The Missiles of Oklahoma: Southwest Oklahoma's Role in the American Cold War Nuclear Arsenal, 1960-65

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Abstract

To counter the Soviet Union's Cold War nuclear threat, the United States government enhanced its offensive nuclear capability in the 1950s by creating intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the Soviet Union. The first American ICBM was the Atlas missile. Southwest Oklahoma near Altus Air Force Base (AFB) played a crucial role in the nation's nuclear arsenal from 1960 through 1965 by building several missile launch sites that... Read More

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Cyrus Avery, the Ozark Trail, and the Birth of Route 66
To counter the Soviet Union’s Cold War nuclear threat, the United States government enhanced its offensive nuclear capability in the 1950s by creating intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the Soviet Union. The first American ICBM was the Atlas missile. Southwest Oklahoma near Altus Air Force Base (AFB) played a crucial role in the nation’s nuclear arsenal from 1960 through 1965 by building several missile launch sites that housed Atlas F missiles. The state was rewarded with jobs, massive amounts of federal dollars spent here, and the satisfaction of deterring Soviet aggression while defending the nation against possible attack.

The Soviet Union’s successful August 1957 ICBM launch, followed by its October 1957 launch of Sputnik, created the illusion of a missile gap. Many believed that the Soviets were ahead of US nuclear weapons development, tipping the Cold War power balance in the Soviets’ favor. Some even feared the Soviets would launch a nuclear first strike,
The Air Force used the missile gap as justification for expanding its strategic arsenal; the missile manufacturers used it to bolster sales; and the Democrats seized upon it as a powerful issue for the upcoming 1960 presidential elections \textit{sic}. In November 1958 Senator John F. Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) charged that the missile gap was caused by the Eisenhower administration placing fiscal policy ahead of national security.\footnote{1}

The United States Air Force was already advancing its ICBM program in the middle 1950s by developing the Atlas missile. The program’s national priority is seen in the explosive growth of people employed on the project. Though defense contractor Convair had only ten people working on the Atlas missile program in 1953, by 1960 the number had increased to twelve thousand.\footnote{2} The air force wanted at least 120 Atlas missiles operational by 1960. The public outcry for increased weapons production after Sputnik pushed those numbers even higher.\footnote{3}

Built for speed, distance, accuracy, and destruction, the Atlas missile was an impressive weapon to behold. The Atlas was 82.5 feet long and 10 feet wide. It weighed 18,104 pounds empty and 267,136 pounds fueled. Its range was between 6,400 and 9,000 miles, and it was accurate within two nautical miles. The missile’s nuclear warhead delivered a four megaton yield—the equivalent of four million tons of TNT—which was at least two hundred times greater than the force of the atomic bombs that the United States dropped on the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 that ended World War II. The air force built six versions of the Atlas missile—the A, B, and C were test models, and the D, E, and F were deployed for field operation. During flight, the missile reached a height of 763 miles, a speed of 16,000 miles per hour, and traveled 6,788 miles in forty-three minutes.\footnote{4} Though earlier versions of the Atlas were successfully launched in the late 1950s, “[t]he first successful launch of a Series F Atlas ICBM took place at Cape Canaveral, Florida” on August 8, 1961. Only the Atlas F missile was stored in and launched from “hardened underground silo-lift launchers.”\footnote{5}

Missile deployment was also fast. Circumstances required a crash missile deployment program to safeguard the United States against the Soviet Union.
The hallmark of the Atlas deployment schedule was urgency; escalating tensions with the Soviet Union sent the Air Force scrambling to deploy the missiles as rapidly as possible. ... Originally the location of the launch sites was determined exclusively by the missile’s range; they had to be within 5,000 miles of their targets in the Soviet Union. Later, other factors that influenced the placement of the sites was that they be inland, out of range of Soviet submarine-launched intermediate range missiles; close to support facilities; and as a cost cutting measure, be built on government property whenever possible.  

