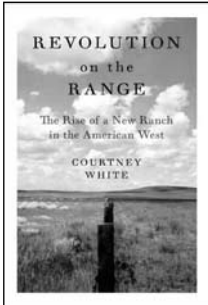


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Revolution on the Range

by Courtney White



Geographically, historically, and culturally a place like no other, the American West also harbors a paradox all its own. No other region of the country nurtures and celebrates independence and initiative to such an extent, and no other region lives in a similar symbiosis with that polar opposite of the rugged individual, the federal government. Uncle Sam owns about half of the wide open spaces of the four corner states — Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico — and significant chunks of Nevada and Wyoming as well. Without the federal water projects of the 20th century, it's doubtful the West as we know it would even exist.

As a result, many western ranchers work on federal lands according to federal guidelines or they don't work at all, a situation that erupted into open conflict in the 1990s. Determined to reform generous grazing-fee structures and enforce better environmental practices, the Clinton administration overturned the easygoing rules of the Reagan era. Ranchers and environmentalists yelled at each other across the barricades. A few things got blown up.

Into this apparently hopeless situation stepped men such as Courtney White, a former archeologist and Sierra Club activist who saw another way forward and set about putting it into practice. He calls it the Radical Center, and it begins with

identifying goals and values shared by ranchers and enviros. Neither side wanted to see the land devastated by drought, erosion and overuse, or covered with suburban sprawl. Partisans on both sides — or at least the kindred spirits White came across in his travels — were willing to put aside some of their dogmatic beliefs and consider ideas that may have felt like heresy at first but turned out to hold great value.

Revolution on the Range: The Rise of a New Ranch in the American West tells a series of stories about these shifting attitudes and the positive changes that are effected when people talk to each other and face facts together. Most environmental books are gloomy accounts these days, and understandably so. This one breaks the mold, however. It is a blueprint for ambition and a vessel of hope.

The conflict White and his fellow radical centrists are doing their best to disarm can be boiled down to ranches versus wilderness. Ranchers believe they have a right to make a living and use the land as they see fit, and enviros want to see land protected and set aside. As per usual with such impasses, there are a certain number of people whose careers depend on managing the conflict without ending it.

Yet the conflict turns out to be grounded in falsity. Land needs to be disturbed by fire or even animal hooves if it is to renew itself; land that is protected from all disturbance degrades over time. And traditional ranchers were loyal to bad practices for many years, from the way they managed their herds and even down to the methods they used to control the behavior of their cattle.

White's anecdotes ought to be enough to convince anyone that a wholesale rethinking of ranching and conservation

in theory and practice can yield great benefits for all concerned. What the book lacks is a more detailed account of the wider world in which these heartening developments are occurring. Most Americans unfortunately still eat corn-fed, not grass-fed beef, and many ranchers still abuse the land they own or rent from the government. Here's hoping Courtney White updates the progress of the radical centrists with another book before too many years pass.

— Chris Walters

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