The Radical Plains:
Antinuclear Protest, the Reagan Revolution and the Double Life of “Prairie Populism”

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(draft, do not cite or quote)

In the spring of 1962 David and LaVonne Hastings sold two of the 440 acres on their Montana ranch to the US Air Force in perpetuity. They had not really wanted to sell – not those particular two acres – but they weren’t given many options. It was either sell or have the land be condemned. It was, they were told, a matter of vital national security. It was their patriotic duty. The US government needed their land to house the latest Cold War weapon – the Minuteman missile – buried underground, a 60-foot rocket topped with a 1.2 megaton nuclear warhead. Only later would the Hastingses learn that the warhead contained 20 times the destructive power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Between 1960 and 1967 the Air Force deployed 1,000 Minuteman missiles in the Great Plains and Missouri.

For the next 20 years a Minuteman missile – named “R-29” – hummed steadily under the small piece of the Hastings prairie. Things above ground were less predictable. The Air Force, in David Hastings’ own reckoning, was a terrible neighbor. He recalled times he had been chased off his own property, his irrigation lines broken and his land beat up by Air Force crews. “They treat us like a bunch of Vietnam peasants,” he spat. “As far as the Air Force is concerned, there is nothing out here but missile silos.” And so it was, perhaps to prove the Air Force wrong, that in 1982 nearly 20 years after the missile went
in, David and LaVonne Hastings decided to do something about it. That summer they stood by and cheered as two young men scaled the fence and entered the missile site. “We want to turn this site back to productive purposes,” the young men declared. They were the first people ever arrested for entering a Minuteman missile silo. The following summer the Hastingses took things one step farther – they helped establish a “little peace camp on the prairie,” a gathering for people who wanted to protest the military.

![Figure 1: map of the Minuteman missile fields (dots represent missile silos, 1,000 in all) [ACE]](image)

What was happening on the Hastings ranch in 1982, in 1983 and again in the years that followed was hardly an anomaly. Rather it was a sign that rural Westerners – residents of the missile fields – had begun, without precedent, to organize against the missiles that had for so long been buried on their property. They began to push back
against Cold War militarism. Between 1982 and 1988 more than 25 Minuteman missile sites were entered by protesters; hundreds more acts of protest took place outside the gates. But like most things relating to the Cold War Minutemen, the protests initially went largely unnoticed. Just as the nation had ignored missile deployment in the 1960s and the region’s long years insuring nuclear “safety,” antimissile activism was brushed aside. No one expected it, no one knew how to interpret it, and nearly everyone failed to understand it as part of a long-running contestation of the meaning and direction of rural politics.¹

This essay uses the story of antimissile and antinuclear activism, recounted in some detail, in order to explore shifts in rural Western politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s.² It is a story that both complicates the narrative of the antinuclear movement and undermines the standard teleology of conservative ascendancy in the region. In fact the missile-field activism contradicts the notion that the Reagan Revolution, or a general sweep of conservatism, triumphed here in the 1980s.³ As one South Dakota activist declared: “we live in a rural conservative state that gave Ronald Reagan a rousing mandate.” However, he continued, nodding to the area’s antimilitary efforts, “there is

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¹ The failure to explore antinuclear activism in the rural West reflects the general ignorance of rural politics in postwar US history. As Stock and Johnson have shown, rural agrarian protest has been a critical form of anti-state resistance throughout American history, and while we now think of things rural as an “exotic backdrop,” instances of active resistance belie this notion. While their collection of essays curiously elides the Sagebrush Rebels and the environmental alliances of the 1970s and 80s, it does I think importantly place rural politics back into our history. Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston, eds., The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

² For this paper the focus is largely on South Dakota and Montana.

³ As McGregor Cawley reminds us “generalizations about Western political patterns are usually tenuous at best,” though that has not seemed to stop most people from making them, Federal Land, Western Anger: the Sagebrush Rebellion and environmental politics (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 5.
more to our rural conservative state than meets the eye.” Indeed a strong populist undercurrent remained committed to what can only be called dramatic reform – upending militarism, fighting corporate power and reaffirming community. Alienated by Cold War policies that seemed to treat rural areas as at best military reservations, at worst totally expendable, individuals in the missile fields began to demand a return to more traditional agrarian-community centered form of governance. These were not standard antinuclear tropes, but rather highly local and meaningful touchstones for rural Westerners.

Participants in the antimissile movement were doing what they had long done: pushing back against the federal government.

The stakes were considerable, the implications profound. Antimissile activism in the missile fields, carried out not by national peace organizations but by locals, suggested the depths of dissatisfaction with the national security state in a region known more for its staunch patriotism and unwavering support of the Air Force. It was a sign of a fundamental reordering in how rural Americans thought of and responded to the federal government. For years – even during the 1960s Vietnam War protests – missile-area residents had been complacent, if not outright willing partners in the Cold War. They had housed the missiles without complaining. But by the late 1970s and early 1980s here too, in the rural heartland, consensus would fragment. These rural Americans would become disillusioned with promises that seemed to favor missile over grain silos; that privileged weapons over rangeland. Their protest exacted a reckoning not just with the

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4 South Dakota Peace and Justice Center, Newsletter, Feb. 1985; CDGA collective boxes “S;” South Dakota Peace and Justice Center (hereafter “SDPJC”); Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA (hereafter “SCPC”). Rural Westerners did vote overwhelmingly for Ronald Reagan. For example in Western South Dakota Reagan won over 70 percent of the vote in all counties but Pine Ridge. Though these results were hardly surprising – the rural West has generally voted Republican since World War Two. The Dakotas even defied the trend of agricultural states voting for FDR.
abstract notion of nuclear Armageddon but with its physical legacy. While the global antinuclear movement of the 1980s highlighted the emotional and psychic toll of the nuclear arms race, antimissile activism could demonstrate its daily costs – in dollars, land, crops and community. While never a large movement, antimissile activism is an important reflection of the ways that Americans – both ranchers in the missile fields and rural residents – could formulate a concrete language and imagery of protest against the national security state, one that made missiles daily realities rather than distant strategic concepts.

