DAVID N. KENNEDY

1936–2007

Elected in 1998

“For planning and management of water resources.”

BY JEROME B. GILBERT

DAVID N. KENNEDY planned and managed California’s water resources and the supply to more than 30 million people for the last part of the 20th Century. He died December 23, 2007, at age 71 in Sacramento. He was elected into the National Academy of Engineering in 1998 for “planning and management of water resources.”

Born in Oregon in 1936, David was the son of a civil engineer who in later years retired as a professor from the UC Berkeley Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering. When David was once asked to state his career goal, he said, “I didn’t remember thinking about becoming anything other than a civil engineer.” In 1954, he entered the University of California (UC), Berkeley as an engineering major. A competitive swimmer in high school, David played on the university’s water polo team. During the summers of 1956, 1957, and 1958 he worked for the California Division of Highways as a surveyor. At UC Berkeley he participated in the ROTC program. He graduated in 1959.

Having participated in the ROTC program at UC, Berkeley, David entered the army where he went through basic training at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia to become a commissioned officer. He was then assigned to Fort Ord in California as a lieutenant in the Army Corp of Engineers. He and his wife, Barbara, whom he met at UC Berkeley, lived nearby in Carmel. During this time, David became interested in water resources. When he was released from active duty in 1961, he returned to UC Berkeley
to work on a master’s degree with a focus on hydrology and project planning. Within nine months he received his degree and in 1962 joined the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Initially he worked on the design of the California Aqueduct. Over the years, he moved up the leadership ranks, both at DWR and then at the Metropolitan Water district of Southern California (MWD), returning to DWR as Director and retiring after 16 years in 1998.

In the 1960s, David developed and published the first California Water Plan and worked on other major projects, such as the Dos Rios Reservoir. When DWR was downsized after the completion of much of the engineering work on the State Water Project, he joined the staff of MWD as an engineering and strategic staff analyst. In 1974, at the age of 35, he was appointed assistant general manager of MWD. He subsequently became its key policy analyst and spokesman, particularly on matters related to the Colorado River.

Toward the end of his career at MWD, David was engaged in California’s epic water-policy battles, centered mostly on the construction of the Peripheral Canal, a conveyance facility to move water around the eastern edge of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to pumps that would deliver water to agricultural and urban users for state and federal projects in the Bay Area, the Central Valley, and Southern California. This project continues to be the focal point of California’s water disputes. David’s rationale remains valid to this day. However, his advocacy was not sufficient to convince voters who defeated the project in a 1982 state referendum. For years thereafter, he cited that referendum as an example of why water agency leaders should work out their differences and present a united front instead of having the courts or the legislature resolve their differences.

In 1982, California elected a new governor, and, at the urging of William Gianelli, former DWR director, Kennedy accepted the appointment of Director of the California Department of Water Resources. In describing David, Bob Potter, David’s friend and deputy at DWR, said, “He had a strong belief that a healthy future for California depended upon developing and
protecting a reliable water supply.” While at MWD, David greatly improved relations between MWD and DWR, and the working relationship he established continues to this day. During an interview in 2002, he predicted that “a governor will have to personally . . . provide the . . . leadership to address unresolved issues for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta projects.” In 2008, Governor Schwarzenegger spoke out in accord with this philosophy.

Known as California’s “water czar,” David was Director of Water Resources of California for nearly 16 years. During those years, he rode the ebbs, flows, and tsunamis of California’s complex and controversial water disputes. When Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt called upon California to develop a plan to live within its 4.4 million acre foot entitlement from the Colorado River, a reduction of 700,000 acre feet, David was asked to mediate between California’s water users. He developed potential water savings through agreements, recovery of canal seepage, conjunctive use, and desalination of drainage water. This plan became the basis for the 2008 water-transfer program to supply water to rapidly growing San Diego County.

David Kennedy demonstrated how western water management could be adapted to changes in public values and attitudes. He felt it was possible to make steady progress in the face of change. When he was elected a member of NAE in 1998, he was cited for “his ability to nurture consensus on challenging water issues, working cooperatively with legislatures, water users, regulatory agencies, and environmental and business groups to formulate and put into action sound water resources policies, programs, and projects.”

David’s peers have variously described him as a mentor, conservative, and although reserved, a knowing, and understanding boss. Rather than dictate solutions to problems, he stood back and let people seek their own solutions. He had an eye for talent and keen insight into the impacts of operational and fiscal issues. In 1997, he led the response to widespread floods in California. Afterward, he gave each DWR staffer a copy of the classic *Battling the Inland Sea* (University of California
Press, 1998), a history of floods and public policy in the
Sacramento Valley. David wrote the forward to the new edition
and helped arrange for its publication by the University of
California Press. In 1997 UC Berkeley honored David Kennedy
with its Distinguished Engineering Alumni Award.

David’s intellectual pursuits went beyond technical
engineering expertise. He had a lifelong fascination with history,
especially the military and political history of World War II and
also with astronomy, physics, and governmental politics. He
traveled abroad including Europe, Russia, China, and the
Middle East. He made a point of visiting Roman antiquities,
including aqueducts. He had a keen sense of humor. In the
1980s, one morning after a major decision on the State Water
Project, David received a call from a professional friend. The
friend explained his unhappiness—at great length. When he
stopped there was a long pause, and David said, “BJ, tell me
what’s really on your mind.” He also had presence of mind. In
1990, when he led a visiting delegation to the Soviet Union, the
group attended a dinner in rural Central Asia. The Russians
offered a toast, but David, who was not a drinker, smiled and
lifted a forkful of food instead of his glass of vodka as a gesture
of goodwill to his hosts.

When asked about his transition to the slower pace of
retirement, David responded, “The joke in my family is that it
took me about two hours to adjust to retirement.” During his
retirement he accepted invitations to speak in Japan about the
Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and in China about financing
for the California State Water Project on behalf of the World
Bank. He was appointed by the Department of Defense to serve
on a panel of experts studying the levee failures in New Orleans
after Hurricane Katrina.

David’s life and career were dedicated to public service and
to engineering in the highest sense. He made complex,
controversial aspects of California’s water system understandable
to many and steadfastly supported its improvement to ensure
that the water needs of the people of California were met. He
was the ideal leader for the largest state water program in the
nation and a role model for the engineers responsible for California's water management in this 21st century.

A devoted husband and father, David never let the pressures of his work intrude on his family life. He also cherished his friends. He loved getting together with a circle of friends each Friday to have lunch and swap stories. David was an avid reader who enjoyed fixing things ("puttering" as he would say), gardening, and taking walks with his wife. David was also an active member of his church.

He is survived by his wife, Barbara, of Sacramento, California; daughters Ann Kennedy Watembach, also of Sacramento, and Susan Orttung of Arlington, Virginia; son, Richard Kennedy of Brea, California; sister, Colleen Engstrom of Walnut Creek, California; six grandchildren; and many nieces and nephews.