Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“The Globalization of American Culture” Book Review

Author: Gretchen Heefner
Title: “The Missile Next Door”
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Reviewed by Ellie Leahy

Defense Dependency and “The Missile Next Door”

In “The Missile Next Door,” Gretchen Heefner explores the untold story of the Cold War by uncovering the buried Minutemen Missiles. The Minutemen Missiles were intercontinental ballistic missiles, ICBMs, stored among ordinary citizens. Deep in underground silos in the middle of the rural farmland of the northern plains, the U.S. Air Force implanted and maintained hundreds of nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War. Doing so provided a deterrent against Soviet missile attacks against the United States while simultaneously placing hundreds of targets in the middle of the heartland. The Air Force did not pick locations with the survival of the farmer’s crops in mind, but instead through calculations and zoning. These missiles remained lodged in the dirt of families who had been working the land since the days of homesteaders until the Cold War ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. Some locals were pleased to see the missiles removed, and others were wary of what that would mean for their rural lands’ infrastructure, but all remained forever changed by the Minutemen. Heefner examines the United States’ many layers of defense dependence in order to understand how and why the United States was able to sell ordinary citizens on the Minutemen Missiles and recruit locals into the war effort.

Heefner goes beyond history and delves into the world of economics in order to explain the dependence on defense spending in the United States. The Minuteman
Missiles were of huge financial cost to the United States, but it was money that the military was willing to spend in order to maintain the upper hand in the Cold War. Economic interests also pervaded the motivations of farmers in the Midwest. While choice would not be the correct term for their role in the Minuteman Missiles, many were willing to accept them because of the benefits they received. Roads and electricity were fortified and maintained by the Air Force for as long as the missiles remained active. These individuals whose land were ruined by the missiles were a small part of the larger picture of defense dependency in the United States. While interviewing Heefner, we discussed her intention to use this text as a metaphor for the large-scale militarization of the United States. These landowners, and the benefits they received from the missile program, represent one of the many ways the civilians have become dependent on defense without fully realizing the impact of the weapons.

It is also important to note that blind support was not the only reaction found among Midwesterners. Heefner discusses an activist group called the Peace Planters who actively protested the missiles using balloons, flutes, and planting seeds. It was groups like the Peace Planters who have since fallen out of the mainstream story of history. Heefner attributes this to the fact that “they don’t fit our model of the left, because they are largely conservative…so they fall through the cracks.” Being a leftist in such a famously right wing area made these protestors difficult to place in the historical records. Heefner thrives on these untold stories and “The Missile Next Door” provided a narrative that is often missed in the telling of the Cold War. While this book would be most relevant to Heefner’s own classes, that is not to say it should not be added to many syllabi. The Cold War is often taught and explained as a distant war fought only in proxy,
but “The Missile Next Door” reveals that there were indeed battles fought in the heartland.

Of the many successes found within the pages of “The Missile Next Door” to share the untold story the greatest success may remain the readability that is often elusive in historical texts. This is not the story of powerful military men; it is instead the story of the men and women used as pawns in the scheme of the Cold War. Heefner sprinkles anecdotes of the common man throughout the text, allowing readers to place themselves within a war that in many facets seemed far from domestic. In our interview, Heefner made it clear that defense dependency is not a facet of life that is behind the United States, and foreign wars continue to be domestic in ways we choose not to face. The ongoing glamorization of soldiers, war and the drone program mirrors the selling of war by the government to the people. This is an important book to American Studies because it forces the reader to examine the realities of war at home. It is a smooth and interesting read that I highly recommend to anyone interested in the Cold War, and especially to those who think that the average American is not a soldier.