The Atlas F missile, the type to be maintained near Altus Air Force Base, was the most advanced ICBM. As mentioned above, each was stored vertically in a “hard” underground silo. Each Atlas F missile silo was 174 feet deep with a diameter of 52 feet. “The walls of the silo were built of heavily reinforced concrete. Within the silo the missile and its
support system were supported by a steel framework called the crib, which hung from the walls of the silo on four sets of huge springs. Connected to each silo by a fifty-foot tunnel was the underground launch control center (LCC). Also built with reinforced concrete, each control center was twenty-seven feet high and had a diameter of forty feet. Its two floors housed the launching equipment and served as the living quarters for the five-man launch crew. The missile was raised by an elevator from its protective concrete cocoon through the massive concrete doors that were flush with the ground, after which it was fueled and launched. Although the Altus area missile sites were among the most expensive to build, they were the least vulnerable to Soviet attack.

Six Atlas F squadrons that included twelve missile launch sites each were deployed near air force bases in Schilling, Kansas; Lincoln, Nebraska; Dyess, Texas; Walker, New Mexico; Plattsburg, New York; and
Altus.

Oklahoma’s US Senators Robert S. Kerr and Mike Monroney, along with Oklahoma Congressman Toby Morris, announced that Altus AFB would be the hub of twelve Atlas F sites in January 1960. Then, in “April, the Corps of Engineers, Tulsa District awarded the basic construction contract to Morrison-Knudsen and Hardeman and Associates. The two firms had submitted a combined bid of just over $20.9 million.”

Altus AFB was built during World War II and hosted flight training for pilots. After the war it served as a municipal airport until the early 1950s. Strategic Air Command assumed control of the base in 1953, and the Eleventh Bombardment Wing—renamed the Eleventh Strategic Aerospace Wing—was assigned to Altus in September 1957. The 577th Strategic Missile Squadron (SMS) at Altus AFB assumed responsibility for the Atlas missile after the SMS was organized in June 1961.

The air force turned to the Army Corps of Engineers to build both the Atlas missile launch sites and the necessary supporting facilities. The Corps of Engineers, in turn, assigned the building of these to several Engineer Districts. Another change was made in August 1960 when the Corps of Engineers Ballistic Missile Construction Office (CEBMCO) was established to manage the massive undertaking and oversee the building of the individual missile sites scattered across the country. A CEBMCO area office was located at each missile site, including Altus AFB, to directly oversee construction.

Because of the underground depth of each silo and overall size of each launch facility, the Atlas F facilities were the most difficult to build, and the task was monumental.

Construction began with an open cut excavation down to a depth of 60 feet, the level of the launch control center floor; from there the silo was mined to its final depth. During the mining operation the contractors supported the silo walls with steel beams, wire mesh lagging, and sprayed-on concrete. Within the silo workers then built a huge steel framework, equivalent in size to a 15-story building, to support the missile and all of its ancillary equipment.

The Altus Area Office of the US Army Corps of Engineers was created on March 14, 1960. Responsibility for building the office and the ICBM sites was transferred from the US Army Engineer District in Tulsa to the Los Angeles CEBMCO headquarters. “By the end of October 1960 the number of personnel assigned to the Area office reached
its zenith with 7 Corps of Engineers officers and 170 Department of the Army civilians."\textsuperscript{15}

The influx of personnel associated with the missile sites in 1960 created a housing shortage in Altus.

To alleviate the scarcity of housing General Dynamics Astronautics (then Convair-Astronautics) entered into a lease agreement in December 1960 with a local real estate owner to rent a block of some 200 Title IX homes to GD/A, Air Force, and Army employees to include those members of the military service assigned to the missile project. Rental rates were on par with the Altus, Oklahoma area rental rates. For example, a 4-bedroom home rented for $100.00, $95.00 for a 3-bedroom and $85.00 for a 2-bedroom home. In addition if the occupant desired the use of a stove and refrigerator the cost was increased $10.00 monthly.\textsuperscript{16}

The locations near Altus chosen for the twelve launch sites were designated by number: “#1-Lone Wolf; #2-Snyder; #3-Cache; #4-Frederick; #5-Fargo [TX]; #6-Creta; #7-Hollis; #8-Russell; #9-Willow; #10-Hobart; #11-Manitou; #12-Granite.” Morrison-Knudsen Company, Inc., and Hardeman and Associates were awarded the construction contract for the twelve sites with their combined bid of $20,926,500, which was considerably less expensive than the government’s estimate of $23,686,717.\textsuperscript{17}

