



Cold War in a Cold Land: Fighting Communism on the Northern Plains

by David W. Mills.

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Most historians of the Cold War gloss over its domestic effects in the continental United States. However, David Mills (Minnesota West Technical and Community College) has now written a study of the impact of the Cold War on America's Northern Plains region. He notes that residents of the area, though not isolationists, opposed US entry into the First and Second World Wars; in both cases, however, once war was declared they supported the government and its wartime policies. So, too, during the Cold War, citizens of the Northern Plains states complied with a will to the US government's specific demands, particularly as the nation's defense strategy came to include the basing of missiles with nuclear warheads. The Cold War brought several benefits to the Northern Plains: military installations meant increased economic activity in local communities and defense contracts spurred the growth of associated industries and boosted employment. Further, funding became available for major, often university-based, scientific research.

The earliest effects of the Cold War in the Northern Plains were more ideological than military. Mills argues that, while the region in general did not overreact to the Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s, several states began to require their government employees to swear a loyalty oath. Anti-communist legislation restricted the formation or growth of communist and other radical organizations. This occurred without specific guidance from Washington. Again, such measures were no more prevalent than in other parts of the nation.

Religion, specifically Christianity, played a significant role in the Northern Plains as throughout the country in the fight against "godless communism." Church revivals drew large crowds and, Mills argues, reinforced the importance of individual rights. He observes that this brand of engaged Christianity stressed the civil freedoms of the individual over the social issues that so preoccupied the more dominant counterculture movement of the 1960s. Besides supporting religious events, residents of the Northern Plains also attended government-sponsored events that contrasted the personal freedoms guaranteed in foundational documents like the Declaration of Independence with the suppression of individual rights in the Soviet Union.

While the people of the Northern Plains were certainly patriotic, average citizens could do little to support the cause directly. This stood in sharp contrast to the Second World War era, when the federal government made far greater demands on the American people. Northern Plains people did, however, actively participate in the Cold War by serving with the Ground Observer Corps (GOC), a small program soon made obsolete by the creation of a large radar infrastructure. Nonetheless,

For many communities, it was a matter of pride to build an observation post out of donated funds, labor, and materials and then operate the site with volunteers. The air force paid for the telephones and the cost of the calls, but the volunteers paid for the observation towers, their furnishings, and all utilities. It was amazing that some posts operated at all. New Hradec, North Dakota, a town of 35 residents, accomplished what seemed impossible by establishing an observation post that required a staff of 100 members. Residents recruited volunteers from outlying areas and swelled the ranks of observers to 125. (139)

Ground Observer Corps volunteers notified Air Force officials in the region, if they spotted an unknown plane. The GOC was the advanced warning system precursor of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, activated in the late 1950s. Most civil defense programs failed for lack of resources, but the GOC benefited from the active participation of civilians and adequate funding.

Mills also discusses various efforts states made to encourage their residents to build bomb shelters on their own initiative. Regional and federal governments were unwilling to provide the resources to finance such projects and individuals were seldom willing to invest their own money to build them, even in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the Air Force increased its presence in the Northern Plains as it began to add missiles to its arsenal. Local governments, Mills contends, at first welcomed the construction of missile facilities because the infusion of cash that came with them benefited their constituents. But after the construction was complete, the ongoing employment of locals at the missile sites provided meager economic stimulus to the surrounding community.

Although missile construction projects were mostly uncontroversial, one project troubled many people. The Safeguard Anti-Ballistic Missile program, begun in the middle 1960s, was designed to create bases housing radar stations and missiles capable of destroying Soviet missiles. Many in the Northern Plains worried that such a base in North Dakota would make the neighboring region a target in any nuclear exchange with the USSR. In addition, some residents of the area felt that farmers were not being offered sufficient compensation for their land. Others welcomed the idea of a major base and invested in enlarging public schools, building more housing, and expanding their commercial outlets.

In the event, political and diplomatic conditions changed with the advent of *détente* in the early 1970s: the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty curtailed the Safeguard program and the North Dakota base never went active. Residents who had backed it felt betrayed, because the investments they had made in their community would never come to fruition.

David Mills's detailed and effective treatment of the Northern Plains' experience of the Cold War will make instructive reading for historians and interested lay persons alike.