

# THE GREAT American LAND GRAB

The Clinton administration's lands-locked legacy may be undone before it is even fully recognized as a sinister plan to manipulate the population and the economy of the United States. By Tim Findley

A RANGE PUBLICATION

At the beginning of the Clinton administration, the United States government owned more than 630 million acres of the nation's land mass, most of it west of the Rockies. Combined with state-owned land, military bases and Indian reservations, it represented the largest percentage of government-controlled property of any non-communist country in the world, including Russia.

Although challenged in the 1970s by the so-called "Sagebrush Rebellion," most in the West remained satisfied with the multiple use of federal land that allowed production and profit from timber, mining and grazing under federal management. Because most of the land remained remote, but open to recreation, "ownership" was seldom at issue among political leaders or the generally urban populations on the coasts.

"Environmentalism" had been steadily rising as a cause among urban activists since it was inherited as part of the general mistrust of the industrial "establishment" in the 1960s. By the late 1980s, aided by the



THE WEST IN 2001.  
SHRINKING PRIVATE  
LANDS AND EXPANDING  
WILDERNESS HABITAT.  
"GROPING OUR WAY  
BACK TO 1492?"  
OR IS IT SOMETHING  
CLOSER TO GEORGE  
ORWELL'S "1984"?

influx of funding from foundations that usually derived their wealth from the underpinnings of the establishment itself, the cause of protecting the environment from pollution and destruction had become a morally-based crusade, with detractors limited to questioning some methods, but seldom the cause itself.

In 1990, the Sierra Club, using Wisconsin-based research, identified what would become the icon of the movement and its inspiration in the use of litigation. The "endangered" Northern spotted owl rapidly emerged as the surrogate species for halting logging on federal properties, first among "old growth" forests in California, and eventually extending to at least 70 percent of forests throughout the West previously open to harvest.

The newly-elected President Bill Clinton, and Vice President Al Gore, acknowledged the economic impact of this on the timber industry in a series of "summit" meetings in 1992 that promised, but never delivered, a new "partnership" that



*President Clinton listens as Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt speaks at Hopi Point in Grand Canyon, Ariz. on Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2000. Clinton was visiting the Grand Canyon to dedicate three national monuments, the largest being a million-acre parcel of land along the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It was just the beginning. AP Photo/Matt York*

would allow timber harvesting to continue under terms that were more environmentally cautious.

Between the promises made at those summit meetings and the summer of 2000, more than 300 timber mills were closed in the northwestern states alone, some at the cost of economic catastrophe to entire towns. At least 130,000 people with jobs related to the timber industry were temporarily or permanently put out of work, effectively devastating an industry worth some \$4 billion to the national economy.

More importantly, the use of surrogate species, like the spotted owl, to establish zones of “critical habitat” made the Endangered Species Act the most powerful tool of executive authority in restricting land use.

Since 1990, timber harvest on federal land has declined from 12 billion board feet a year to barely 2.5 billion board feet in 2000.

In 1990, 596 species were listed as threatened or endangered in the U.S. By 1999, the list had grown to 1,205. In the West alone, “critical habitat” for those species is estimated to extend over more than 80 million acres. At the same time, active reintroduction of predatory species, primarily wolves and grizzly bears, was a federal priority in at least four west-

