

Uncle Dave Foreman's
Around the Campfire
"The Angry West"

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The Angry West: 'Get Off Our Backs, Uncle Sam.'
—*Newsweek* cover, 1979

Beginning with this *Newsweek* cover story in 1979 (complete with a clenched-jawed Marlboro Man on horseback),¹ ill-informed East Coast journalists began to peddle the carefully fermented whine of the Western economic elite that "The West" was dead set against conservation and public lands.

¹ *Newsweek*, September 17, 1979.

Of all the lies, myths, and blather that come from the anticonservationists, this “War on the West” bullshit most ticks me off, probably because of my personal history. I’m sick and tired of scheming industry, pandering politicians, whiny rednecks, and benighted East Coast journalists playing the victimized West card. I was born in New Mexico; my family homesteaded here 100 years ago. I am a Westerner, by damn, and I know how phony the “War on the West” claims are.

In the last “Around the Campfire,” I wrote about anti-public land bullies during the first half of the twentieth century. What we have been hearing about the “War on the West” since the 1970s is just the continuation of Barrett’s “Wild West Show,” resurrecting the effective victimization cry behind earlier attacks on the public lands. In this “Campfire,” we’ll take on the advertising-like spin of the keystone sob of western anticonservationists. In my forthcoming *War on Nature* book and perhaps in future

“Campfires” I’ll delve more into the anticonservation movement.

The War on the West rhetoric makes it sound like nearly all westerners and rural folks dislike wilderness area designation, protection of endangered species, reintroduction of wolves and other carnivores, and public lands in general, including national parks and national forests.

The truth is that a loud and big-bucks-mighty minority, some of their employees, their beholden politicians, and a small number of throwback ranchers and fearful populists (bumpkin proletarians) do oppose protection of public land, *but* most of the folks in the West—urban and rural—prize public lands and find them to be a vital part of what makes the West the West. Nonetheless, the “War on the West” claim is made so often and so shrilly that many fall for it—even in the West, even among a few newly arrived or naive conservationists. Karl Hess Jr. warns that “wise-users have sunk their roots in agrarian tradition and

righteously demanded that the West be preserved exclusively for westerners, a catch phrase that roughly translates into ranchers, loggers, and miners.”²

Some academics also fall into this trap, with one western cow-college political scientist offering such claptrap as “The idea of wilderness has always been advanced by those who can afford it, not by those who live in it.”³ Based on my lifetime in the West, I'd say this comment reveals the professor as the true elitist outsider who doesn't know what he's talking about. As far back as you wish to go in the history of wilderness area protection, Westerners with thorough knowledge of the land have been the muddy-boots-on-the-ground experts as well as much of the leadership for the designation of national parks and wilderness areas. Who has it been for over one hundred years to explore the back of beyond, draw the map boundaries based on

² Karl Hess Jr., “A West Without Heroes,” unpublished draft in author's files.

³ Philip Brick, “Taking Back the Rural West,” in *Let the People Judge: Wise Use and the Private Property Rights Movement*, edited by John Echeverria and Raymond Booth Eby (Island Press, Washington, DC, 1995) 62.

their footwork, give the talks and slide shows, and work their tails off to push agencies and politicians to safeguard wild places? It has overwhelmingly been locals. Even in the 1970s campaign for the Alaska Lands Act where Nature lovers from all over the country came out in support, much of the knowledge and leadership was from Fairbanks, Juneau, Anchorage, and the bush.

