would "not rest upon the shoulders of those who tried to secure . . . the Florida Ship Canal." Nor were they responsible for the deaths of seamen in German submarine attacks on coastwise shipping.<sup>60</sup> The argument of wartime transportation problems finally brought senate approval of

57. Pepper to executive committee of the canal district counties, August 28, 1940, Pepper Papers.

58. Pepper to Marguerite le Hand, August 19, 1940, Pepper Papers.

59. *Congressional Record*, 77 Cong., 2nd sess., 3249.

60. *Ibid.*

a house version of the barge canal bill omitting the pipeline in July 1942. Roosevelt signed the authorizing act on July 23 for a project Pepper had already said was "too little, too late."<sup>61</sup>

The question legitimately might be asked as to whether Pepper's effort to obtain a wartime start on canal construction was both as hopeless and useless as he apparently felt it was. The basic issue was the matter of time. Only if it could be finished in time to make a significant contribution to the war effort would it be worth any diversion of men and material. Few questioned the value of such a contribution; however, as the submarine menace lessened, the need for a canal lessened. Pepper, in seeking to overcome the time factor, once obtained an estimated minimum construction time of fifteen months from the chief of engineers, who quickly added that three years was a more realistic figure. But Senator Bailey pointed out that the real need was for "something in operation in the next six months."<sup>62</sup>

The need Bailey noted was being met by pipelines built under the direction of Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes who was also wartime petroleum administrator. Ickes pressed pipeline construction with his customary efficiency, and he objected to the canal on ecological and practical grounds. He did not think it could be dug in a short time, and he opposed the diversion of resources it would require. In 1943 Pepper struck back by denouncing a bill for additional pipeline construction in the hope of thwarting what he called Ickes's "Messianic mission . . . to build pipelines everywhere he can." He added that the secretary was "intellectually dishonest" for holding back information about water transportation of oil. If left to his own means, Ickes would "build a pipe line anywhere in the United States that the dictates of his cupidity, fancy, or folly may lead him."<sup>63</sup> Senator Burton K. Wheeler assured Pepper that Ickes was honest and able, and Ickes complained to Pepper about the cupidity remark, pointing out that in opposing the canal he had the Florida water supply in mind as well as Pepper's political future. Pepper, he said, might well consider

---

61. *Ibid.*, 6290; U.S. *Statutes at Large*, LVI, part 1, 703.

62. U. S. Senate, Committee on Commerce, 77 Cong., 2nd sess., *Construction and Operation of Pipeline and Navigable Barge Channel Across Florida*, Hearings on S. 2426 and HR. 6999, 55 ff.

63. *Congressional Record*, 78 Cong., 1st sess., 6727-28.



any opposition to the canal a "favor," since it could prove his political grave.<sup>64</sup>

The canal issue usually generated bitterness and sarcasm. Senator Francis T. Maloney of Connecticut thought it an "incredibly inefficient" means of transportation and from any point of view or period of time a "wasteful project."<sup>65</sup> Senator Tom Connally said of Pepper, "I have been under the spell of his magic," and called for language in intracoastal waterways bills that would preclude the chance of Pepper's using his "eloquence and persuasiveness" on the engineers.<sup>66</sup> Vandenberg conceded "great respect" for Pepper's "incorrigible tenacity" in fighting for the canal and for never having deviated from his objective "regardless of setbacks and obstacles . . . the Treasury's anemia or the council of prudence and common sense." The use of the wartime transportation crisis to win authorization in 1942 was to Vandenberg a "most delightfully insidious approach." The Michigan senator took comfort in assurances from the engineers that nothing would be started during the war.<sup>67</sup>

Time was of the essence. In 1943 Pepper made a last effort to obtain a barge canal appropriation, but the appropriations committee failed to approve it, seventeen to fourteen. Bitterly, Pepper wrote to his parents that "defeat was due to southern senators who voted against their own south— McKeller of Tennessee, Russell of Georgia, and Overton of Louisiana."<sup>68</sup> After 1943 Pepper never brought up the subject again. The project was simply not in the realm of merit during the war, and without the problems created by the war it had little chance of success in the postwar era. Pepper's interests turned to foreign affairs and domestic problems. Over the years he fell out of favor with his constituency, and he was defeated in the Florida Democratic primary of 1950.

In 1962, after a dozen years in private life, Pepper was elected to the house of representatives, returning to a congress in which the old opponents of the canal were gone. In February 1964, he was present at the ceremonies which marked the

64. *Ibid.*, Harold L. Ickes to Pepper, July 22, 1943, Pepper Papers.

65. *Congressional Record*, 78 Cong., 1st sess., 4054.

66. *Congressional Record*, 77 Cong., 2nd sess., 8361.

67. *Ibid.*, 8425.

68. Pepper to his parents, May 5, 1943, in Pepper Papers, Tallahassee, Florida.

start of construction on a barge canal. Pepper had outlasted them all, and it must have been with a certain degree of satisfaction that he watched President Lyndon Johnson set off a dynamite blast.<sup>69</sup> It seemed as if the dream was about to come true.

But to some the dream was a nightmare. Political rivalries and money had never been the whole issue. Pepper's files contain dozens of letters and reports in which opposition was based on ecological considerations. The argument against the canal which came to the fore in the late sixties and early 1970s is nothing new, but it emerged just when it seemed as if the major battle was won by the pro-canal forces. The canal project became a timely subject in the battle to save the environment. It has been described as "an antiquated concept . . . being done in an antiquated way," which will "raise havoc with the ecology of Florida."<sup>70</sup> It has also been called an "octopus," having the army "Engineers . . . self-serving politicians . . . special interests . . . and . . . state agencies" as its tentacles.<sup>71</sup> One study which combines the ecological argument with economic analysis charges the engineers with dishonesty and concludes that in addition to bringing ecological disaster, the canal is "likely to be . . . an economic disaster for the U. S. taxpayers."<sup>72</sup> All the old questions have come back for answers, but with a new sense of urgency.

In the summer of 1970, Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickle proposed a fifteen-month construction moratorium, and on January 15, 1971, a United States District Court judge in Washington issued a preliminary injunction halting construction temporarily in the hope of "preserving the environment" and preventing "irrevocable" damage to the Oklawaha River.<sup>73</sup> Four days later an order from President Nixon halted all construction on the canal to "prevent a past mistake from causing permanent damage."<sup>74</sup> Construction has been stopped and the old dream may remain a dream. The new dream is the preserva-

69. *New York Times*, February 28, 1964; White House "Press Release," February 27, 1964.

70. *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, June 14, 1970.

71. *Atlantic*, Vol. 225, (April 1970), 59.

72. David W. Ehrenfeld, *Biological Conservation* (New York, 1970) 87.

73. *Greensboro Daily News*, July 1, 1970; *New York Times*, January 16, 1971.

74. *Ibid.*, January 20, 1971.

tion of the Oklawaha River Valley in its natural state, and the conservative opposition to the canal has given way to the conservationist opposition.