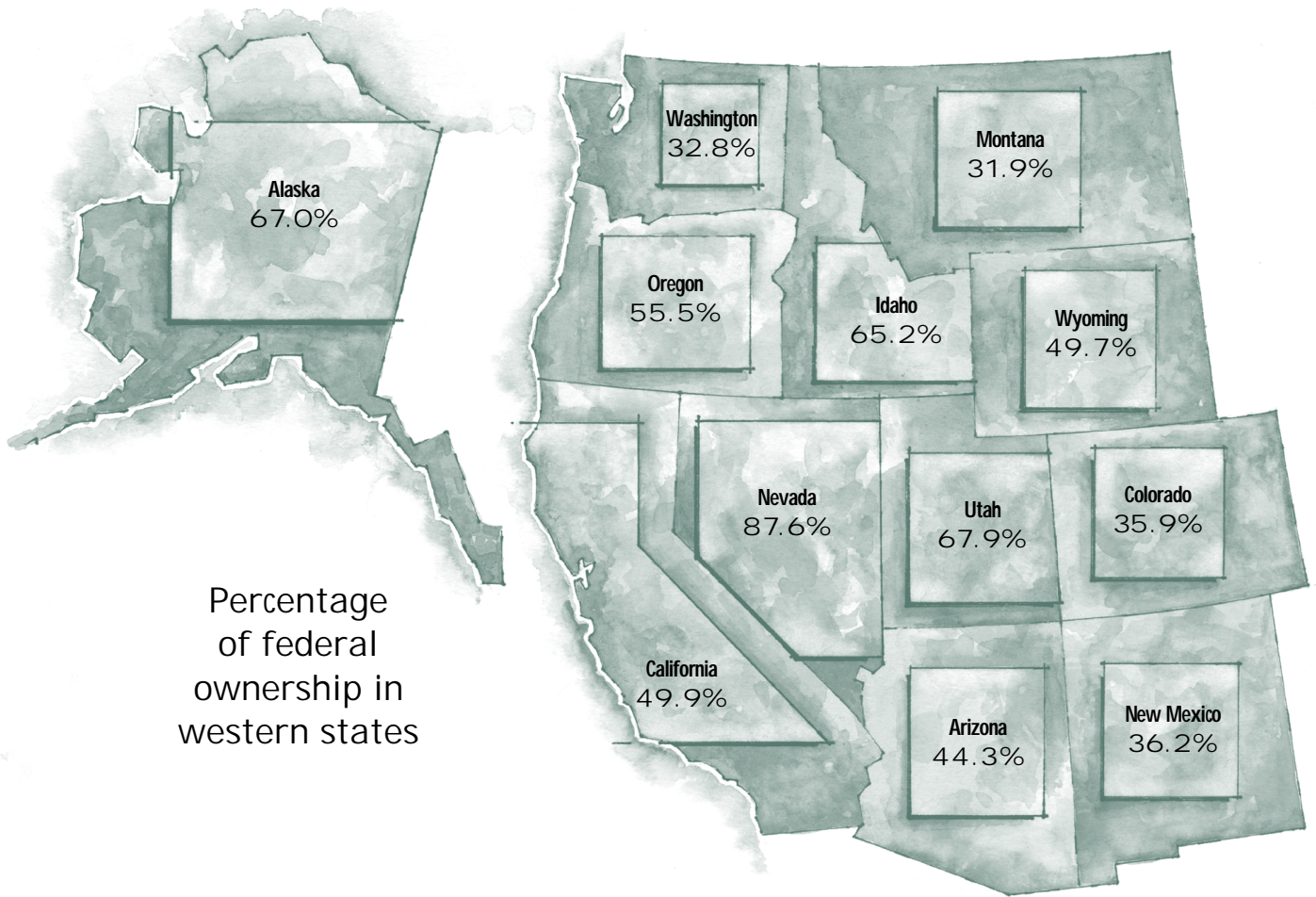
ern states. “Recovery” of both species proved so rapid that the endangered status of both is being reconsidered.

Established on record for its strong environmental stance by Vice President Gore’s campaign-conscious book, “Earth in the Balance” (1992), the Clinton administration put aside its own choice of Bill Richardson as secretary of Interior to accept the recommendation of the intimidating League of Conservation Voters (LCV) to name their president and former Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt to the job.

Babbitt, himself a failed presidential candidate in 1988, was referred to by environmental organizations such as the Wilderness Society as “our Babe Ruth.” The grandson of an Arizona cattle baron, Babbitt nevertheless expressed his contempt for western livestock producers and vowed to the LCV that “We must identify our enemies and drive them into oblivion.” He set upon a course aimed at revising and limiting the use of federal land for grazing purposes, while at the same time demanding new restrictions on mining and resource exploration on federal properties. Thwarted by congressional resistance to his arbitrary revisions of law and regulations, Babbitt bluntly announced he would avoid Congress and carry out his program by executive authority.

“ We must identify our enemies and drive them into oblivion.”

Bruce Babbitt, 1991



Percentage of federal ownership in western states

Primarily due to allotment reductions and wilderness expansion, livestock production on public lands in the West has declined by more than 20 percent under the Clinton administration.

By the end of his first term in office, Clinton's administration claimed to have established an unparalleled record in the preservation and protection of the environment. The 1996 report of the Department of Interior hailed new acquisition or extended control over more than 141 million acres, most of it in the West, by the federal government. It amounts to an area roughly the size of the state of West Virginia and was added on to the more than one million square miles of the West already in federal ownership.

