

Don't Forget It, Jake: Water in Los Angeles

OPENING

Good morning, friends.

When I say "Los Angeles water," many of you hear a line from a movie.

"Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown."

That film is fifty years old. It still shapes how we think about water. It tells us that water is power, and that the powerful always win.

I do want to take that film seriously. But it is fiction, and I want to add my own real life experience to share with you today.

Before I served on the Board of Water and Power in Los Angeles I grew up as a child without running water. As a boy in Athens, I carried water every morning from one faucet in a yard. Four families shared it. So I never take a glass of clean water for granted.

I will tell this story in six parts. Please keep one question in mind. Does this decision give more dignity and security to the people with the least power? And does it do that without blaming anyone unfairly?

I. THE SETTING: A THIRSTY CITY

Chinatown begins in a drought. So does our story.

Los Angeles gets about fourteen inches of rain a year. Our local water could support maybe half a million people. But nearly four million people live in this city.

So how do we do it? We bring water from far away. From the Owens Valley. From the Colorado River. And from the Delta in Northern California.

Today, all three are in trouble. The snow in the Sierra is shrinking. We have years of flood, then years of drought. The Colorado River has been in drought for more than twenty years.

The truth is simple. The water that built Los Angeles is no longer cheap. It is no longer plentiful. And it is no longer certain.

II. THE TRICKLE: WATER TAKEN QUIETLY

In the film, water disappears at night. Land changes hands under false names. The real story began in a similar way.

William Mulholland was an Irish immigrant. He started by cleaning ditches. At thirty-one, he was running the city's water company. Without him, there is no Los Angeles as we know it.

Mulholland looked north to the Owens Valley. He dreamed of bringing its water here by gravity alone.

But first, the city needed the water rights. So city agents went to the valley. They pretended to be ranchers. They quietly bought the land. When the valley woke up, the water was already gone.

The aqueduct was a marvel. It ran two hundred thirty-three miles, with no pumps. It opened in 1913. But the people of the valley felt cheated. Some of them used dynamite on the aqueduct. Within thirteen years, Owens Lake was dry. It became a dust bowl. And that story became the seed of Chinatown.

We need to remember what Mulholland did. He showed a certain amount of genius. But we must remember how we got our water in the first place, or we will never understand why others still distrust our system.

III. THE FLOOD: THE POWER BEHIND THE WATER

The villain in the film has a motto. Either bring the water to Los Angeles, or bring Los Angeles to the water.

The real history is less evil, and more interesting.

By the 1920s, the Owens Valley was running out. Mulholland looked east, to the Colorado River. But the city could not pay for it alone. So the neighbors joined in, cities like Pasadena and Glendale. In 1928, they formed the Metropolitan Water District. During the Great Depression, thousands of men built an aqueduct across the desert.

Then came the State Water Project. It pumps water over the Tehachapi Mountains to reach us. But here is a story few people know. The project almost failed, because Los Angeles would not sign on. Our leaders asked a fair question: why should our taxpayers pay most of the bill for water we do not need?

Then Governor Pat Brown called Mayor Norris Poulson. He said, "We need your help. This is for the good of mankind." The next day, Los Angeles said yes.

That is the other side of the Chinatown story. Sometimes the powerful are ethical and good. Sometimes they are asked to carry a burden for everyone and they actually say "yes."

Now let me bring you to this year, 2026. The Delta is still the heart of the system. It serves nearly thirty million Californians and four million acres of farmland. This August, the State Water Board released its long-awaited plan for the Delta. It gave water agencies a choice. They could accept limits on how much water they take. Or they could sign voluntary agreements, and give water and money to restore fish habitat. Governor Newsom supported the plan. The big city and farm agencies supported it. But tribes and environmental groups called it a giveaway to powerful districts.

Three weeks later, the federal Bureau of Reclamation called the plan unworkable. It threatened to hold back its share of the money. And Westlands, the largest farm district in the Central Valley, walked away from the deal.

We have seen this before. The Peripheral Canal. The tunnel plans. Every grand bargain promised to end the water wars. Every one started a new one.

The lesson is that compromise can be useful. Just remember, a deal that depends on a partner's goodwill is only as strong as that partner's politics. Next month, the Board will vote. And the plan will be tested, perhaps in part by science, but much more likely by who is still standing behind it.

IV. THE WOUND: WHEN THE PUBLIC TRUST IS ABUSED

In the film, the man who abuses the city also abuses his own family. Our story has no villain like that. But it has wounds. And they fall on ordinary people.