And let's quit being silly about elitism. Just about anybody can afford to go to nearby wilderness areas. For example, anyone in Albuquerque with bus fare can easily and quickly get to a trailhead for the Sandia Mountains Wilderness Area. I was dirt-poor in my late-teens to thirties, as were my friends, yet we got to wildernesses all over the United States.⁴ Loggers, ranchers, and bulldozer jockeys had newer pickups and made plenty more money than most of my band of wilderness warriors. The difference was that they

⁴ Truth be told, it was marrying a nurse, Nancy Morton, that got me out of poverty.

endlessly blubbered about their economic “plight” to anyone who would listen, while we just went on with our modest lives, figuring that only people of low character whined about such things. Overall, conservationists are middle-class. Well-to-do conservationists do exist, of course, but an honest person can’t build the elitist claim on those few. It’s the dishonest and ill informed who have cooked up such a falsehood. Gobbling up such whoppers are the anti-intellectual and paranoid set who weave them into outlandish conspiracy theories.⁵

University of Wyoming political scientist McGreggor Cawley also muddles things when he writes about President Jimmy Carter's 1977 bid to kill eight pork-barrel water projects in the West: “Immediate reaction throughout the West portrayed Carter's move

⁵ I’ve written about the bumpkin proletariat before (“The Dark Side of American Populism,” *Wild Earth* 13-2/3 Summer/Fall 2003, 2-5, 80-81) and will in future Campfires look more closely at anticonservation conspiracy mongers and anti-intellectuals.

as a direct attack on the region.”⁶ What the professor doesn't fully explain is that this “immediate reaction” came from the irrigation elite and their political thralls, not from the common citizens of the West, who were mixed in their reactions.⁷ For over a decade, many of us Westerners had been fighting the welfare dams Carter ditched. In fact, opposition to these water projects originated with homegrown western conservation groups, river runners, and sport fishers—not with President Carter. I know. I was there helping to spark the fight six years before Carter's action. Those hooked on dams and canals, along with slapdash reporters, successfully spun Carter's action as something suddenly sprung on “the West” from the District of Columbia. They overlooked public meetings,

⁶ R. McGregor Cawley, *Federal Land Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion & Environmental Politics* (The University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1993), 82.

⁷ Even generally noble and farsighted politicians, like Colorado Governor Dick Lamm, jumped on Carter. Few, if any, western politicians were brave enough to stand against the western water establishment. Mark Twain wisely noted that in the West, whiskey was for drinking and water was for fighting over.

demonstrations, and detailed comments on water-project environmental impact statements (EISs) from local river lovers. In 1971, I started working against Cochiti Dam on the Rio Grande.⁸ In 1973, I sent out the invitation letter for a Denver meeting that organized the American Rivers Conservation Alliance (now American Rivers). So I have some understanding of what was going on. Carter's action came in big part from those of us in the West who fought dams, not bow-tied policy wonks on the Potomac.

We western conservationists know all this (or should!), but the news media slights us in order to tell a more red-hot story. A good example of how the establishment media turns its ear from those who don't fit into the "War on the West" myth they wish to keep going comes from Larry Calloway, New Mexico's most distinguished and reliable journalist (now retired). In 1996 he reported in his newspaper column,

⁸ The colonel in charge of the Albuquerque office of the Corps of Engineers admitted to me that Cochiti Dam was a boondoggle, but that it was too far along to stop it then. It was then that I became a cynical realist, at the beginning of my conservation life.

“We think it's wonderful!” said Celeste Bernards, co-owner of [Escalante's] only outdoor sports outfitter. “It's good for us. It's good for the community. Our business here is catering to tourism, and we've broken our butts for eight years to build a store!”

But she said, with some bitterness, that she's expressed this opinion to at least 20 journalists and never seems to make the news because, “They want to hear the dirt, and we're positive about it.”⁹

Bernards was talking about the Escalante-Grand Staircase National Monument in Utah, which got loads of coverage in the mid-1990s as a showcase study of government brutality on rural communities. The national media have puffed up this “War on the West” fairy tale, and land barons and industry bigwigs must be chortling about what naive city slickers reporters are. (Many local opponents of the Escalante-Grand

⁹ Larry Calloway, “Monument Aftermath,” *Albuquerque Journal*, October 20, 1996.

Staircase National Monument are now happy with the deal.)