We are accustomed to thinking about the rural West as deeply conservative, where anti-government screeds are closely aligned with right wing movements. The “Sagebrush Rebellion” of the late 1970s and early 1980s is a case in point. Those “rebels” called for widespread deregulation and local ownership of federal lands. According to the mainstream media they were “nuts on the loose, plundering the national domain.”5 By the mid-1980s there was little with which to disagree: the rural West was deep crimson and the Sagebrush Rebellion was synonymous with Interior Secretary James Watt’s resource grab. And yet, as the antimissile movement demonstrates, vibrant alternative visions of rural politics remained. More astonishing still, the antimissile movement and Sagebrush rebellion shared a common political lineage.6 Both grew from – and self-consciously

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6 For examples of how rural radicals on the Left and Right can share the same discourse see McGregor Cawley Federal Land, Western Anger: the Sagebrush Rebellion and environmental politics (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 5; Mary Summers, “From Heartland to Seattle: The Family Farm Movement of the 1980s and the Legacy of Agrarian State Building,” pp. 304-325; Summers considers reactions to the farm crisis of the 1980s. Her protagonist use the language and ideas of serious reform and she argues that the family farm movement was “one of the few places in the 1980s where progressive activists seriously engaged and combated right-wing ideologies,” p. 317. Summers also points out the erasures of the agrarian state-building movement from US history, something that has allowed a right-wing appropriation of rural radicalism, p 318. Stock continues this line of questioning throughout her own work, most excitingly in Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), an
identified with – local myths about independence and community. They wanted the federal government off their lands and out of their lives. Both often utilized tropes of land and property rights and lamented the passing of a rural, independent way of life constantly under threat from outside forces – namely those on the Potomac. But unlike antimissile activists scattered across the Plains, the Sagebrush Rebels would be given a name and a national platform. In fact it would be the Sagebrush legacy – as inscribed through the Reagan presidency — that would become the standard bearer of Western anger, nearly totally eliding the common ground shared by rural radicals of all stripes and sizes. But uncovering this hidden story of rural activism has important implications for our understanding of rural Western politics today. How is it that once crimson states are turning purple? What does the New York Times mean today by “libertarian-tinged prairie populism”?

But first to the missile fields where, in the late 1970s, far-flung ranchers were beginning to question the role of the military in their communities. After decades of the Cold War they would demand a return to farms, not arms. It was individuals like the Hastingses of Montana and Marvin Kammerer in western South Dakota, who would try, with mixed results, to puncture the silence of the missile Plains.

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Marvin Kammerer remembers the worst day of his life. As these things happen it started out normal enough. A crisp spring morning in 1979, the sun was rising a little earlier, staying a little later in the western sky. Stronger, helping the spring grasses poke out from the snow. It was the time of the year when the meadowlark had finally returned,
signaling the end to winter and the arrival of new things. “Something that was never there before,” Kammerer marveled. As most mornings Kammerer climbed to the top of the southernmost ridge of his ranch to survey the scene, scout his cattle. The outline of Bear Butte visible off to the west, to the north the faint white shadow of the one-room schoolhouse three generations of Kammerer’s had attended. He could see his two youngest daughters on horseback heading there now.

Behind him Kammerer heard the roar of engines, the thin whistle as wings took flight. He barely turned because it was a sound he was well-accustomed to: B-52 bombers taking off from Ellsworth Air Force Base. The Kammerer ranch edged the runway; in fact the runway was now built on what had once been Kammerer land. But something made Marvin turn that morning – it was not the sound of a B-52’s engines, but the sound of hundreds of engines. “This was bang, bang, bang.” Kammerer later recalled. “These suckers were pouring on as hard as they could go. I mean, there is a lot of difference between a normal flight, a touch down and wrap around and fly around and touch down again.” To Kammerer it looked like every single bomber had taken off and was soaring up and out over the North Pole, presumably the shortest distance to their Soviet targets. It would take about 30 minutes for the Soviet ICBMs to arrive, Kammerer knew; he did not have enough to time to find his family. All he could think of was that morning he had not hugged anyone goodbye.  

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7 Marvin Kammerer, interview with author, August 2006, February 2007, in author’s possession; Michael Crater, “Kammerer: Farmer who hates the bomb,” newspaper clipping n.d.; and, Marian Eatherton, “Convinced Ordinary People against War,” newspaper clipping, n.d., all in Kammerer papers, all viewed at the Kammerer Ranch, Rapid City, South Dakota [hereafter “Kammerer papers”]. Unless otherwise note all documents from the Kammerer Ranch were copied and are now on file with the author.
It was not nuclear war, of course but rather something called a “broken arrow,” the term used for military accidents involving nuclear weapons. But that did not matter to Kammerer. The moment changed his life. “I vowed that I would never again allow myself to be like my neighbors, or anyone else,” Kammerer insisted. “That I would use every tool that was available and find ways to oppose militarism, and to promote the right to life of all that is God’s creatures here.” That same year – 1979 – he began to push back against the military in South Dakota. While his actions would brand him “Meade County’s lone communist” in many circles, quite unexpectedly Kammerer would find that he was not alone. After thirty years of living with the instruments of nuclear deterrence, people around the country, including the rural Plains, were ready to resist.

Kammerer’s alienation dovetailed with a rising tide of rural western discontent in the late 1970s. In fact Kammerer’s path towards antinuclear activism, including the local politics traversed (sometimes crossed) and coalitions built, would be emblematic of the way in which rural residents in the late 1970s and early 1980s were able to construct a compelling platform for antimissile activism. Missile field residents mobilized first not around Minuteman, but around highly local concerns. In South Dakota it was uranium mining and a new missile system, the MX. Certainly the antimissile crusade received psychic support from the broader national and international peace movement, but the depth and successes of antimissile activism cannot be understood without appreciating the local nature and roots of protest.

Kammerer knew that few of his neighbors initially shared his ire, that few would support his radical-seeming crusades. The missile fields had never been a hotbed of

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8 I have not been able to receive confirmation of this incident from the US Air Force. There were, however, a number of documented “broken arrows” during the Cold War, including bomber scrambling.
antimilitarism was something the Air Force also well knew. In fact the first attempt to protest an ICBM base – back in 1958 – had been a complete failure. That year members of the newly formed Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA) had traveled from Philadelphia to Cheyenne, Wyoming to see if they couldn’t get some locals incensed over the construction of the Atlas site – the nation’s first ICBM. For six months activists spoke with locals, conducted surveys, organized and tried to get petitions filled. Their efforts were almost completely for naught. While a handful of easterners and a few radicals from Chicago showed up to stop trucks and hang signs, the residents of Wyoming remained uninterested, or worse annoyed. In all the CNVA concluded that “Cheyenne Appeal” was not to be emulated. In fact it seems it was not to be mentioned. Despite the large documentary record pertaining to the effort, the Cheyenne Appeal does not appear in histories or stories about the CNVA.⁹

Not a lot had changed in the intervening decades. Missile-field residents in 1979 exhibited the same wariness of outsiders, the same disapproval for anything that smacked of radicalism. To be sure, by the late 1970s Minuteman area ranchers were often fed up with the Air Force and its strategic weapons, but they were more apt to complain and grumble about the problems with fellow Legionnaires or Stock Growers Clubs. Few, like Kammerer in South Dakota, were ready to take action. But while there may have been little precedent for anti-military protest, there was certainly ample evidence of community organization. Rural westerns had long since learned how to come together to assert their rights in the face of outside influence. In fact rural western South Dakotans of nearly all political persuasions were well versed in grassroots political activism. South

