

# Scott Thompson (continued)

the local residents and environmental groups. And interestingly the Mormon Church, which on May 5, 1981, to the surprise of many, issued a document flatly opposing the project. Entitled the "First Presidency Statement," it included the following paragraph: "Our fathers came to this western area to establish a base from which to carry the gospel of peace to the peoples of the earth. It is ironic, and a denial of the very essence of that gospel, that in this same general area there should be constructed a mammoth weapons system potentially capable of destroying much of civilization."

Note this paragraph because we're coming back to it.

While a variety of factors tipped the scales against the MX, there is little doubt that the opposition of the Mormon Church was crucial. Consider the following from a news story, "Anti-MX Missile Stand Surprised Some Mormons, Too," in the May 2, 2011, edition of The Salt Lake Tribune: "While President Ronald Reagan had not yet tipped his hand, Utah's entire congressional delegation wanted the MX in Utah and Nevada. Nearly every elected state leader embraced the MX out of patriotic duty or the desire for economic development or both."

...



**But when it comes to protecting desert lands, especially in the Great Basin, the quoted paragraph from the First Presidency Statement is noteworthy. It declares "this western area," namely the Utah deserts, to be a sacred land dedicated for the propagation of peace.**

"According to polls at the time, support among Utahns for the MX deployment in the Great Basin had dropped from 80 percent to less than 50 percent by the spring of 1981. After the First Presidency's Statement, 75 percent of Utahns opposed the MX missile coming to the state's backyard."

"Mormons in Congress quickly reversed their support for bringing the MX to Utah and Nevada."

...

"The First Presidency's Statement 'meant a hell of a lot,' says Ed Firmage Sr., then a University of Utah law professor who was active in the anti-MX camp. 'It killed it.'"

Now I'm not an advocate for Mormonism. Once out of curiosity I tried reading the Book of Mormon but couldn't gain any traction in it. And while Mormon culture surely has its attractive features, as far as I can tell it is highly conservative in orientation with significant right wing leanings. Not friendly epistemological territory for the likes of me.

But when it comes to protecting desert lands, especially in the Great Basin, the quoted paragraph from the First Presidency Statement is noteworthy. It declares "this western area," namely the Utah deserts, to be a sacred land dedicated for the propagation of peace. For that land to be dedicated instead to the propagation of massive death was too much for these Mormon leaders to swallow. In their integrity they could not condone such a desecration.

Good for them.

So that's our next irony: that it took a conservative-to-right-wing religious organization to save the desert valleys that made Great Basin National Park possible.

I know of no other Judeo-Christian religion or denomination with any meaningful power that is willing to treat any stretch of wild land in North America as sacred. You have to turn to indigenous cultures to find this kind of wisdom, which is why I pay so much attention to them.

That said let's explore the meaning of "sacred land," which I believe is paradoxical. In a number of stories I've said that the wildness of the land or in this case desert land is sacred. This expression is my effort to redress our civilization's lack of respect and concern for undomesticated ecosystems and landscapes it isn't using for self-serving purposes. But even though calling wild land sacred may be useful, doing so creates an artificial separation between the land itself and us. Because strictly speaking there is no such separation. We ARE that desert sunset that we see and when we gaze at it, our own eyes are gazing back at us. I believe that the paradox of knowing not simply that the land is sacred but that we ARE the land itself is much of indigenous spirituality.

Now for the final ironies in our story. Sadly it was Jimmy Carter, one of my very favorite Presidents because of his humility and near-prophetic insight, who supported the colossally destructive MX missile plan. And it was President Ronald Reagan who in 1981 finally axed that program. A weird irony for me because when I was a young man in the 1980s it was also Ronald Reagan who, with his inviting smile and cheery talk, tragically seduced the American public into embracing market fundamentalism and into brushing aside crucial environmental concerns. I witnessed all of that, including the lasting aftereffects. Even today our most powerful institutions as well as a critical mass of the public remain committed to Reagan's essential legacy.

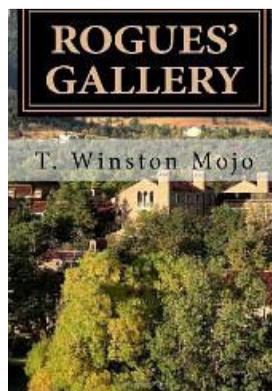
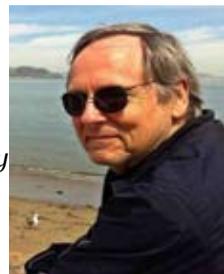
With climate change coming right at us, well...that's bad.

And now for the crowning irony: it was also Ronald Reagan who in 1986 signed the bill creating Great Basin National Park. Of course the Gipper had to leave his right wing thumbprint on the park by insisting (1) that the park boundaries exclude private mining claims and other private land and (2) that grazing continue unabated within the park boundaries. But he did sign the bill.

The takeaway hypothesis from all this is that sometimes people who do REALLY good things are those we have the least countenance with.

*Note - I have gratefully utilized Gretchen M. Baker's Great Basin National Park: A Guide to the Park and Surrounding Area, published in 2012 by the Utah State University Press, as a key source in writing this story.*

*Furthermore: to all you citizens of Baker, Nevada, I stand ready to apologize in writing if I have inaccurately claimed that a top-grade cup of mocha latte is not available to the public at a reasonable price in your town.*



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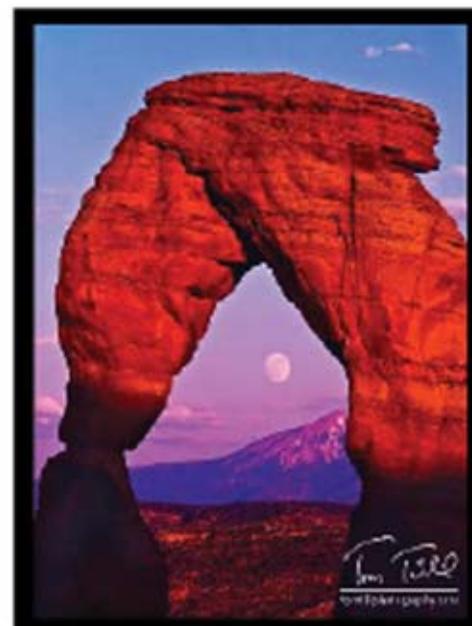


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