The Altus Area Office oversaw construction of the twelve ICBM silos located near Altus AFB. Each silo was “a highly reinforced concrete structure” with walls that varied “in thickness from 2 1/2 feet to 9 feet.” Though the silo was built to house an Atlas missile underground, the top of each silo was “flush with the ground surface.” The extremely heavy silo doors “operated hydraulically” and were able to “completely seal off the silo.” Each silo “required over 1,800 tons of reinforcing steel and approximately 6,000 cubic yards of high strength concrete.”\textsuperscript{18}

Needing thousands of acres for the missile sites in southwest Oklahoma and north Texas, the US government exercised eminent domain and took ownership of the private land near Altus Air Force Base. “To acquire the needed 12,879 acres . . . the Real Estate Division of the Tulsa District filed condemnation suits against 477 landowners in the 6 counties surrounding Altus.”\textsuperscript{19} Excavation on the first Altus AFB missile sites began in May 1960.\textsuperscript{20} Amis Construction Company of Oklahoma City completed the open-cut excavation for all of the Altus-area missile sites.\textsuperscript{21}
Missile site construction was dangerous. In all, more than fifty men died nationwide in site accidents during construction, while others died in automobile accidents near those sites. Three men were killed while building the Altus Air Force Base missile sites.

Eight work stoppages briefly halted work at several of the Altus-area missile sites under construction. On September 8, 1960, electricians at the Lone Wolf, Snyder, Cache, and Creta sites walked off the job for four days because nonelectricians were used to complete some of the electrical work. Workers at the Hollis site left from October 21 until October 24, 1960, claiming that the silo ladder was unsafe to climb. Ironworkers at the Snyder site stopped work from November 4 until November 7, 1960, citing unsafe silo conditions. Unhappy with their oversight, Granite workers declined to work for one day—November 16, 1960. Alleging that ironworkers were doing plumbing work, plumbers at the Lone Wolf, Snyder, Cache, Creta, Hollis, Hobart, and Manitou sites walked off the job on November 22, 1960. In a show of
respect for an ironworker who was killed at the Cache site on December 28, 1960, fellow ironworkers there walked off the site that day. Because of a local dispute, several unionized laborers refused to work April 25 through April 28, 1961. The final stoppage happened July 5, 1961, when metal workers at the Fargo site walked off during contract negotiations.24

Building the twelve Altus-area missile sites included significant labor and associated costs. “Of the prime contract, approximately $9.3 million of the cost was expended by the contractor for labor. Of this total cost, approximately $3.9 million was for overtime; $1.7 million for travel and subsistence; and $1.5 million for premium pay.” Pay was awarded for 3.7 million man-hours.25

Jerry Brewer of Elk City was a twenty-year-old newlywed in 1961, and he needed a job. In September he went to work at the Cache site then under construction, where he was employed by Fluor, which was a subcontractor of General Dynamics, as a timekeeper. He kept time sheet totals and logged them for payroll. He made $1.90 per hour. Brewer’s experience illustrates the opportunities for good-paying private sector jobs that resulted from the government’s placement of Atlas missile sites in southwest Oklahoma. “The federal minimum wage was $1.15 then, so what I made was good pay,” Brewer said in a 2016 interview.26

In early 1962 Brewer transferred to the Granite site where he also worked for Fluor, this time as an operating engineer. His shift rotated weekly, and because he joined the International Union of Operating Engineers, he earned $3 per hour on the day shift, $3.10 per hour for the evening shift, and $3.15 per hour working the night shift. His job was to maintain the equipment that ran around the clock for construction. “Fluor had inspectors, General Dynamics had inspectors, and the Air Force had inspectors,” Brewer said. “Work had to pass all three with the Air Force having the final say.” By the time his Granite missile site job ended in September 1962, he had saved enough money to pay the local hospital the $200 for the birth of his firstborn son and provide a down payment on the $7,650 Elk City house that he and his wife bought.27