⁹ See especially Ltr from Tatum to Olson, 22 July 1958; and Ltr from Lawrence Scott to Olson, 18 July 1958; both in “Cheyenne Appeal, Correspondence;” “CNVA-projects, Cheyenne Memo Drafts;” Series VI, Box 11; Committee for Nonviolent Action, DG 17; SCPC.
Dakota, like many of its Plains neighbors, exhibited a “moderate conservatism” that emphasized moral leadership, limited government and local control; a political culture closely linked to their past as agrarian populists. South Dakotans had, for example, pioneered the ballot initiative and were not shy about using it. The electorate remained wary of bigness on all fronts; large federal budgets and standing armies would not be tolerated. A deep agrarian producer ethic that honored family, community and work had long helped rural residents mobilize in the face of outside problems. It was this heritage that had led to the populist movement, the Farmer’s Union and, more recently in the 1960s, the formation of the South Dakota Missile Area Landowners Association. In those early years of the Cold War area landowners had worked together not to thwart missile deployment, but to press for their rights as land owners. Once the fight was over, they disbanded, fading back into the rolling anonymity of the Plains. But the points of contact remained: churches, American Legion Halls, cattlemen and farming associations, town meetings. It was through these groups that, when necessary, rural westerners could be mobilized again. The protest would rarely take the same shape, the rosters would nearly always be different, but strong community commitments and a spirit of volunteerism meant that serious grievances would not go unchecked. Under the right conditions these largely invisible individuals, far-flung and silent, could emerge from the Prairie grasses to

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stake their claims once again to what was important to them: land, water, a way of life.
They just needed a reason.

These hazy patterns Marvin Kammerer understood. In fact his increasing radicalism in the 1980s was not a total conversion. For most of his life he had been a Democrat in a Republican stronghold. When his brother was drafted in 1967 he began protesting the Vietnam War, hanging signs on his gate or over the ridge facing the Air Force Base: “keep the bombers on the ground.” As such Kammerer’s increasing activism in the 1980s only seemed to affirm what his largely conservative neighbors long suspected: he was a “pinko,” or at least a fellow traveler. More telling, perhaps, was the fact that Kammerer’s own contrarian tendencies were finally given room to be heard in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He would not long have to work alone.

But Kammerer shared more in common with his neighbors than even he may have cared to admit. He could have, by his own admission, ended up something of a Sagebrush rebel. Kammerer’s politics were enmeshed with the land, a sense of place and duty, a deep commitment to a particular vision of American republicanism that seemed increasingly under assault from outside forces. For Kammerer the ultimate goal was to be left alone to ranch; raise his family; attend church and take care of his community. “Bigness is not everything,” he would lament. In fact it was bigness in government – particularly one in collusion with “fly-by-night” corporations – that received the brunt of his ire. It was not, Kammerer insisted, what the Founding Fathers would have wanted. They would have spoken out against the decimation of the small-time farmer and producer, the bedrock of the country. “We have to get back to the rural concept of what land is,” Kammerer proclaimed. Land was not a commodity but a precious resource to be
cultivated and respected. Agribusiness, invasive mining and massive developments were out; so too should be government policies that supported such practices. It was the only way that the founding principles of the country – something Kammerer took very seriously – could be upheld. “The farmer and rancher are becoming the next Indians,” he bemoaned, and with them the strength of the nation.12

Kammerer’s antimilitarism grew from the same soil, the same set of ideals that held producer over all others. It was a deep current in the Kammerer clan. The Kammerers loved home and country and would fight for it when necessary, but there were limits to their loyalty. In the 1880s Marvin’s grandfather John fled Bismarck’s Germany – a country he loved – because he did not want his own sons to be used as “cannon fodder.” For John Kammerer these were wars of the wealthy, not worthy of patriotic blood. Stopping first in New York and then in the packing houses of Chicago, what Upton Sinclair would immortalize as “the Jungle,” John Kammerer made his way to Rapid City on an ox train hauling supplies. Once there he refused to leave. Instead he abandoned the wagons and squatted on a piece of land outside of Rapid City. Based on the provisions of the Homestead Act he built a house, tilled some soil, stayed put for five years. By 1891 the land was his; the United States was his new country. Accordingly, though he abhorred the First World War, he allowed his sons to fight against his motherland. They did not all return.

In 1942 the Air Base came – first an Army training center; later, after the War, an Air Force installation. From then on Ellsworth Air Force Base was a place with nothing to do but grow and little means of doing so without slicing off chunks of the Kammerer land.

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12 Based on Kammerer interviews and clippings previously sited. For broader sensibility see Stock, Summers.
The Kammerers did little to stop it. For one they did not know how, but more importantly, as Marvin would later admit, “we didn’t feel the same way about it … We thought the Russians might be a real threat.” For much of the Cold War the Kammerer patriotism would thus prevail. But by the late 1970s Marvin Kammerer’s own antimilitarism had begun to assert itself. “We are a great nation with great strengths,” he would boast. But “our Founding Fathers feared a military government and Eisenhower warned of the dangers” and now “each of us has an obligation as a citizen” to stop the arming of society. Hanging signs against the Vietnam War was just the start. But Kammerer could do little alone. Soon he would not have to.

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In the spring of 1979, precisely as Marvin Kammerer had his brush with fate, a seemingly unrelated chain of events was unfolding just a few miles to the west in the Black Hills. It was there that some of Kammerer’s much maligned “fly-by-night” corporations had taken a keen interest in South Dakota’s geology. Twenty-five corporations in all. Their interest: uranium. Though uranium had been discovered under the Black Hills in 1951, extraction was not considered commercially viable until the nuclear energy boom of the 1970s. Accordingly at that time companies like Union Carbide and the TVA had begun quietly acquiring mining leases for millions of acres in South Dakota. By 1979 they were ready to start digging. South Dakotans, however, were ready to stop them.13

Though the connections were not immediately obvious, local concerns about uranium mining would ultimately fuel South Dakota’s – and Marvin Kammerer’s – own

antinuclear movement. The numerous small grassroots organizations that rapidly sprang up to fight mining represented a fundamental reorientation of South Dakota’s political culture – a step critical to activism in the missile fields. Unionized mine workers formed Miners for Safe Energy. Other locals founded the Black Hills Energy Coalition. The state’s religious bodies re-started a statewide Peace and Justice Center. Lakota Indians approached white ranchers – such as Kammerer – about founding the interracial Black Hills Alliance. What made this moment so critical was that while South Dakotans could mobilize to fight for local rights, rarely had such disparate groups come together in common cause: anti-mining was often an alliance of white ranchers, environmentalists, church leaders and Lakota Indians. Never in South Dakota’s history had these constituencies agreed on much of anything. They key was the resurgence of a local religiously-based social justice movement.14 The result was the creation of a diverse statewide network of activists that could support and sustain antimilitary activism. For the first time in during the Cold War South Dakotans would build a coherent and consistent opposition to the national security state.15