Although those acquisitions were accomplished largely in piecemeal steps often involving wetlands and forest habitats, the Clinton administration took an unprecedented campaign advantage in 1996 by using the 1906 Antiquities Act to declare 1.7 million acres of Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante a National Heritage Site, restricted from any exploitive use, including extraction of what is thought to be

one of only two deposits of the most valuable low sulfur coal in the world. The other deposit, in China, is being mined by an Indonesian company that was a contributor to the Clinton campaign.

In 1999 alone, the federal government removed over 2.3 million acres from access to mineral exploration. These withdrawal notices were taken in spite of congressional refusal to grant Babbitt's demand to revise mining laws.

By 1996, the Clinton administration proudly claimed to have added or extended control over new public lands amounting to the size of the state of West Virginia.

The "Heritage Site" declaration of the Grand Staircase was done without consultation with or notification to any elected representative in the state of Utah, including its two U.S. senators. Following his re-election, President Clinton once again named Babbitt as his secretary of the Interior and entrusted him with what was to become the most intense and controversial period of federal expansion of control over United States lands in history.

While millions of acres of lands in the West were either added to federal ownership or further restricted in their use, only one significant region was divested of federal ownership. That was the

## FEDERAL LAND ACQUISITIONS OR EXPANSION OF CONTROL UNDER CLINTON

|                                     |                                |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Grand Staircase-Escalante, Utah     | 1.7 million acres              |
| Grand Canyon Parashant, Arizona     | 1.1 million acres              |
| Aqua Fria, Arizona                  | 71,000 acres                   |
| Pinnacles, California               | 8,000 acres                    |
| California Coastal                  | 840 miles (offshore coastline) |
| Hanford Reach, Washington           | 200,000 acres                  |
| Cascade/Siskiyou, Oregon            | 52,000 acres                   |
| Canyons of the Ancients, Colorado   | 164,000 acres                  |
| Ironwood Forest, Arizona            | 134,000 acres                  |
| Sequoia National Forest, California | 328,000 acres                  |

## ADDITIONALLY PROPOSED MONUMENTS

|                                   |               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Craters of the Moon, Idaho        | 661,000 acres |
| Vermillion Cliffs, Arizona & Utah | 293,000 acres |
| Missouri Breaks, Montana          | (1)           |
| Steens Mountain, Oregon           | (2)           |
| Santa Rosa Peak, California       | (3)           |

## FEDERAL PURCHASE (LANDS LEGACY)

|                           |                   |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Baca Ranch, New Mexico    | 96,000 acres      |
| Mojave Desert, California | 405,000 acres (4) |

(1) 149 miles of the Missouri shoreline in Montana are in the "Breaks." A region of protection has been proposed on a minimum of 230,000 acres. Much of that expands into currently used grazing areas.

(2) Environmentalists demanded up to 6 million acres around the highest peak in South Central Oregon. Pressure from Secretary Babbitt on state authorities would set a minimum of 143,000 acres aside from grazing or other uses.

(3) A minimum of 31,000 acres in the mountain itself, although checkerboarded with private inholdings and expanded with unclear "buffer zones" in federal demands.

(4) The total purchase since 1994 of 6.6 million acres in the California Desert Protection Act is the largest acquisition of private land in BLM history. The purchase was made possible with the help of \$15 million from the non-profit Wildlands Conservancy.

Additional acquisitions include some 2 million acres for habitat protection of endangered species and Clean Water Act restrictions, as well as more than a million acres in areas of "critical concern" and wilderness designations. Proposed habitat "buffer zones" extending up to 100 miles from river shorelines alone amount to over 150,000 river miles. It should be noted that in every case when a National Heritage Site was enacted by the Clinton administration, the amount of land acquired proved greater than expected, in some cases twice as much as had been suggested.

