

# THE UNITED STATES ARMY VS. RAG-TAG RANCHERS

*In Southeastern Colorado, Don Quixote wins one...for now.*

Tonya Morton

It's always newsworthy when the little guy wins. It doesn't happen often; in fact, it happens so rarely that over time cynics can begin to think maybe it never happens at all. Or else, that maybe it used to happen, in the days when Mr. Smith went to Washington and Atticus Finch warned young Scout that it was a sin to kill a mockingbird—but, surely, not now. Not anymore. This just isn't the time for "little guys." And so, when the military base at Fort Carson announced in 2007 that it planned to expand its Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site to fill the Southeastern portion of Colorado, wiping 17,000 small ranchers and farmers from the landscape and stripping their communities down to ghost towns, who would have believed that anyone—much less a ragtag coalition of rural folks—could stop them?

It's a long drive from Trinidad, Colorado to Springfield, Colorado—roughly two hours across a flat, empty stretch of highway 160. Along that whole stretch, I may only see a couple pickup trucks stopped at a fence line or a lone tarantula ambling across the road ahead; I may watch massive thunderstorms form out of cumulus, let loose, and then dissipate into blue sky, all from a distance of a hundred miles. So, fighting off the lull of highway hypnosis, I often resort to counting just how many signs perch along the highway reading "This Land Not for Sale to the Army" or else, in a simple painted scrawl, "Not 4 Sale."

Southeastern Colorado doesn't attract many tourists. And I can't imagine many environmentalist groups choose pictures of the dusty expanse of Las Animas County to grace the pages of their yearly calendars. But locals don't seem much to mind their isolation. Many of the ranches in the area have been passed down through five generations, and this sort of land breeds a type of personality that doesn't require much in the way of nightlife or espresso shops.

This area has everything to do with the past; almost certainly more travelers passed through on the Santa Fe Trail than do on today's highways. Dinosaur tracks and the remains of Comanche civilization are still scattered across the



and Conservation Colorado have joined; and both Colorado congressman John Salazar(D) and congresswoman Marilyn Musgrave(R) have lobbied their cause in Washington. For what may be the first time in history, the most radical lefties and the most radical righties could probably agree on one thing—no expansion for the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site.

For the Right, the primary issue is private property. The U.S. Army already made a huge land grab in this area in the 1980s to establish the initial PCMS; over half of the 235,896 acres were acquired through eminent domain. What better symbol is there for "big government" than Uncle Sam stealing away the family farm? For the left, the primary issue is environmental destruction. The army would literally be conducting warfare on a fragile ecosystem, running tanks over wildlife habitats and setting off live fire weapons on an unsuspecting animal population. In a leaked army report from 2004 on the possibilities for the proposed expansion, the author stated that the land would be suitable for conducting tests with all current weapon systems short of the Patriot Missile. For everybody in the middle, the biggest issue is why the government even needs the land. The army admits that the PCMS, in its current incarnation, is hardly used more than once or twice a year. The primary benefit of the land in Southeastern Colorado is its similarity to the steppes of Afghanistan, and thus its suitability for training brigades on rotation out of the Middle East; but, considering the army could fit the entire metropolitan area of Kabul into the current PCMS twice over, it's difficult to understand how more land could substantially affect

their ability to train.

And the biggest argument against the expanded PCMS? Like everything else in this ancient place, it comes down to the past—though, in this case, the not-so-distant past. The army promised in the early 1980s that it would not expand beyond the borders of the initial PCMS. So, when they now promise no further expansion beyond the 100,000 additional acres they've requested, who can believe them? Especially since a leaked army map from 2004 shows a plan for graduated

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ground. By and large, the residents lead the same lives as their grandparents, running cattle along the same fence lines, over the same harsh land. But such isolation is also vulnerability; when grasslands are under attack, it's hard to stir up much environmentalist fervor. The plains don't lend themselves to mountain biking and kayaking; not to mention, they are populated by ranchers—a historic enemy of the spotted owl-defending type. And, on the other side, it just isn't good Republican business sense to defend a land on which most of those ranchers operate at a financial loss. So, when word came down that the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site was expanding again, the bulk of the fight was left to the small population of people who own the land under threat.

If, somewhere along the 122-mile stretch of open highway, a driver needs food, the place to stop is at the Kim Outpost. Literally, it's the only place. And, in addition to being the only restaurant in Kim, Colorado—a small town of sixty-four people—the Kim Outpost is also the birthplace of the Pinon Canyon Expansion Opposition Coalition. (That's where all those ranchers buy their "Not 4 Sale" signs.) The PCEOC is about as "grassroots" as any opposition can be. Yet, considering the lack of financial resources and general population to sustain it, the movement against the expansion of Pinon Canyon has so far been quite a success. The PCEOC has created strange alliances: The Colorado Cattleman's Association has joined in their cause, as have the Colorado Springs and Pueblo branches of the Sierra Club; the Citizens for Peace in Space and the Ark Valley Auto Dealers Association have lent their support; members of the National Rifle Association

expansion up to 7 million acres, with the parcel the army is currently seeking labeled "section 1a." And, when the army promises economic growth to the local communities, residents recall how Col. Earl Burley in 1981 promised that, of the money generated by the army, somewhere between 20 and 84 percent would stay in local economies—a statement that rings eerily when walking through the ghost towns at the edges of the current maneuver site. And, as for the reimbursements offered by the government in lieu of lost property taxes? Southeastern Colorado residents know better than anyone that those are never, ever paid in full. Since the original land grab, the federal payments in lieu of taxes have never averaged more than 60% of full funding.