Of course mistrust of outsiders and bigness, whether government or corporate, was a hallmark of rural politics. It was the same impulse that had led missile-area landowners in the 1960s to resist roughshod deployment of Minuteman. But in the late 1970s this inclination was visibly resurgent and the success was emblematic of an underlying shift in American political culture that seemed to favor localized or regionalized political

15 Race relations in South Dakota is a long and contentious issue deserving of more focused study. Grossman has gone into some detail on the importance of the Lakota/white alliance that grew from uranium protests and that has subsequently become important to the state’s social justice network. It would be a gross overstatement, however, to suggest that somehow racial tensions have been alleviated in the state.
action – something true on both Left and Right. Disenchanted with the failed promises of the Cold War state (and the New Deal before it), many rural residents turned back towards more traditional ideas of community-level change. Activists of all political stripes were skeptical of bureaucracy and centralized power.

It was to these issues that *Newsweek Magazine* devoted its September 19, 1979 cover: “The Angry West: ‘Get off our back Uncle Sam.’” While Marvin Kammerer and the anti-mining alliances were not mentioned, the glossy went into detail about how the current breed of anger has “united an otherwise maverick group of states and rugged individualists with a new sense of common cause.” Not only was the West’s tradition of hostility towards government being channeled in typical ways, against regulation and management, but also against energy policies that threatened to turn the region into a “colony.” The article went on to discuss what would soon become the most familiar form of this rural Western ire: the still-unknown “Sagebrush Rebellion.” The Rebellion would capture national ideas about the West as prominent politicians, most notably Ronald Reagan, attached themselves to it. At heart the Sagebrush Rebels wanted greater local control over federal lands – properties they thought they knew how to best deal with.

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16 National issues like the Vietnam War and Watergate had papered over much of this regionalism on a national stage. See SM Lipset on resurgence of regionalism in 1970s. For rise of localism see Suleiman Osman, “The Decade of the Neighborhood,” *Rightward Bound*.

17 It is my contention in “The Missile Next Door,” that the Cold War state was a new form of federal intervention in the rural Plains, supplanting New Deal liberalism. The Cold War state transferred power from agricultural to military programs, thus altering the ways rural Westerners both viewed and used the state. As a result, too, anti-state actions had to be refigured taking into account this critical military/defense facet of the federal-local relationship.

18 As many historians have noted, of course, the West was highly dependent on federal largesse, for more see Chapter 4.
“We’re tired of being pistol-whipped by the bureaucrats and dry-gulched by Federal regulations,” a movement leader explained.\(^\text{19}\)

And so it was that from the very soil that Marvin Kammerer ranced, a different sort of opposition germinated. While organizations like the Black Hills Alliance and the Peace and Justice Center had drawn inspiration from the environmental movement of the 70s, the Sagebrush rebels took quite the opposite lesson: they were tired of huge swaths of land being made off limits to agriculture and grazing, tucked away as “wilderness” for the enjoyment of outsiders. Particularly since it was land they had long used. They wanted it back. The rebels wanted nothing short of all public lands transferred to the state. “We’re not just a bunch of wild-eyed cowboys out to lynch some Federal officials,” argued Nevada’s Attorney General of his quest to sue to federal government. “We’re serious people asking for a serious look at the unfair treatment the West is receiving.” In Nevada, where the federal government controlled 87 percent of the land, Senator Paul Laxalt, close ally to the Gipper, admitted that the people “are tired of being ruled like some faraway colony.”\(^\text{20}\)

The same disdain for the “faraway” and sense of colonization was also evident in Kammerer’s thinking, though to different ends. He even declared that “the feudal system”

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\(^{19}\) In 1979 many Western states passed sagebrush initiatives – led by Nevada but closely followed by Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming and Utah. South Dakota passed a hortatory Sagebrush resolution. For background on the Sagebrush Rebellion I draw principally on William L. Graf, *Wilderness Preservation and the Sagebrush Rebellions*, Savage, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1990); and Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger*. What ostensibly sparked the rebellion was the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), which reordered the BLM. Graf notes that this rebellion was just one in a long line of Western rebellions that centered on the issue of land use and who had a right to determine how to use public lands. Cawley provides greater connections between the environmental movement and the rebels, and demonstrates how the rebellion was an attempt to return land management to its former relationship of close local/federal cooperation.

was returning to South Dakota. But while Kammerer railed against the multi-national corporations and big business, the Sagebrush Rebels – or at least those who became called “Sagebrush Rebels” – were generally aligned with conservative interests such as private land use, mining and timber. “Growth and use” were the main objectives, according to Nevada State Senator Richard Blakemore, a movement leader. Once the movement became aligned with the Reagan Revolution it would also come to mean land developers and privatization. No matter that, as historians have shown, these two tenants were often irreconcilable for the small-time rebels in question, the idea of the Sagebrush Rebellion would fit perfectly into Reagan’s notion of cowboy politics.

The national retelling of the Sagebrush story – through Reagan and others – would ultimately obfuscate the remarkable similarities between the Sagebrush Rebels and radicals like Marvin Kammerer. Both were initially grounded in personal grumblings about large corporate and government interests running roughshod over community and work. They shared the same political lineage. These were, in ways both literal and metaphorical, the children of the ranchers who had watched the Minuteman missiles come in; those ranchers who in the 1960s had accepted their patriotic duty but chafed at its implications for their own rights as property holders. In turn those ranchers had their own understanding of the federal government, built on decades of forging compromise and accommodation with the state. The Sagebrush Rebels wanted state control of lands;

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23 As Cawley importantly points out, as soon as Reagan aligned himself with the Rebellion the dialogue shifted from one of states-rights to one of private ownership. Indeed the solution to the problem was privatization of all federal lands – opening them up to whoever could pay for them. The Sagebrush rebels were not pleased, affirming again the commonalities in rural Western ire -- nearly always aimed at bigness and a threat to a particular way of life, Cawley 3; for more detail on the privatization issue see Cawley 123-42.
the antimilitary activists wanted defense dollars reoriented to agriculture – “farms not arms.” In both cases, however, the reform impulse had the same precursor: policies rooted in local concerns, policies that protected the small time producer in the face of outside odds, policies that understood and accommodated difference and nuance; policies that the Cold War national security state, in its entire bureaucratic largess, was completely unable to provide. But despite a similar genealogy it would be the Sagebrush Rebels that would become standard bearers for rural, Western ire. Considering why and how this happened provides insight into the successes and failures of the rural antimissile movement.