Local media covered construction of the twelve Altus AFB Atlas missile sites. According to History of the Altus Area Office by S. C. Wood for the US Army Corps of Engineers, between the Altus Area Office’s opening until late April 1962, sixty-nine stories about missile site construction appeared in local newspapers, plus “one nationwide news release was published by the Army Times, Washington, D.C.” A Lawton television station also featured construction of the local missile sites.
On 2 July 1961 the Area Engineer appeared in a 45 minute panel discussion on KSWO-TV, Lawton, Oklahoma. Other members of the panel were Colonel Ernest L. Ramme, USAF, Altus SATAF Commander; Lt Col R. E. Jarrell, USAF, Deputy Commander, 577th Strategic Missile Squadron and Mr. J. N. McPheeters, Altus Manager, General Dynamics/Astronautics. The panel discussed the construction of the Atlas F ICBM Complexes in the Altus Area.28

Americans too young to remember the Cold War may not be able to understand the nationwide fear of a Soviet nuclear attack, but the fear was real. Strategic Air Command prepared for a Soviet offensive by placing one-tenth, then one-third, of its bombers on alert at all times. Additionally, SAC strategy called for twelve armed B-52s to be in the air constantly, prepared to bomb the Soviet Union should war come. Each B-52 took off in the direction of a “specified ‘go or no-go’ line” hundreds of miles away from the Soviet Union. “Upon reaching that imaginary line, if no authenticated order to attack was received from the American President, the bombers would turn around, refuel, and head for home. . . . These flights typically would last about twenty-four hours,” and during the return trip, “another bomber would take off to assume the alert duties of the returning craft.”29

A national civil defense program was implemented to train Americans to prepare for a nuclear attack. Oklahoma participated in a nationwide civil defense mock attack in May 1960. According to the results of the fictional hydrogen bomb attack, only 10 percent of Altus-area residents remained alive, and more casualties were expected among those survivors due to radiation exposure. “Civil Defense authorities said one bomb hit near Martha and another southwest of Altus near the missile site not yet built.”30

The May 8, 1960, edition of the Altus Times-Democrat carried a front-page story about the downing of American pilot Francis Gary Powers while flying a U-2 spy plane on a reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union a week earlier. The story relays that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev announced that Powers “was a $2,500-a-month agent of the U.S. intelligence agency and he recommended he be tried for espionage.”31

A day after informing its readers that Francis Gary Powers was in Soviet custody, the Altus Times-Democrat announced that work had begun at the Lone Wolf missile site. “First earth on the No. 1 site for the $63 million Atlas ICBM project in the Altus area was moved at 10 a.m. today with several key figures assigned to the gigantic project on
hand for the occasion.” The newspaper described the site’s location as “just east of SH 41 between Lake Altus and Lone Wolf.” Work also was to begin at the Snyder and Cache sites the same day. “There were 10 construction workers at the Lone Wolf site this morning but officials said that number would be up to about 60 by the end of the week,” when around-the-clock work would begin.32

Missile site construction brought several business offices to Altus, including offices for Cloverland Construction Company and U.S. Engineering Company of Kansas City; Gillmore-Skouvye Company of Oakland, California; Cyclone Fencing Company of Fort Worth, Texas; and Amis Company of Oklahoma City.33 The July 18, 1960, Altus Times-Democrat announced the arrival of the Convair office in conjunction with the project. “Convair Astronautics prepared to open its Altus office today with the arrival of key officials to pave the way for a gradual buildup of a peak force of almost 1,400 company personnel whose job will be to serve as surveillance [sic] teams for the $63 million Altus Air Force Base ICBM project.”34

The Altus-area missile sites were built as President Eisenhower’s tenure was ending and the two men vying to be his successor in the White House were battling each other on the campaign trail. The September 26, 1960, edition of the Altus Times-Democrat carried a front-
Democratic presidential candidate Kennedy visited Oklahoma just days before the 1960 election. Met by a raucous crowd of supporters who listened to him discuss “the religious issue,” Kennedy was introduced by fellow US Senator Robert S. Kerr. “Kerr, a millionaire Baptist layman, said he had been raised to ‘love my church and believe in its doctrine’ and then shouted: ‘I support a patriotic Catholic Democrat for president of the United States.’” Afterward, Kerr predicted that Kennedy would win the Sooner State. Republican state chairman Henry Bellmon forecast a Nixon victory in Oklahoma and criticized the Kennedy rally. “They are putting on something like they were pushing a new brand fo [sic] soap.” Bellmon also charged that the Kennedy team “had to make telephone calls and run advertisement for days to get out a crowd. Electing a president is far more serious business than selling soap.”

