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That time Ronald Reagan joined a ‘rebellion’-but still couldn’t change federal land laws

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Ronald Reagan was campaigning in Utah in 1980 when he offered an unusual pitch to the state's voters: "Count me in as a rebel."

A weird argument for a candidate for the presidency, but in that place at that time, it was good politics. Utah was one of six states at that point that had passed legislation aimed at nullifying federal ownership of land within the state's boundaries. As we noted Monday, while explaining the takeover of a federal building by armed activists in Oregon, large percentages of land in the West are still owned by the federal government, including more than half of Utah.

The push to turn that land over to the states was part of an ad hoc legislative and political push known as the "sagebrush rebellion." In 1976, Congress passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, formally ending its longstanding policy of turning over most federally-owned land to those wanting to farm or ranch the land — and essentially locking in the control of that land by the feds. That law was largely what prompted the state legislation.

In that July 1980 speech, Reagan threw his lot in with the rebellion, as the New York Times reported at the time. "I happen to be one who cheers on and supports the 'Sagebrush Rebellion,'" Reagan said. Reagan "promised to help lobby legislators in Western states" that hadn't passed laws like Utah's, according to a Nevada assemblyman who spoke with the Times. Nevada was the first state to pass such a law, dubbing it the "Sagebrush Rebellion Act." (Then- and current California governor Jerry Brown vetoed that state's bill.) Less than four months later, Reagan carried every state west of the Mississippi River — including Utah, which he won by more than 50 percentage points.

But, again: The federal government still owns that land. So what happened?

At first, the advocacy of Reagan and his secretary of the interior, James Watt (who founded a legal group that became integral to the rebellion's efforts), shifted the movement's energy to Washington. (A bill introduced by Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch in 1979 didn't go anywhere.) Eight months after Reagan was sworn in, Watt declared the rebellion over, given the administration's advocacy of its tenets and his efforts on its behalf.

The administration launched a huge political fight in 1982 when it planned to sell federal land to private owners in an effort to raise money to apply to the federal budget deficit. This wasn't what the rebels wanted. After all, sales to private owners would likely limit the grazing agreements that ranchers enjoyed with the government. "If they press ahead with any large-scale land sales in the West," political scientist Gregg Cawley told the Times that April, "it is just going to get the Reagan people embroiled in a whole new debate they can't win, because it's going to unite dyed-in-the-wool sagebrush rebels with environmentalists." While "unite" was probably a strong word, it's definitely the case that both environmental groups and advocates of turning the land over to the states offered opposition.

It was largely the environmentalists that doomed Reagan's plan. Former Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt (himself an eventual secretary of the interior under President Bill Clinton) argued that the Reagan effort stirred up a sleeping Western conservation movement. Environmentalists filed a lawsuit blocking the federal land sales and began state-level pushes to protect the land from mining and deforestation. "They did us a favor back then," Babbitt told the Times in 1985, referring to the Reagan plan, "by raising that old ghost for one more visitation, and now I think it's dead for keeps."

"With the advent of the Reagan administration and the dismantling of the Federal trusteeship, there was a spontaneous awakening all over the West," he said.

In a 1984 post-mortem on the movement, the conservative Cato Institute gave credit to Watt for "dissipating the momentum of the Sagebrush Rebellion" by making federal land managers more responsive to the states with whom they worked. During his confirmation hearings, Watt suggested that the rebellion be "defused" by doing precisely that. Once in power, he did. (Watt later resigned in disgrace.)

The roots of the current dispute in Oregon — which is based in part on federal land ownership — extend back to the earliest days of the country. An uprising against that ownership three decades ago was snuffed out by an unlikely party: Ronald Reagan.

But the fight isn't only happening in Oregon. In 2012, the state of Utah passed another bill along the lines of the one that Reagan embraced in 1980. A number of other Western states — and two counties in Oregon — have begun moving back down the same path.