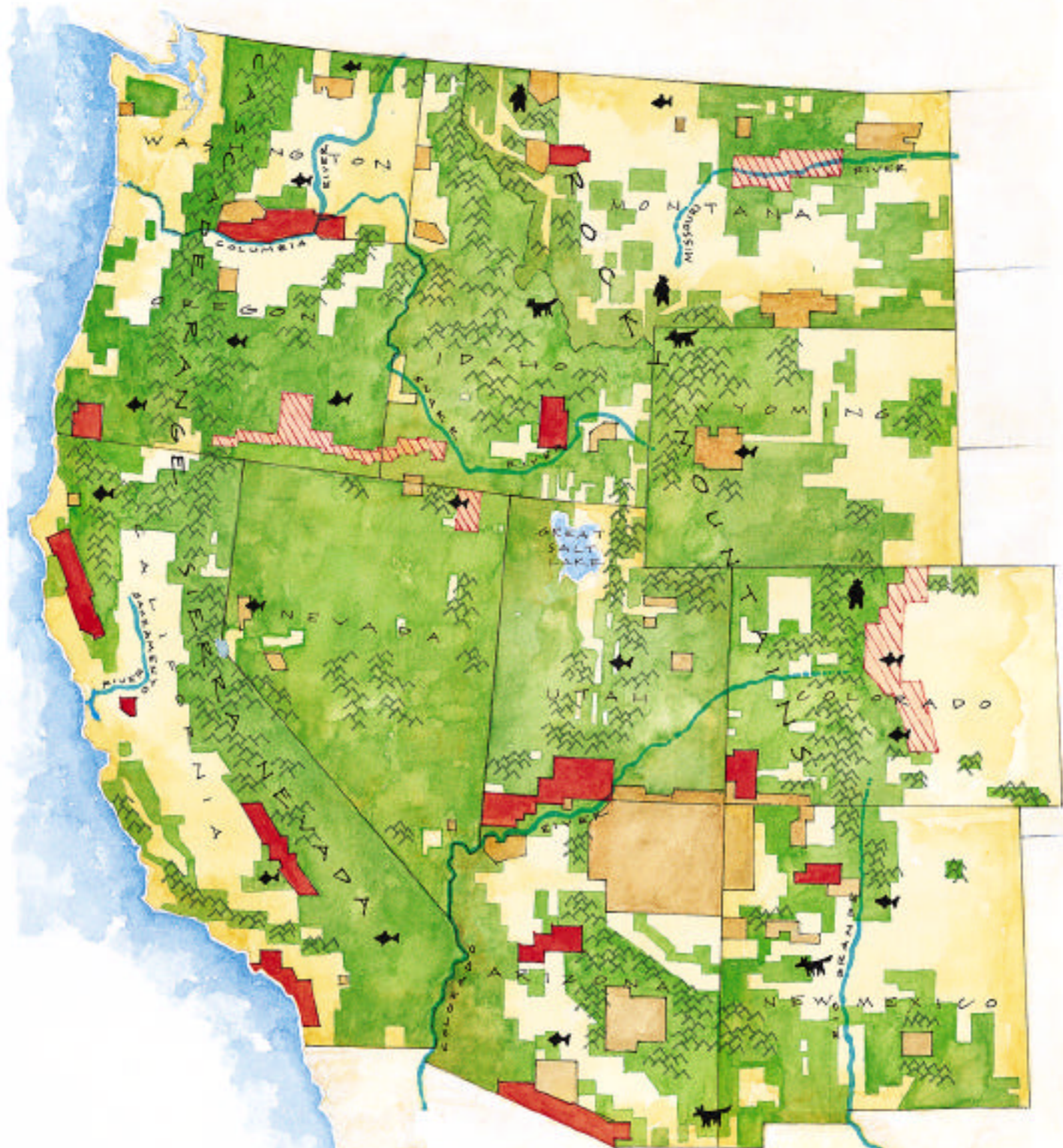
Elk Hills Naval Oil Reserve in California, a 47,000-acre site with a daily production of 60,000 barrels of oil and 400 million cubic feet of natural gas, previously kept in strategic reserve. In 1997, under the guidance of Vice President Al Gore, Elk Hills was sold by sealed bid to Occidental Petroleum Corp. for \$3.65 billion *in cash*. It was the largest privatization of federal land in U.S. history. The Vice President's father and former U.S. Senator, Al Gore Sr., was, prior to his death in 1998, the vice president of Occidental. The Gore family is a significant stockholder in the company.

At the time of the Elk Hills sale, U.S. Department of

Energy Assistant Secretary Patricia Fry Godley said, "This sale helps get the government out of the oil and gas business."

Consumer costs for gasoline and heating fuel reached record prices in the United States within two years of the transaction, and U.S. Naval authorities expressed concern about shortages of fuel reserves for military operations.