The same day that Kennedy’s Oklahoma visit was front-page news, the Altus Times-Democrat reported that the first missile site construc-
tion fatality had occurred at the Hobart site when construction worker Otis S. Hopson, age thirty-one, of Lampassas, Texas, was electrocuted when a cable at the end of the crane he was operating touched a high-voltage power line. J. D. Wright, who was standing near Hopson when he was electrocuted, was taken to the Hobart hospital where he recovered from burns. Hobart doctors and firemen tried unsuccessfully to save Hopson on the scene. Hopson and Wright had recently finished work at the Willow site and were preparing to start work at Hobart. The day Hopson died was both men’s first there; each had been at the site less than thirty minutes when tragedy struck.37

The Altus Times-Democrat reported the December 28, 1960, death of Warren Neal Willis of DeQueen, Arkansas, while working at the Cache missile site. Willis was working in the silo and fell about one hundred feet. An ambulance took Willis to a Lawton hospital where he was pronounced dead. Two of Willis’s brothers also worked at the site. Willis, age twenty-nine, had worked at the Cache site for about three months.38

The newspaper also carried several stories about the April 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion. “Rebels Swarming Ashore 90 Miles Outside Havana,”
“Rusk Declares Invaders Not From U.S. Soil,” “Castro Declares Emergency State As Invaders Hit,” and “Cuba Charges U.S.-Financed” were some of the headlines in the April 17 edition. April 18 headlines included “Nikita Calls On Kennedy to ‘Halt’ Rebels in Cuba,” and “Navy Clamps Security On Guantanamo.” This international embarrassment for President Kennedy was a prelude to a nuclear showdown with the Soviet Union over Cuba eighteen months later, in which Oklahoma’s missile sites would be prominently featured.

About six weeks after the Bay of Pigs, the US Army Corps of Engineers transferred control of the first completed missile site launch control center (LCC) at the Snyder site to the US Air Force during a ceremony marking the transfer. The Altus-Times Democrat described the LCC as “a circular, two-level concrete structure about 30 feet high and buried under nine feet of earth.” Similar to the silo, the LCC’s floors “are suspended within their two-foot thick concrete walls” that could “absorb shock in case of a blast above the surface.” The first floor of the launch control center included “living quarters for the crews which will man the Atlas around the clock,” which even included a kitchen and shower. The LCC’s second floor contained “the intricate consoles which ready the missile for firing and send it on its way should the need ever arise.”

By June 1, 1961, an extensive network of cables stretching more than two hundred miles had been established, allowing communication between Altus AFB and the LCCs at the missile sites. Silo doors were added to the twelve Altus AFB missile sites toward the end of construction of each. Though extremely heavy, the concrete and steel doors through which the Atlas was raised from beneath by an elevator could open quickly. LCCs at the remaining sites also were being prepared for transfer to the air force that summer.

The Atlas missile program was launched to deter a Soviet nuclear attack and, if necessary, retaliate against that nation. The US government took steps to save American lives in the event that deterrence failed. The August 1, 1961, Altus Times-Democrat carried a front-page story about Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s appearance before Congress to pitch President Kennedy’s civil defense plan for creating shelters to protect Americans from a nuclear attack. McNamara told Congress that President Kennedy’s plan to create shelters from radioactive fallout could millions of lives. The goal was to provide enough shelter for fifty million people, which was about 25 percent of the country’s population.

The same edition of the Altus newspaper also reported that the Snyder missile site silo had been transferred to the air force. “In a cer-
Above: The Willow Atlas missile site, located approximately thirty miles from Elk City. The concrete launch control center entrance can be seen below the missile. In the lower right of that pic, a Quonset hut is visible, and a metal building is seen in the lower left. Grain storage currently sits on the circular concrete pad where the missile doors are seen open and through which the missile protrudes (photograph courtesy of the author).