These arguments have all been parsed over and explained in town hall meetings, editorials in the local paper, even a youtube documentary. Ranchers aren't usually a group prone to demonstrations against the government, so many of their get-togethers have taken the form of county fairs and potlucks. But the small town feel of their work has only helped the group, as Fort Carson officials remain cozier than ever with the city of Colorado Springs. In 2008, seemingly shocked at the level of resistance from the rural towns they planned to destroy, the military hired a consulting firm out of Colorado Springs to help them salvage their image; the consulting firm sub-contracted out the work to a Pueblo-based PR firm, which began compiling polling and anecdotal data on the area's response to the proposed expansion. The recommendation of the PR firm? Reach out to the small communities and, especially, to their media outlets. But, two

years later, the Colorado Springs newspapers are still viewed by most as the pro-army mouthpiece and the *Pueblo Chieftain* and smaller papers in Trinidad and LaJunta—the papers read in towns like Kim—are still on the side of the ranchers. Last September, when a district judge rejected the army’s plans to expand training on their existing Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site, stating that the environmental impacts of such an expansion had not been fully taken into account, the *Pueblo Chieftain* editorial on the ruling was titled “Army Rebuffed.” The title of a *Colorado Springs Gazette* editorial on the same ruling? “Judge’s ruling underscores Army’s need for expanded Piñon Canyon.”

The main argument raised in the Colorado Springs papers and in the opinions of Army representatives is that willing sellers should be able to sell their land. The ranchers, they say, are creating a culture of fear among their communities, such that their neighbors who might want to sell are too intimidated to step forward. If the army is only courting willing sellers, they say, aren’t these ranchers standing in the way of people’s property rights? Sounds reasonable at first. Except that, as the ranchers reply, with each small ranch sold, a chunk of their community would disappear. A ranch owner, who pays property taxes, buys goods in the local economy, and sends his kids to the local schools, would be replaced by: nothing. At most, 60% of the loss in property taxes would be repaid through government payment in lieu of taxes. That’s not enough. Just the loss of a couple ranches could destroy a small community. Further, they argue, there’s no way the Army would be content to make up its training ground on a patchwork of

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willingly sold ranches. A few miles here and a few miles there, with miles of unusable private land in between, would be of no use to the military unless they are planning, later, to seize the remaining ranches through condemnation and eminent domain. It’s a perfectly logical argument and, as far as I know, the army has yet to refute it. Without eminent domain, the only hope for the military would be that, after a few land purchases, the sounds and stink of warfare on surrounding properties would eventually drive out the remaining ranchers—whose property, after the loss of their neighbors and the surrounding community, would have been devalued to practically nothing.

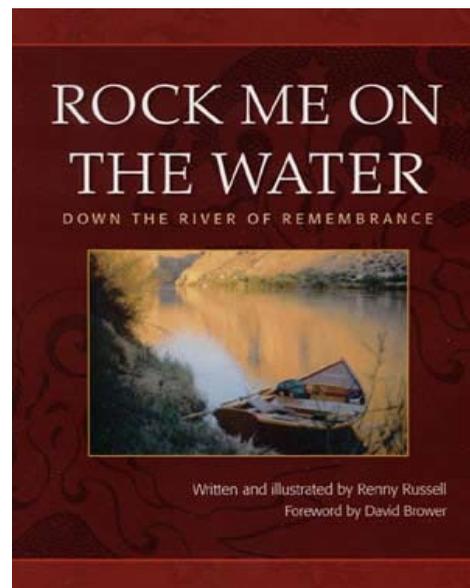
But, for now, the army won’t have a chance to test that theory. Though they certainly haven’t exhausted their tactics—as I write this, Fort Carson is expanding the number of troops who will train on the PCMS, building more housing and ramping up infrastructure, all likely in defiance of the district Judge’s order—the army has been crippled in its ability to pursue a land grab by three consecutive years of funding bans passed by the U.S. Congress, which prohibit any purchase of additional land for the Maneuver Site. The most recent ban, passed just last month, will be in effect for fiscal year 2011. For the moment, the ranchers have won.

And so time passes—more slowly, perhaps, out in the rural West, but still the passage of years since the beginning of the expansion fight has turned Americans’ interest away from Southeastern Colorado. The local Sierra Club chapter hasn’t updated its website in at least a year; Outside of the effected area, press coverage of Pinon Canyon has dwindled to practically nothing; and at least one Colorado Springs councilman has publicly dismissed the PCEOC as anti-army obstructionists who just can’t admit that the anti-expansion fight is over. “The rancher-activists evidently don’t just want the Army contained,” Councilman Sean Paige states in an editorial, “they want it kicked out” of Colorado. But if there’s one thing most of the citizens of Southeastern Colorado know, it’s that the federal government doesn’t need to be right to win; it just needs to outlast or outlive the opposition. The people can win a million battles, but the government only needs to win one—the last one. It’s a desperate fight, almost doomed to lose, as ranchers are driven out of business by financial hardship and the passing of generations—but, for now, the people of Southeastern Colorado still run their cows along the fences of Highway 160; they still celebrate each of their victories around the tables of the Kim Outpost; and, with their “Not 4 Sale” signs still proudly displayed, they keep their eyes to the West and await the next battle.



TONYA MORTON is a regular contributor to *The Zephyr*.

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