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Review of *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* by R. Gregg Cawley

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Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics. R. McGreggor Cawley. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. xi+195 pp. \$29.95 cloth, (ISBN 0-7006-0613-0).

The public policy issue this book explores is a continuing one, especially after the Republican take-over of Congress in 1994. In a sense, then, this study of the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s and 1980s is incomplete. It seems clear that the issue, governmental control and use of the public lands of twelve western states, will change—perhaps radically.

Yet, the book is an important study of a highly volatile public issue in the West, and gives us an understanding of its dimensions no matter what turn policy or public indignation will take. A crucial part of that understanding is the author's point of view, seeing the issue of who shall control huge tracts of public lands, state or federal governments, from the side of the state rebels. As a more conservative, state's rights philosophy finds power in Congress, with an obvious reflection in executive actions, it seems crucial that this side should be well understood, without detracting from the compelling arguments of environmentalists and others who oppose handing the federal land over to states.

It was a belief that the environmental movement was in the "ascendancy" throughout the 1970s, producing an "unacceptable burden of regulations" for the private interests who wish to lease or develop mineral resources on public lands. According to Cawley this led to the Sagebrush Rebellion (p. 4). The rebellion was manifested in minor civil disobedience actions, conferences, polemics, legal actions, and a great deal of commotion. It attracted the support of President Ronald Reagan who promptly confused the situation by putting forward a "Good Neighbor" policy of less arrogant land managers and a move to privatize the land by selling the federal estate to help retire the federal debt. Neither rebels nor environmentalists agreed to the latter. "Whereas Sagebrush Rebels were attempting to rearrange power

relationships within the public land policy arena, privatization advocates wanted to eliminate the arena altogether” (p. 142). The environmental community flatly opposed privatization, although they may soon face another, stronger version of it.

As Cawley points out, invigorated environmental groups appeared to win the struggle during Reagan’s years. The rebellion died out, two cabinet members, James Watts of Interior and Anne Gorsuch Burford of the Environmental Protection Agency, were forced out, and privatization lost. A coordinated environmental political agenda led to overt aid for favored Congressional candidates, with important success.

Yet, the battle left a “confusing political undertow” to national policy, Cawley notes (p. 154). Environmental groups took a more pragmatic approach following Reagan’s overwhelming victory in 1986 and suffered a split between radical action groups and the mainline, more bureaucratic organizations. And, while the rebellion essentially disappeared from public attention, it still left a mark on the policy landscape. Reagan’s pro-development stance didn’t change, though he was unable to broadly institute it. This showed that conservation of public land resources will be variously defined, and argued, and that neither side has won a final and lasting victory. For Cawley, that leaves plenty of room for future maneuvering, and the 1994 election makes that obvious. **Francis Moul**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.