Despite promises of "partnership in stewardship" promoted by Babbitt's Interior Department, the second term of the Clinton administration witnessed even further restrictions on multiple use of federal lands in the West and was



- INTRODUCED GRIZZLY BEARS 
- INTRODUCED WOLVES 
- ENDANGERED FISH, FOWL & FAUNA 
-  CLINTON TAKINGS
-  CLINTON / BABBITT PROPOSED
-  FEDERAL OWNED/MANAGED
-  INDIAN RESERVATIONS
-  PRIVATE LANDS
-  FOREST SERVICE



While claiming to be saving America from corporate influence, unaccountable non-profit environmentalist groups maintain more than 3,400 full-time employees in Washington, D.C. Funding for their advocacy efforts is estimated at \$400 million a year, including more than \$35 million a year from Pew Charitable Trusts alone.

marked by Babbitt's own defiance of congressional or legislative authority in policy. "The clock is ticking," Babbitt told one congressional committee in warning that he would not wait for their approval for expanded federal control.

Regardless of local opposition, eight more "heritage sites" were declared, with the Vice President given the duty and personal recognition for his own campaign by announcing the last four during a campaign stop in Washington state. Total acquisition in those lands amounted to at least 10 million acres, but Babbitt made clear that his recommendation to the President would include at least four more sites.

The administration also put forward legislation seeking at least \$1 billion in funding for future federal land acquisition.

Throughout this time, since logging was halted by litigation in the 1990s, forest experts within the government itself had repeatedly warned that the ban on harvesting even dead or diseased timber was leading to a potential disaster in 40 million acres of federal forests overgrown and overloaded in tinder-dry fuels.

The first major fire of 2000 was touched off by the Forest Service itself in an attempt to eliminate some of this fuel. It burned over some 50,000 acres near Los Alamos, N.M., and destroyed 260 private homes. The Forest Service superintendent in charge was removed from his job, but later given a new post at higher pay overseeing the nearly adjacent 96,000-acre Baca Ranch which the federal government acquired earlier this year at a price of \$101 million. This amount is estimated by private analysis to be twice the actual value of the land.

When lightning-sparked fires broke out in the summer of 2000 in the Bitterroot National Forest and many other parts of Montana, and in even greater stretches of Idaho, Secretary Babbitt blamed it on "the worst drought since the 1930s," although that was not an accurate statement of conditions. Despite valiant and heroic work by federal firefighters and others, more than 6 million acres was consumed in

the West in the most disastrous fire season in more than 75 years.

Secretary Babbitt, speaking for the Clinton administration, accused Montana Governor Marc Racicot of "running for a cabinet post" (in the next administration) by suggesting federal policies were in part responsible for the wildfires.

In its budget submission for 1999-2000 some \$20 million was diverted from federal funds to combat wildfires into the president's "Lands Legacy" fund for new federal acquisitions. The United States Forest Service, nominally an agency of the Department of Agriculture, nevertheless was directed by Babbitt's former head of the BLM, Michael Dombeck. Despite the dire warnings of fire in neglected forests, Dombeck had argued that economic losses in the timber industry would be offset by \$100 billion in mysteriously-collected recreation revenues by 2001. At the same time, he announced plans to halt all road construction and eliminate existing roads on 40 to 60 million acres of the national forests.

Dombeck's Deputy Chief for Forest Management, Jim Furnish, told *RANGE* in 1999 that, "If the choice is to allow more harvest or to allow it to burn, then it's burn."

Following the summer fires, Babbitt and Dombeck said it would require more than \$1.7 billion to begin restoration of the devastated areas, including \$117 million to clear dead trees and brush. Environmental groups publicly objected to the funding for clearing debris.

Once Bruce Babbitt had established his "Babe Ruth" position on behalf of environmentalists in the Department of Interior, he soon brought in others dedicated to the movement, including George Frampton, former president of the Wilderness Society, who rose to become President Clinton's chief environmental advisor.

Frampton and others given positions in federal authority by Babbitt and Vice President Gore, were well aware of the most radical proposal put forward by environmentalists in these last 10 years. Attributed to "Earth First!" extremist

*(Continued on page 8M)*

# THE LEGACY

The legacy of Clinton, Gore, and Babbitt will be a souring in the national spirit, a rotten soft sore that a new season alone won't heal.