Below: In fall 2017 a historic marker was placed at the Willow Atlas missile site. The background shows the Quonset hut and the profile of the concrete LCC entrance. The grain storage tanks to the right sit on top of the silo that housed the Atlas missile (photograph courtesy of the author).
emony somewhat longer than it takes an ICBM to zoom out of sight, the construction phase of the Atlas launching complex at Snyder was declared officially over today.” The remaining sites would follow suit and “be ready for signing over to the Air Force and become available for General Dynamics-Astronautics to start installation and check-out work at each site.” The story forecast that 2,500 workers would be needed, and their work would continue through the following year.43

The Snyder ceremony was attended by civic leaders, including State Senator Ryan Kerr and State Representative Maurice Willis, both of Altus, Altus Mayor Hoyt Shadid, and Snyder Mayor William Fulps. Snyder Chamber of Commerce President Dr. E. A. Allgood and Altus Chamber President Coy Shadid were among the business leaders present.44

The Snyder launching complex alone “required the removal of 60,000 yards of earth, pouring of 6,900 yards of concrete and the use of over 537 tons of steel.” The work was completed by crews who worked twenty-four hours a day. “When operational, the launching complex is an underground city within itself, capable of producing its own electrical current, water and sewage disposal.” The silo could have held “over 2 ½ million gallons of water, and enough concrete was used in each of the complexes to pave 30 city blocks with a six inch layer.45

America’s greatest fears were nearly realized as the Cold War entered its most dangerous two-week span in October 1962 when the United States discovered that the Soviet Union was placing nuclear missiles ninety miles from Florida, triggering the Cuban Missile Crisis. “Potentially Hot Showdown Nearing; Russia Claims U.S. Sets
Above: A US Army Corps of Engineers survey mark on the concrete pad at the Granite missile site (photograph courtesy of the author).

Below: The silo pad at the Granite missile site (photograph courtesy of the author).
Stage for War” was the front page headline of the October 23, 1962, *Altus Times-Democrat*.46

The first Atlas F ICBM in the Altus AFB arsenal was put on alert status two months before the Cuban crisis. The remaining eleven missiles followed suit in October. “As a result of the Cuban missile crisis during the latter part of the month, the Series F Atlas squadrons at . . . Altus (577th) . . . were for the first time required to place all 12 missiles on alert.”47

The day after President Kennedy addressed the nation about the Cuban Missile Crisis, the *Altus Times-Democrat* reported that Altus AFB had no comment when asked if the base had been placed on heightened alert. The newspaper also reported that Altus AFB had, the previous week, “become one of three Atlas ‘F’ missile launching points now operational in the nation,” at which time the 577th Strategic Missile Squadron at Altus AFB had assumed control of all twelve missile sites.48

In response to the Cuban crisis, Jackson County civil defense officials met with city and county leaders as well as Altus AFB personnel to plan for a possible attack. Jackson County Civil Defense Director Tal Oden said that a pair of siren blasts, each lasting three minutes, would warn locals to monitor television or radio. A continual siren
blast meant that an attack was imminent, and residents should seek immediate shelter. Oden stressed the planning necessary for families to survive a nuclear attack by choosing a safe place to take refuge and by gathering provisions and medical products.49

Fortunately disaster was averted and the crisis was resolved peacefully in late October. However, as international tensions relaxed, local tensions heightened as Oklahomans near Cache received a scare when a liquid oxygen tank at the missile site there began leaking. The tank was drained by the base disaster team and any threat was eliminated, but the sight of mist that appeared to be smoke, along with the appearance of the base team working with firefighting equipment, fueled a rumor in the area that the Atlas missile complex was on fire.50

Another dangerous incident occurred when the Atlas missile stored at the Frederick site exploded shortly before noon on May 14, 1964. No injuries resulted, and, fortunately, the nuclear warhead was unaffected. State and local law enforcement evacuated and secured the area, and locals were instructed to avoid the scene as investigators worked to determine the explosion’s cause and to assess the damage.51