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July 18, 1980 proved a turning point for both antimissile activism in South Dakota and Sagebrush politics on a national stage. That afternoon the newly-elected GOP Presidential nominee Reagan heartily declared himself a Sagebrush Rebel. As the Rapid City Daily Journal reported, until that moment, no one but rural westerners were aware of a “western states’ rights movement” at all. Reagan made himself the national exemplar of western grassroots action.24

Reagan’s allegiance to the Sagebrush did two things: for rural westerners it sharply refracted the different ends that seemed to take advantage of the same rhetorical strategies. But Reagan’s allegiance also, in effect, made the Sagebrush Rebels, or his Administrations interpretation of the Rebels, the standard-bearers of rural western ideas about land. As a result alternate interpretations and uses of rural land-right politics – namely those more liberal-leaning – were eclipsed nationally.

24 19 July 1980 RCDJ. This also fits into Reagan’s strategy of using states’ rights language – something that has been effectively discussed regarding the South.
Reagan’s appropriation of the Sagebrush was, in fact, in keeping with the themes of his acceptance speech at the GOP convention just days before. “Let us pledge to restore the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, of private and community initiative,” Reagan declared, echoing the language of community-level action so revered in the rural West. For his part, Reagan pledged “to restore to the federal government the capacity to do the people’s work without dominating their lives.” Reagan thought the federal government needed to be put “on a diet” and control returned to the state and local level.25 (In some senses Kammerer may have agreed, but he found the “stench” coming from South Dakota’s capitol as rotten as that from DC). Reagan was establishing himself as the champion of the little guy. He was capturing the (white) grassroots impulse of the time – folding local needs into a program of change. And while largely overlooked at the time, The Progressive Magazine was quick to point out that Reagan’s Presidency represented a seismic shift in the allegiance of the “American insurgent heritage.” The Left had abdicated the grassroots, and Ronald Reagan had effectively “cashed in.”26

While this was certainly true in the Electoral College (the rural west voted overwhelmingly for the cowboy movie star) there were still, however, areas where the “insurgent heritage” was being channeled in quite different ways. And perhaps none was as diametrically opposed to the image of conservative, pro-defense, pro-privatization, pro-Reagan westerners as the antimissile movement. The true roots of which – what can only be described as a flash of radicalism – were taking shape on the Kammerer ranch that dry month of July.

While Reagan rallied a crowd in Salt Lake City that afternoon, a different consortium of Westerners had gathered on the Kammerer in western South Dakota. There, under the roar of B-52s taking off and landing at Ellsworth AFB, the Black Hills Survival Gathering commenced. Organized by South Dakota’s new social justice networks including the Black Hills Alliance and Peace and Justice Center, over 10 days nearly 10,000 people from around the world would come and go to participate in workshops, rallies and concerts aimed at saving the region from uranium mining and nuclear destruction. It was the largest political gathering in South Dakota’s history. Seminars were set up to discuss mining, agriculture, the arms race, environmental justice and indigenous rights, to name a few. College students and environmentalists arrived with tents, a few cowboys slept in campers, American Indians rolled out teepees. They listened to lectures, held rallies and attended concerts by Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt. The event was considered a boon to the local economy. The Rapid City Journal suggested, somewhat incongruously, that the effect of the Survival Gathering was similar, though not quite as big, as the “shot in the arm” the “Republican National Convention gave downtown Detroit” just a week earlier. Rapid City pizza places were especially pleased, though perhaps not as much as the Black Hills Catering Company, who provided much of the food for the event. Employees were amused to discoverer that the Gathering’s participants preferred salads and buckwheat pancakes to the “meat, potatoes and gravy” usually served to local folk.27

While no one at the Survival Gathering actually hopped a Minuteman fence (at least not that week), and no acts of civil disobedience were performed, the people and issues

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that would make antimissile activism possible were present. It was here that the seeds were planted. Building on ideas of land stewardship, traditional agrarian livelihoods and the language of small time producers, participants in the Survival Gathering made local connections to broader issues: defense spending and the decimation of the farm; the military-industrial complex and agricultural policy; mining and water supplies. These were important personal avenues into more abstract issues of nuclear energy and weapons. It was hard to connect to the realm of experts and technicians – much easier to leave “thinking the unthinkable” to those trained to do so. But the incongruity of seeing $30 million B-52’s roaring overhead while discussing federal policies that left farmers with 70 cents to the dollar for their produce was a stark reminder of the reality of the American farm. Merle Hansen of Nebraska came to declare that the eradication of the small-time farmer and rancher was deliberate – part of a “planned genocide” that would leave production in the hands of huge conglomerates.

The reality for small-time ranchers and farmers was certainly becoming dire in 1980. The 1970s had actually been a boom time for US agriculture, but as was generally the case in the rural west, boom was followed by bust and so began the 1980s. In South Dakota the farm crisis was already spreading bile by the time the Survival Gathering kicked off in July. It was hot and dry; another “drought cycle” was taking its toll on South Dakota ranchers. Grazing conditions were 25 to 60 percent of normal – grass and

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28 Jay Davis noted that activists in South Dakota tended to know each other: “a small state with a small group of left wing and progressive activists,” Davis interview p. 6. For networks needed for action see Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 220-23.

29 The issue of family farm was taken up at a number of meetings, it seems. Much of the critique was leveled at government policies that aided large corporations as well as international financial institutions that squeezed the smalltime rancher and farmer. Dick Rebbeck, “Family farming in peril,” *Rapid City Journal*, 22 July 1980, p. 2. For more on the increasingly radical organization of farmers in the face of the Reagonomics see Summers.
water were all but gone on some summer pastures. For the first time in 30 years the Oil Creek was dried up. South Dakota is “taking on [the] appearance of the desert Southwest,” the Rapid City Journal bemoaned. 30 Things would only get worse as the decade wore on. Cattle prices dropped to pre-1950s levels and Federal Land Bank interest rates soared to eighteen percent. Many ranchers and farmers gave their land back, along with the work they had poured into it; rural communities shrank, towns disappeared.

But more than towns and farms were on the verge of extinction, so too were entire swaths of western South Dakota. “We live,” declared Lakota activist Russell Means, in a “National Sacrifice Area.” Speaking before the Survival Gathering the former American Indian Movement leader and longtime activist gave what many thought was the best speech of his life. Echoing the language of a report from the National Academy of Sciences that actually labeled uranium mining areas “sacrifice” zones, Means demanded that South Dakotans of all races and classes come together to resist being made expendable. Rejecting in total the narrative of technological progress and sophistication – so closely linked to the national security state – Means asserted, “there is another way. … It is the way that knows that humans do not have the right to degrade Mother Earth.”