By Tim Findley

**T**here will be a legacy left by eight years of the Clinton administration's control of public land, but it won't be so much in the expanse of new wilderness or in the denial of access and use of national resources. The legacy of Clinton, Gore, and Babbitt will be a souring in the national spirit, a rotten soft sore that a new season alone won't heal.

No matter who wins when the votes are finally counted, the era of Babbitt is over in the Department of Interior. A pompous, arrogant man seemingly as contemptuous of his own family as he is of most working Americans will go off into some job in which he may still pretend to know what is best for all the people he has attempted to destroy. But he will no longer have the arbitrary power he relishes and has thrived on as a self-made petty tyrant. If history is a true judge, it will regard Bruce Babbitt as the small, venal man he is, unworthy of anything but regret for the way he managed to create enduring distrust among citizens who once regarded themselves as the most loyal of Americans. What he will claim to have "saved" for future generations will be regarded with comparison to the bitterness he has established for generations to come. The natural environment will not have been made measurably better for his presence, but the social and political atmosphere is likely to remain polluted for years after his passage.

Babbitt need not have done it. There was no commanding urgency to "rescue" public lands when he was appointed as a pay-off reward to well-funded special interest groups. Two hundred thousand people, at least, in timber, mining, agriculture and livestock industries need not have lost their jobs or their livelihoods. Yet Babbitt is openly proud of that accomplishment. Still unfinished confrontations between local authorities and the federal government need not have brought the rural West so close to outright rebellion. Yet Babbitt takes credit for seizing power without the need for due process or representative approval. On their own, the people of the United States had become the most environmentally conscious pop-



PHOTO COURTESY/BLM

*Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt is a petty tyrant who relished his arbitrary powers in the Clinton administration. His legacy is distrust among citizens who once regarded themselves as the most loyal of Americans.*

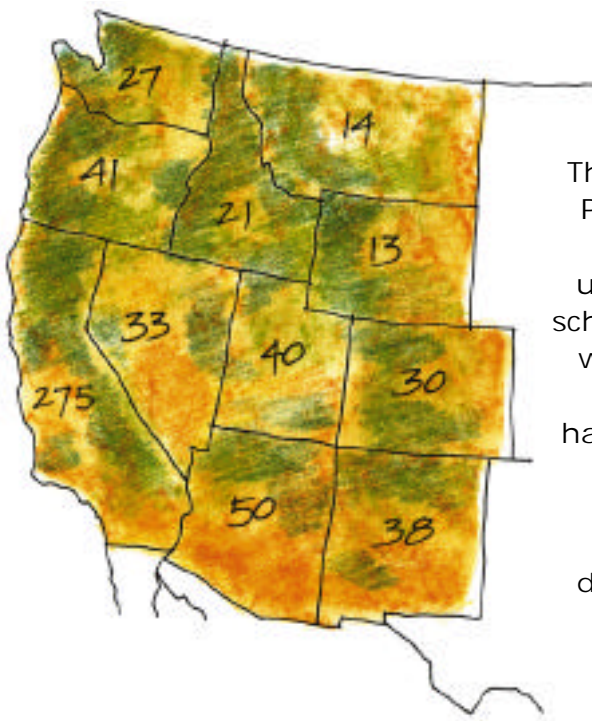
ulation on the planet, it need not have been an issue that would divide them between rural production and urban consumption. Yet Babbitt publicly sneers at what he considers the ignorance of rural people who dared oppose him. Bruce Babbitt will claim to have saved the grey wolf from extinction, even if in its natural habitat it was never really endangered. He will say he preserved pristine lands from exploitation, even though all he has really done is to fence them from public use or appreciation. The Department of Interior, Babbitt will claim, was modernized in his time, yet scores of skilled and well-meaning professionals whose careers in land management were destroyed by Babbitt will see the junior police state he replaced them with for what it really is. Babbitt will feed for years on the plunder he has taken, even while families unknown in the lies he tells may yet starve.