Take Owens Lake again. In 1997, the Department of Water and Power agreed to control the dust from the dry lake. The estimate was about one hundred twenty million dollars. Today, the cost is more than two and a half billion.

One commissioner, Dominick Rubalcava, voted no. He told me why. Politicians promise the moon, he said. But they will be gone when a single mother in South Central opens her water bill, and it has doubled.

When I joined the board, I found one consultant designing the project, managing it, and checking its own work. I asked, "So the fox is watching the chicken coop?" An audit later found written instructions on how to overcharge the city.

In 2008, I read in the newspaper *La Opinión* about a landlord in North Hollywood. He was shutting off his tenants' water, for hours, to force them out. I was furious. It reminded me of my childhood, when poor people had no power.

When water is abused, the poor suffer first.

V. "FORGET IT, JAKE": THE PULL OF CYNICISM

The film ends with people looking away. I have seen that too.

I saw a city official asked if she would audit the Owens Lake contract. Her answer was, "I don't know." I heard a general manager tell our board, "We didn't know what we were getting into." I asked for an outside audit. The board president refused to put it on the agenda, until I said I would collect the signatures myself.

I saw good ideas killed by fear. In the 1990s, the city planned to clean and reuse its wastewater. Then someone called it "toilet to tap." The project died. For years, we cleaned our wastewater, and then poured it into the ocean. We kept the ocean safe, but we hurt our own chances to re-use.

This is how cynicism is born. This time there was no big crime. This time cynicism was born in a thousand small shrugs.

VI. THE SAGE'S ANSWER: DON'T FORGET. BUILD.

So what is the answer to Chinatown? Don't say "forget it Jake." It is: remember, and build.

First, we build watchdogs. On the board, we opened the budget to the public. We sued the consultant. We wrote a Ratepayers' Bill of Rights, including the right to clean water. We helped more low-income families pay their bills. After the North Hollywood case, we made it a crime to shut off water to harm people. In 2011, the voters created a ratepayer advocate. And in 2022, the department named its first inspector general. I first proposed that job more than ten years earlier. Patience is part of courage.

Second, we build our own water supply. Our generation's great project is local.

It starts with saving water. In 2014, Mayor Garcetti asked us to cut our use by twenty percent. And we did.

It continues with recycling. The idea once mocked as "toilet to tap" is now city policy. By 2035, the city plans to recycle all of its wastewater. As I like to say: it is not waste, unless it is wasted.

It continues with the rain. Most of our rain runs into the ocean. In 2018, county voters passed Measure W to catch that rain and use it.

And it continues underground. Under the San Fernando Valley, old factories poisoned our groundwater. Now the city is building plants to clean it and bring it back.

But all of this costs money. And here I want to share a lesson from my other life, in transportation.

Our trains took a long road to permanent funding. In 1980, the voters passed the first half-cent sales tax for transit. In 2008, Measure R added another half cent, for thirty years. And in 2016, Measure M made it permanent. No sunset. It took thirty-six years. But today our trains have a future that stands on its own, year after, election after election.

Water is still on that long road. Rate increases are hard to pass. State bonds come and go. Federal money depends on politics in Washington, as this year's Delta fight shows. Measure W was a strong first step. But water needs what transit finally won: steady, long-term funding. Funding that is protected by watchdogs. And funding that is trusted by the people who pay for it.

Third, we bring back the river. For a hundred years, the Los Angeles River was buried in concrete. In 1986, a poet named Lewis MacAdams cut a hole in the fence. He said the river was open. In 1990, thirty people came to clean it. Today, more than ten thousand come every year.

CLOSING

Let me return to Jake, as the police tell him to walk away.

The film says the powerful always win. I say something different. The powerful win when we stop watching. They lose when we ask three questions. Who controls the water? Who pays? And who profits?

This year's Delta fight shows that these questions are both part of our past and part of our current news today.

Water in Los Angeles is in large part an engineering problem. But water is also problem. The farmer in the Owens Valley. The mother opening her bill. The tenant with a dry tap. The child playing by a living river. These are the people who will judge our choices.

We found a permanent road for our trains. Now we must find one for our water.

Maybe someday we will decide to bring back the lake we drained. It will take time, money, and a huge effort. But today, this day, this moment, we can choose to build a city that makes ethical choices about our water supply. We can build a city that catches its own rain, reuses its own water, and cares for every neighbor.

Don't forget it, Jake. Remember it. And build *together*.

Thank you.

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