War-on-the-West flimflam was blown out of the water once again in 1995 with a survey to measure support for reintroduction of the Mexican wolf in New Mexico. Jerry Maracchini, New Mexico Game and Fish Director, killed a contract to poll New Mexicans and then publicly opposed wolf reintroduction because “local support in those counties with the best potential wolf habitat is practically non-existent.”¹⁰ Unbowed, wolf supporters raised private money and the League of Women Voters commissioned the polling firm, Responsive Management, to go ahead. “The results of the poll came as a surprise to some state officials who expected stiffer opposition in rural counties.”¹¹ Why? Well, 61 percent statewide and 49.5 percent in four rural counties near the wolf release area favored

¹⁰ Associated Press, “N.M. won't back reintroduction of gray wolf,” *Albuquerque Tribune*, November 2, 1995.

¹¹ Mike Taugher, “Poll: Rural Residents Back N.M. Wolf Release,” *Albuquerque Journal*, December 6, 1995.

reintroduction of Mexican wolves in the Apache National Forest.¹² Practically non-existent local support?

Of course, the livestock industry (not representing all ranchers, by the way) wailed their disbelief. Mike Duda, executive director of Responsive Management, explained that like results had been found elsewhere. For example, 60 percent of rural residents in Idaho and Montana backed reintroduction of the grizzly bear to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area, despite strong opposition from the two states' politicians; and 75 percent of the residents around the Osceola National Forest in northern Florida favored reintroduction of the Florida panther. Duda said, "What I think it means is that a small minority, the unenvironmental extremists, are so vocal that they appear to represent a larger portion of the population than they really do."¹³

¹² Tony Davis, "Poll: N.M. likes wolves but not public funding," *The Albuquerque Tribune*, December 2, 1995.

¹³ Keith Easthouse, "Pollster: Wolf sentiment probably skewed," *The New Mexican*, November 3, 1995.

Duda could not be more right.

The myth that the West and rural America are wholly against wolves, wilderness, and public lands is a bald-faced, self-serving, conscious lie. It has been shown wrong time after time. Nineteenth-century economic and political elite in the West pretends to speak for the rest of us. They do not. Nonetheless, greenhorns who write for the national media eat it up and serve it to their readers.

Of course there is angry opposition to protection of public lands and wildlife in the West. But despite its noise, it does not represent the majority. For over 100 years there have been homegrown conservationists fighting the foes of conservation. That is the real story.

One of the best observations on the whole Western myth was written in 1979 by a thoughtful East Coast journalist:

There is something quaint about the Westerner's insistence that he built the place all by his lonesome,

with no help from God or the socialistic East....The myth is that men were brave, women were fair and life was sweet before the tea-sipping, paper-pushing dudes from Washington started butting in.

The author? George Will, commenting on the Sagebrush Rebellion appropriately in the 1979 “Angry West” issue of *Newsweek*.¹⁴

Nearly three decades later, little has changed. I’ve been closely watching the ongoing use of “War on the West” during this time. I believe that the overriding reason it still has legs is because the mainstream East Coast media have fallen for the myth and endlessly parrot it. Both print and electronic news media have been grossly unprofessional and irresponsible in not digging deeper and talking to a wider sweep of westerners. If reporters and other journalists would do the job they’re supposed to do, the stories would be about exposing the falseness of “War on the West.”

¹⁴ George F. Will, “Wagons In A Circle,” *Newsweek*, September 17, 1979.

One reason the media have been so sloppy with this issue, however, is that we—pro-public lands westerners—have let them get away with it. We have not been loud enough, persistent enough, and *angry* enough to set the record straight. It's high time that conservationists quit being cowed by the “quaint” myth and damn it as the lie it is. We must endlessly straighten out the reporters, publications, and bloggers who stupidly repeat it. By roaring about this and other anticonservation myths and lies we will crack through the numbskulls in the media and make it more likely that our side is told, too. Remember that every time the “War on the West” Myth is repeated in public it gains more credibility. Our task as conservationists is to never allow it to go unchallenged. It's high time for angry conservationists.

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