History seldom lingers long on the short and limited influence of even such a self-possessed minor functionary as Babbitt, but his legacy

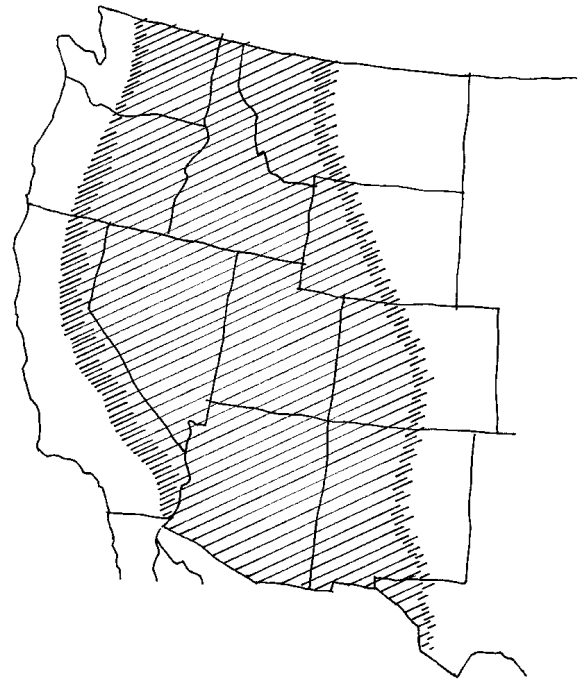
may well be in the ultimate destruction of the very powers he so abused. For that, Bruce Babbitt may be remembered.

It is bitterly sad that the climate left by Babbitt has created divisions in American society that were not nearly so deep as when he began gouging at them with his scarring tactics. He encouraged misunderstanding among people. He promoted contention and contempt as a means of securing his own power. He used people, as he was used himself, in a cynical method of securing a private agenda. He even repeatedly defied the fundamental tenets of constitutional government, placing himself beyond accountability to Congress or to the people of the United States.

Bruce Babbitt couldn't get nominated for the presidency after two embarrassing tries. When the voters rejected him, he regarded himself as beyond the grasp of their intelligence. Babbitt held on in the most powerful job he could find for eight years, privately bemoaning the fact that he was overlooked for the U.S. Supreme Court. Bill Clinton, for all his faults, might at least have the respect to thank the majority of American people who kept him in office during that time. Bruce Babbitt won't thank anyone. He always thinks they should thank him. ■



The Wildlands Project is an almost unbelievable scheme to favor wildlife over human habitation and predatory domination over any domestic use.



*LEFT: As of the end of 2000, these were the numbers of endangered species listed in each western state. New federal policy stressed protection of habitat for those species, sometimes extending hundreds of miles from where they were identified. RIGHT: The Wildlands Project doesn't really supply a sensible map unless it is understood that the idea is to make it possible for a wolf or a bear to migrate all the way from the Mexican border to the Yukon without crossing a highway. In its simplest form, all the West between the Rockies and the Cascade/Sierra would give priority to "corridors" for wildlife, while limiting human use to tightly-controlled enclaves. We leave it to the reader to compare such a scheme to the pattern of wilderness expansion in the Clinton administration.*

David Foreman, but actually the work of a consortium of organizations including the never-touched Nature Conservancy, the "Wildlands Project" proposes to control and restrict human activity on no less than 50 percent of the United States land mass, virtually all of it west of the Rockies. It is an almost unbelievable scheme to favor wildlife over human habitation and predatory domination over any domestic use.

Fully implemented, it suggests a reduction in human population of the West by one-third. It claims to have the backing of the United Nations Council on Biodiversity and the Clinton administration. As much ego-ideology as it is the "deep ecology" it claims to be, the Wildlands Project was described by Foreman as "groping our way back to 1492."

Except as it is acknowledged by its creators to involve a region covering at least half the size of the continental United States, the Wildlands Project is difficult to display on a map because of its spider vein "corridors" proposed for the exclusive use of migrating wildlife. The plan, given some credence in the United Nations, shocked members of the

United States Senate who subsequently put aside any vote on the U.N. Biodiversity Treaty.

The Clinton administration takes pride in establishing a record to exceed that of Theodore Roosevelt in setting aside "public" lands for the future.

Others observe that Roosevelt was himself experienced with the West and familiar with its people, while Clinton, even on a staged vacation trip to Wyoming, acknowledged being uncomfortable in the wild, and his Interior Secretary, Bruce Babbitt, admits he is unpopular in the rural West. While Roosevelt set aside the Grand Canyon and other lands for the appreciation of all Americans, Clinton's actions have been characterized by further restricting access to public lands.

If there is a comparison to be made, the critics say, it might be between Clinton and actions of Presidents Andrew Jackson and Ulysses S. Grant in taking native Indian lands as public property, while restricting the Native Americans themselves to limited reservations. ■

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