On November 19, 1964, Secretary of Defense McNamara, who, since the November 1963 assassination of President Kennedy answered to President Lyndon Johnson, announced that the Atlas F missiles would be “phased out . . . by the end of June 1965.” And on March 25, 1965, “the 577th Strategic Missile Squadron (ICBM-Atlas F) at Altus AFB, Oklahoma” was deactivated. Southwest Oklahoma’s part in the nation’s missile program ended.52

Most of the launch facilities, built at breakneck speed around the country during the most intense and dangerous period of the Cold War, sit empty and unused. After the Atlas missiles were decommissioned and phased out, the military declared that the missile sites were surplus and subject to sale through the General Services Administration.53 All twelve of the Altus area missile sites were sold to private owners.54

In 1999 David Johnson bought the abandoned Atlas F missile site west of Hobart from its owner through the internet, intending to turn the Cold War-era Kiowa County LCC into a home. In a 2009 story, The Oklahoman reported that “the government has helped seal off a couple of the old silos, filling them with concrete and welding the doors shut.” Richard Guinan, historian for the Ninety-Seventh Air Mobility Wing, attributed the Atlas missile program’s termination to the May 1964 explosion at the Frederick missile site. “That was one of several incidents in the Air Force, but that was the last straw. After the Frederick missile silo site exploded, they started shutting the program down.” Some of the silos were donated to area schools, “and many area school
districts—Snyder, Hollis, Granite, and Northside High School near Fargo, Texas—still use the land, having placed FFA barns or other such ag-ed facilities and equipment at the sites.”

Guinan had the opportunity to visit the Hobart silo, and he was taken aback. “You see things you don’t read about, about how there’s so many turns from the top door. . . . The size and the quality of the work, the concrete walls, everything still looks new.” He reflected on the bygone era that the silo represented. “When you walk into his complex and just look around, it takes you back to a time when the nation had a different threat . . . the end-of-the-world threat, nuclear attack.”

Because of missile technology advances, the Atlas was soon considered obsolete. Used briefly, the Atlas program was discontinued in 1965. Ironically, the danger posed by the Cold War made building the Atlas missile sites as quickly as possible imperative, yet the same danger caused the United States to abandon them for a more advanced missile just as quickly.

Historians generally agree that the Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest that the world has come to nuclear war. On the evening of October 22, 1962, in the middle of the crisis, President Kennedy spoke to the nation in a televised address explaining the situation in Cuba. He told the American public that the United States would “regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response against the Soviet Union.” That “full retaliatory response” would have included firing the Atlas F missiles surrounding Altus Air Force Base.

The Atlas missile program was needed to deter a Soviet nuclear attack and to defend the United States if deterrence failed. The program was a national security priority spanning the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson from the late 1950s through 1965. Southwest Oklahoma played a crucial role in the nation’s Cold War nuclear arsenal by building the Atlas F missile sites and housing those missiles during the most dangerous years of the decades-long conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union known as the Cold War. The missiles of Oklahoma near Altus Air Force Base provided jobs, created an economic boon for southwest Oklahoma, and, most importantly, kept all Americans safe during the most dangerous period in the history of this nation—and the world.
Endnotes

* Landry Brewer is a faculty member at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Sayre, where he teaches history and political science courses. He and his wife, Erin, have five children and live in Elk City.


2 Ibid., 67.

3 Ibid., 77.

4 Ibid., 210–11.

5 Ibid., 215.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 220–24.

8 Ibid., 220.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 406.


12 Lonnquest and Winkler, “To Defend and Deter,” 79.

13 Ibid., 80–81

14 Ibid., 83.


16 Ibid., 19.


19 Lonnquest and Winkler, “To Defend and Deter,” 406.


22 Lonnquest and Winkler, “To Defend and Deter,” 82.


24 Ibid., 148–50.

25 Ibid., 151.

26 Jerry Brewer, interview by the author, November 30, 2016, Elk City, OK.

27 Ibid.


29 Thomas C. Reed, At the Abyss: An Insider’s History of the Cold War (New York: Random House, 2004), 159.
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53 Lonnquest and Winkler, “To Defend and Deter,” 137–38

54 Ibid., 541–42.


56 Ibid.