While white ranchers may not necessarily have agreed with the spiritual and cultural dimension of Means’ own argument, many nodded to the call for balance. “I do not own the land,” Marvin Kammerer would admit, “the land owns me.” White ranchers understood that mining could threaten their way of life. “I have never been in a room with an AIM member,” a white woman rancher acknowledged. “But I agree with what

[they] are saying and I don’t believe in merely regulating mining either – I want to see it stop. And if it takes getting out there and taking my gun out – by God I’m gonna do it!”

Both because of the brewing farm crisis the connections being made at the Gathering between local agency, land use and nuclear weapons would become important discursive strategies for peace activists in the missile fields. “Opposition to the nuclear arms race,” wrote the South Dakota Peace and Justice Center, “is a genuine local issue.” The Center itself announced that the US government was “subsidizing certain silos” at the explicit expense of others: “the best kept secret of the gutting of American agriculture is the degree to which military spending is responsible.” Up in Montana antimissile activists were spinning the same story – noting that each year each Minuteman missile silo cost $500,000 to maintain. “With the money redirected from nuclear terrorism,” the group Silence One Silo suggested, “Montana growers could get almost 30% closer to full parity” with their produce. “Agriculture is a more stable economic base than the military.”

Later investigative journalist and New Yorker correspondent Ian Frazier would make the stakes all the more graphic when writing about the Great Plains: in each county that housed the Minuteman, a single silo cost five years worth of cattle, grain and wheat.

There would be one final factor that would tip some rural Westerners over the edge of mainstream protest. Their long 20-plus year service to national security had not been enough. Suddenly they were going to be asked to house yet another weapon system – the MX. The Air Force, it turned out, was no longer happy with its deterrent force. The once

32 SDPJC newsletter, Feb. 1985, emphasis in the original; SDPJC newsletter, March 1985; “Silence One Silo” information brochure, n.d.; “Agriculture and the Bomb, Spring 1984 SOS newsletter; SOS; all SCPC.
mighty Minutemen – invulnerable, instantaneous, cutting-edge and guaranteed – were growing old. A new weapon system was needed, where to deploy it would become a question of great local concern. Building on new social justice networks, a language and understanding of nuclear issues, as well as an increasing sensitivity to the areas role in the world, pockets of rural residents would take their protest into the missile fields.

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Ray Bradbury could not have scripted a more fantastic apocalyptic landscape than that concocted by the US Air Force in 1979. Forty-five thousand acres of barren, scorched desert would be crisscrossed with single lane asphalt; 4,600 concrete bunkers would loom, like mirages, at the end of barren cul-de-sacs. From the air it would look like a giant suburban construction site – roads preceding subdivisions; scrappy sand to be turned green with shrubbery; perhaps a school and football field at the end of the lane. But the houses, greenery and people would never come. Instead this was a world devoted to Armageddon: the roads would be used not by moving vans and family sedans, but by huge tractor trailers hauling missiles. The entire complex built so that 200 ICBMs could be shuttled from one shelter to another in an elaborate shell game all aimed at fooling the electronic eye of the Soviet empire. Making the entire scheme more absurd was the fact that the MX had to be developed under SALT II guidelines and verification procedures: the weapon system and ground configuration actually had to be calibrated so that clusters of missiles could be verified by Soviet reconnaissance. Apparently the only people to be fooled by MX were the people willing to house it.  

33 *MX Deployment Management Plan*, p A-1; ACE military files XVIII-38-1. Other strategies to the vulnerability/first strike issue included a trigger response protocol for the ICBMs by which any sign of attack would be met with before-hit launch of them all. This was seen as cheap but dangerous. The other
In 1979 this was the new picture of national security. Faith in Minuteman was running thin, for the strategic community its near total vulnerability a certainty. Soviet ICBMs were considered so accurate and huge that only a few hundred missiles would not be needed to effectively disable the Minuteman missile fields. The country clearly needed a new “sacrificial sponge.” This new system – called “MX” because no name had as yet been determined (Reagan would later christen it “Peacemaker”) – was the answer. Echoing the sales pitch of Minuteman decades before, the Air Force insisted that MX would provide an invulnerable deterrent force for the coming decades; one that would require the Soviets to expend 5,000 missiles to be certain of destroying the entire missile force.

The Air Force initially planned to deploy the monstrous system to the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada. Yet if the citizens of this apocalyptic landscape were to be comforted, they were not. As the Air Force continued to put the finishing touches on MX plans its deployment team began running into trouble. Not of the sort encountered in 1960 South Dakota, but a more virulent bile: this was a displeasure that had recourse for action. The 1969 Environmental Policy Act required that all federal agencies solicit public comment and consider the environmental effects of huge projects. As a result, unlike deployment of Minuteman in the 1960s, citizens in the 1980s would know what was in store for them before final plans could be made.34

While Great Basin residents initially supported the MX (jobs and money were hinted at on more than one occasion), opposition quickly mounted. By the spring of 1980, just

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months after President Carter approved the MX and a short time before the Survival
Gathering, it was clear that many Great Basin citizens did not want to cooperate. On one
level they argued that this was the classic story of the eastern power establishment
making decisions about western lands. More immediately they worried about water and
property. The system will “destroy the chosen way of life” in these isolated
communities, Utah’s Governor Scott Matheson told Congress when he appeared, along
with the Governor of Nevada, to protest deployment. Building on the rhetoric of land
rights, history and heritage, anti-MX activists mobilized an increasingly broad-based
campaign that included politicians, the Mormon Church, cattle ranchers, Stock Growers
Clubs, Shoshone Indians and environmentalists. Even Sagebrush Rebels were involved.

At the 1980 annual meeting of Western Cattlemen, the group passed a resolution
claiming the MX would ruin rangelands and ranching. There was nothing compatible
about cowboys and missile silos. It was an unusual coalition (like those forming
throughout the rural west) but one that seemed – at least to residents of the missile fields
– to be effective. By late 1980 it was clear that the MX would not be deployed in Utah
and Nevada.

So it was that Marvin Kammerer and other residents of the Minuteman missile fields
became intimately acquainted with an uncomfortable axiom: one man’s triumph can be

35 Glass 34.
36 For connections between the MX and state’s rights rhetoric – particularly with direct linkages to the
Sagebrush Rebellion, see Cawley, 88-89. For a good overview of the issues and people involved see Paul
(New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); and Glass, Citizens Against the MX. A shorter, and clearly biased,
account of rural Western anti-MX activism is “Selling the MX” in The Progressive, May 1980.
39 Glass 19-20.
40 For more on these unusual coalitions see Tom Matthews, Gerald C. Lubenow, Martin Kasindorf and
Gloria Borger, “The Angry West vs. the Rest,” Newsweek, 17 Sept. 1979, pp. 31-40. They say that “One
measure of the anger now firing up in the West,” the magazine observed, “is the way it has united an
otherwise maverick group of states and rugged individualists with a sense of common cause.”
another’s tragedy. Air Force planners had to concede the Great Basin, but not the MX. In fact the MX was a centerpiece of Reagan’s Cold War build up. Accordingly when Air Force planners rolled out their national maps, the existing Minuteman missile fields again looked rather attractive. Reagan would soon announce that the MX would be deployed into existing Minuteman silos somewhere in the Northern Plains, perhaps Montana, the Dakotas or Wyoming.41

Missile-area residents were galvanized by the threat of the MX. In western South Dakota the issue raised concerns about militarism, the role of Ellsworth Air Force Base and what, if anything, should be done to keep it around. Ellsworth had become a critical part of the region’s economy, but would the community accept a new nuclear weapon as insurance that the Base would not leave? Even people who avidly supported the Air Force were not so sure.42 If the MX is not a big deal, Kammerer asserted, then “Ronnie should put the MX on his own ranch.”

For activists such as Kammerer the prospect of a new missile system led to the creation of pan-regional networks of opposition. Through connections made at the Survival Gathering, Kammerer helped organize Western Solidarity, a group that hoped to stymie new deployment plans by sharing news, resources and bodies.43 The organization included ranchers from the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Nevada. They encouraged regional Stock Grower Clubs to issue antimissile pronouncements and pressured politicians to take their concerns to Washington. At the same time nascent

41 Charles Mohrs, “Pentagon to Use a Minuteman Site for 40 MX Missiles,” New York Times, 1 Jan. 1982, p. 1. As early as October 1981 Reagan had favored placing the MX missiles in old Titan silos in Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska. The plan was to deploy 100 MX in total, but not all basing issues had been determined.
42 Heefner, “Dismantling South Dakota’s Cold War.”
43 Other regional groups included “Ranchers for Peace” and the Tri-State MX Coalition.
social justice networks sprang into action, taking the MX issue to the communities. The South Dakota Peace and Justice Center reminded residents that the superpowers already had the power to blow the world up many times over. The MX was both unnecessary and too expensive – “the farm subsidy program costs less than the MX” the Center argued linking farms to arms. Yet farm subsidies would be cut rather than a weapon system. In Montana residents eventually took the MX issue to the ballot – drafting Proposition 91 which called both for a nuclear freeze and a halt to MX deployment. Montana Governor Ted Schwinden declared that any plan to base the MX in Montana was “another incident of federalism being a one-way street…. With the growing Federal deficit approaching half a trillion dollars, military decisions of this magnitude have to be re-examined.” Apparently the residents of Big Sky Country agreed because on November 7, 1982 they voted for Proposition 91, a resounding rejection of basing the MX in their state. It was hardly the most radical action that would take place that year in the missile fields.

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As dawn broke across the frigid Western Plains of South Dakota 60 people headed out from Kadoka along the side of Interstate 90 (the Defensive Highway System), their breathe preceding them in warm puffs of smoke. Just a week before an unexpected winter storm had slammed the area, and while the ice and snow were gone, the frigid air hung over the rolling plains. It was Sunday, April 11 1982. Easter: a time of rebirth and rejuvenation, perhaps a time to heal. From Exit 152 it was a mile walk east into the rising

44 “Anti-MX flier,” South Dakota Peace and Justice Center folder; CDGA box “S”; SCPC.
46 Judith Miller noted before the election that in Montana it was the MX issue that was causing debate, not the freeze, “Nuclear Freeze Debate Important in a few Races,” New York Times 19 Oct. 1982, p A18; 57 percent of the voters voted for 91, see “Montana Citizens to End the Arms Race,” information pamphlet, n.d.; CNGA Collection “M”; SCPC.
sun. Many of the protestors carried Easter lilies, some played trumpets, others lofted banners while some sang. Following the frontage road the processional had to take a sharp left, due north, to reach the access road that would actually lead to E-5, but it was not much of a walk and once the turn was made they could see the Air Force security and state police that awaited them. They were not deterred. In fact they had expected some sort of official presence, though perhaps not so many troopers. The Reverend Carl Kline, group leader, had actually met with the Ellsworth Base Commander on Good Friday to inform the Air Force of the group’s intent. The goal, Kline would later say, was in keeping with the Gandhian tradition of non-violence and of having adversaries, not enemies. “The intent is not to surprise your opponent and in fact the intent is to broadcast as loudly as possible what it is that you are doing and why you are doing it and be prepared to take the consequences of your own actions.”

Four of the protestors, including Kline, were prepared to accept the consequences of what they knew they were going to do. They had long since planned to enter Minuteman site E-5, to climb over the fence and sit on the silo lid. But the warning they had provided the Base meant they would not get that opportunity. Instead, a string of police ringed the missile site and the four were arrested for stepping over an invisible 25-foot perimeter that was technically a military no-mans land. It was South Dakota’s first organized protest against the Minuteman; it would hardly be the last. Kline and others would thus inaugurate an annual “Easter Lily Peace Project.”

Marvin Kammerer hung back that morning. He had no intention of being arrested but was interested in supporting Kline. The two had met at the Survival Gathering two years before and had formed a strong friendship. In fact it was at the Gathering that Kline had

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47 Carl Kline, interview with author, July 2006, author’s possession, p. 4.
learned of the Minutemen and realized that direct action in the missile fields was one way of registering protest with failed government policies. For example Kline connected the near-annual Easter protests to concerns about land and agriculture: “The arms race is beginning to have a visible and alarming impact on our South Dakota way of life…” Kline argued, echoing the language of the Survival Gathering. “To a greater extent than is ever publicly acknowledged, farmers are watching their land slip away because our society is subsidizing the producers of weapons at the expense of the producers of food. We are converting butter into guns, we are choosing death over life.” And death, according to Carl Kline, looked an awful lot like a Minuteman missile silo.

It was a story echoed across the Plains as local social justice groups took notice of the bombs in their backyards. In Montana the Silence One Silo campaign, based at the Hastingses ranch, was a hybrid form of activism, drawing from Christian pacifism, political opposition, and agrarian populism. The group did not want to use the missile silo only as a site of personal witness, but as a location for organizing broader awareness and action – thus the creation of the peace camp. Like its counterpart in South Dakota, Silence One Silo tended to play down its connections to the broader peace movement and instead emphasized rural, agrarian interests. For Silence One Silo the threat was not so much bureaucratic control from Washington, but “bigness” in any form: military, corporate, agribusiness. By cycling ideas of militarism, weapons and defense spending into the narrative of agricultural crisis and difficulty, activists tried to make personal connections for people who had not spent a lot of time contemplating nuclear annihilation. It became a choice between a way of life and support of the Pentagon.

48 “Subsidizing Certain Silos,” March 1985, SDPJC Newsletter; SDPJC folder; CDGA box “S”;SCPC.
49 Religious protest looked towards personal experience and witness in antinuclear actions, see discussion from “Heefner” Missile Next Door of the Plowshares movement.
Silence One Silo drew connections to the sterile, useless piece of silo land and what could be a thriving, complete ranch and then extended these connections out to the ruin of the farm and rural life. The Air Force had mismanaged the land, Silence One Silo insisted. It was time to take it back.

This is “a project for Montanans,” Silence One Silo’s information pamphlet asserted. “This [campaign] would show that Montanans that we don’t have to be chips in the gamble with our lives.” Silence One Silo established a peace camp in the middle of the Prairie where people could come and learn about the arms race and, if they chose, protest at the missile site. Most people came to observe the missile silos, to learn about peace and justice, to work with area farmers and educate people about nuclear weapons. But others came to scale the fence, to place their bodies between missiles and their targets. From 1982 to 1985, over a dozen people would be arrested at silo R-29.\(^{50}\) The basic idea was to work together for as long as it took (five years was one thought) to reclaim “one acre of land to domestic production.”\(^{51}\) Any and all tactics were welcome. Silence One Silo, in fact, hoped to purchase some of the Hastingses land – the parcel adjacent to the missile silo – so that peace activists could have a permanent base camp that would not “tax the goodwill of the Hastings and other farm families.”\(^{52}\) Neither of Silence One Silo’s goals came to pass – the money couldn’t be raised and the missiles wouldn’t budge – but that did not stop the group from waging peace against the Minutemen.

\(^{50}\) Summary of SOS actions and ideas is found in “History in a nutshell,” SOS Spring 1984 newsletter, p. 2; SOS; SCPC. In 1982, three were arrested: Anderlik and Zanzing in June, and Linda Greenwald on Nov. 2 (election day); in 1983 five were arrested for crossing the silo: John Worcester on 16 February, Jim Wienberg on 22 June, Nigel Cottier and Will Kerling on Oct. 24; 5 others were arrested for getting too close to the silo, including Sam Day. In August 1985 Thorton Kimes was arrested for entering the site.

\(^{51}\) “Silence One Silo” information brochure, n.d.; SOS; SCPC.

\(^{52}\) References to purchasing land run throughout SOS newsletters – see especially Winter 83-84 newsletter, p. 6; SOS; SCPC. That newsletter notes that original plans were to purchase the entire ranch, 440 acres, but that it was now considered more realistic to purchase a small parcel near the silo. Day mentions that SOS was trying to raise $500,000 for the purpose, “Restless Ranchers,” p. 25.
While the antimissile movement remained small it was significant in that it ruptured decades of complacency. No matter how small, cracks had opened; fissures found. A significant hurdle had been overcome – once the fences were crossed, once dozens of people gathered at their gates – the missiles did, in fact, lose some of their mystique. While ranchers such as Gene S. Williams had for decades been sidling up next to the missile fences in their daily work, the conscious vigil signified a shift in focus. Missiles would no longer be ignored, their preservation could no longer be taken for granted.

The final missile protest in South Dakota would take place in June 1989, just a year before residents learned they would finally be freed of their Minutemen. Not because of Carl Kline and Marvin Kammerer, but because of the START I Treaty. Signed in July 1991 the Treaty between the US and Soviets required the dismantling of the nation’s Minuteman II missiles. In Missouri protests continued until the day the Minutemen came out; in October 1991 Knob Noster State Park was to be the site of another pre-vigil rally as protestors went out into the missile fields.53 In North Dakota peace camps were called throughout the early 1990s. And of course in the Warren AFB missile fields – eventually home to the MX – protests continued into the new millennium.

The antimissile movement was successful because it remained local, deeply tied to community issues. Unlike previous years (or decades for that matter), a coalition of grassroots social justice activists had come together that could sustain this sort of radical activism. The issues that brought them together – uranium mining, antinuclear sentiment, and agricultural crisis – would morph over time, but antimissile activism itself had long been conceived in terms of social justice issues. It could morph as well. The missiles

53 “A Call to Action” Missouri Peace Planters flyer for October 1991; “Nukewatch” file; Nukewatch Archive.
became the obvious flash points of all that was wrong in places like South Dakota, of all
the negative outside influences that had damaged the “land of infinite variety.” Perhaps as
Kline had hoped, the missiles had become, at least for some people, points of obvious
contemplation, the very direct and physical manifestations of war in the heartland.

The power and potential of these social justice and antinuclear movements have long
been invisible because of the perceived Reagan landslide in the rural West. As a result
we have failed to appropriately understand the sort of grassroots energy that is again
asserting political power in this country. An energy that is reflected in headlines that
scream of a new “prairie populism,” or of a “new Western man” capable of taking on the
Republican Party. But rather than a resurgence or great awakening, this latest cycle of
rural grassroots politicking is merely part of a longer continuum of contestation in the
rural West. The reality is that Marvin Kammerer never went away, despite the fact that he
long lamented that national politics had left his ilk to rot. In fact Kammerer himself holds
the same disdain for Washington insiders as he does for uranium mining CEOs. He
begrudgingly admits that he and his conservative neighbors probably have more in
common than the outsiders who like to lay claim to their politics. Kammerer still attends
zoning meetings, he writes editorials, he holds meetings on his ranch. He votes. He hangs
signs on air force fences.

The allegiances and alliances of these “rural radicals,” to borrow Cathy Stock’s
phrase, are certainly fickle. But they are rooted in a longstanding mistrust of outsiders
and distance. They are rooted in a faith in small “d” democrats and democracy. Perhaps
more importantly this movement is also far more egalitarian and open-minded than its

54 Mary Clark Jalonick, “Populist Democrat Wins Montana Seat,” Boston Globe, 8 Nov. 2006; Mark
historical predecessors. It is not as stuck in the past as it may seem. The new prairie politics – that of Marvin Kammerer’s strain – is interested in racial and environmental justice alongside economic justice. It is less interested in scape-goating and “othering” than in forging new community bonds. It is perhaps for these reasons that white rural ranchers would opt to vote for the first African Americans presidential candidate at all.