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Nike Missile Fail: When Elk City and Clinton Almost Went Nuclear



*By Landry Brewer**

The Cold War entered an intense new phase in August of 1949 when the Soviet Union successfully detonated its first atomic bomb, and the United States lost the nuclear hegemony that it had enjoyed since the end of World War II in 1945. Fear of a Soviet nuclear strike via airplane moved the federal government to prepare to defend against a long-range bomber attack by deploying Nike surface-to-air missiles across the nation, some of which were placed near Strategic Air Command (SAC) bases. One SAC base scheduled to be protected by nuclear-tipped Nike missiles was in Burns Flat. In 1959 nearby Elk City and Clinton were scheduled to house Nike Hercules missile batteries and implement the nuclear option if necessary, but the program failed to launch.

Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base was one of many American military installations created in response to World War II needs, although when it opened in October 1943 it was called Clinton Naval Air Station. Located seventeen miles west-southwest of the Custer County city of Clinton, the base was situated in the city of Burns Flat in Washita County. According to *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, the War Department laid claim to “five thousand acres of Washita County farmland . . . for a naval air station.” Runways, hangars, barracks, and other facilities were created, and “more than thirty-five hundred officers and enlisted men” followed who “served with the Special Task Air Groups in the operation of aircraft drones and glider bombs.”¹

The naval air station closed after World War II, and the War Assets Administration transferred ownership to the City of Clinton. In September 1954 the municipality leased the location to the federal government, which began extending a runway there to more than 13,500 feet, building new structures, and creating housing for nine hundred families. Renamed Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base, the new SAC base was devoted to training pilots and developing aircraft equipment. Over the next decade, the Air Force laid hold on several more acres of nearby property.²

As the 1950s became the 1960s, Cold War commitments dictated the role of Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base. According to James Crowder’s entry in *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, “In March 1959, with a new assignment of B-52s, the 4123d Strategic Wing and its Ninety-eighth Bombardment Squadron arrived at Clinton-Sherman to conduct a nine-month test of the SAC airborne alert program.”³

During the Truman presidency, a reevaluation of American foreign and defense policy occasioned by multiple events, including the American loss of its atomic monopoly to the Soviets, resulted in a 1950 document known as NSC-68. The paper stated that the Soviet Union would have a large stockpile of atomic bombs and the ability to deliver them inside the United States by 1954, requiring dramatic increases in defense spending. To strengthen its defensive capabilities against such a Soviet long-range bomber attack, the US government sped up its work on the Nike surface-to-air missile. The US Army began developing the Nike Ajax anti-aircraft missile in 1945, with deployment of the first Nike battery in 1954. The liquid-fueled Ajax was thirty-four feet long, had a thirty-mile range, could operate at an altitude of 70,000

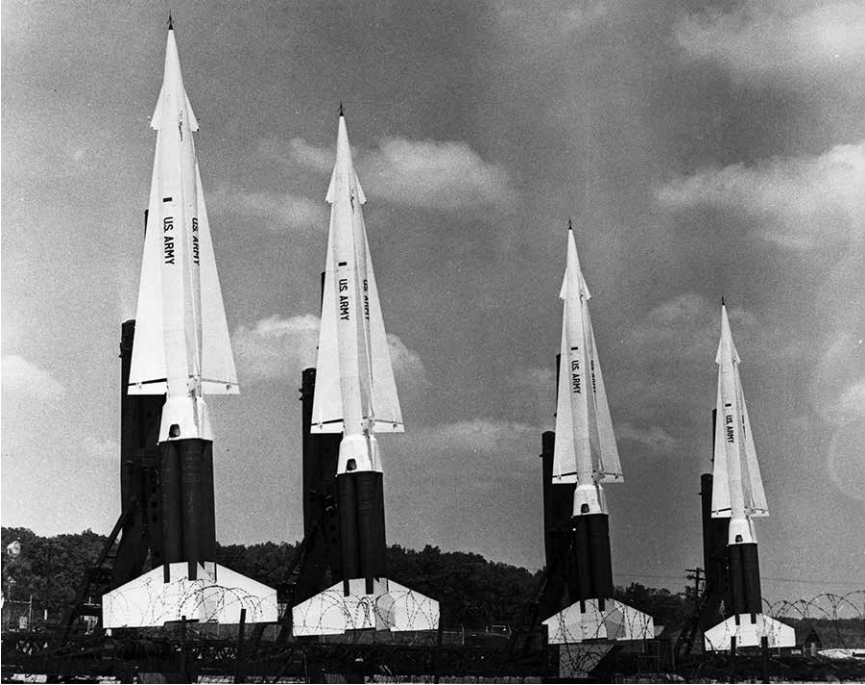
THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Aerial photograph of planes parked at Clinton Naval Air Station, 1946 (2012.201.OVZ001.7859, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

One of three large buildings at the Clinton Naval Air Station slated to be moved to the campus of Oklahoma City University following World War II, February 1947 (2012.201.B0267.0270, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).





Nike Hercules missiles near Dyess Air Force Base, Abilene, Texas, c. 1960 (photograph courtesy of the Richardson Library, Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, TX).

feet, and carried a conventional bomb. In 1958 two hundred Nike batteries were scattered across the nation. The same year, the US Army deployed the newer Nike Hercules as it began phasing out the Ajax. The solid-fueled Hercules was forty-one feet long, had a seventy-five-mile range and was operational at an altitude of up to 150,000 feet. The first among anti-aircraft missiles to carry a nuclear warhead, the Nike Hercules was deployed at 137 locations.⁴

Whereas America's intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) would be housed in rural locations, the Nike launch sites were often near the nation's large cities and surrounding metropolitan areas. The Nike sites, built beginning in the second half of the 1950s, stood only one story, were made of cinderblocks, and reportedly resembled the many school buildings built to accommodate baby-boom children who filled schools during the decade. By 1958, just five years after the army received permission to develop a second-generation surface-to-air mis-

The Elk City Journal

ELK CITY, BECKHAM COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

THURSDAY, JAN. 15, 1959

No. 21

Less Gain 57 Period

sales continued to by paying into the \$25,543 for the Oklahoma Tax Commission in the course of the tax commission 1957. The gain reported approximately a 1% increase over a year.

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October sales tax profit 184.16 compared to 1 in October the year. The Elk City's percent for the month was 10.73 per cent. Washburn County county clerk the collection of \$8,000 to \$1,100 the year.

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1958. 1000 compared to \$1.84 and \$1.00.

—Magnum, 1957

V. P. McClain Gets Certificate From OU's Attorney's Institute

NORMAN, Jan. 13.—V. P. McClain, Elk City, Beckham County Attorney, received a certificate for public service during the closing session of the Sixth Institute for County Attorneys at the University of Oklahoma, Jan. 8-9.

Sponsored by the committee on continuing legal education of the Oklahoma Bar Association, the OU College of Law and extension division and Oklahoma County Attorney's Association, 37 county attorneys and their assistants registered for the meeting.

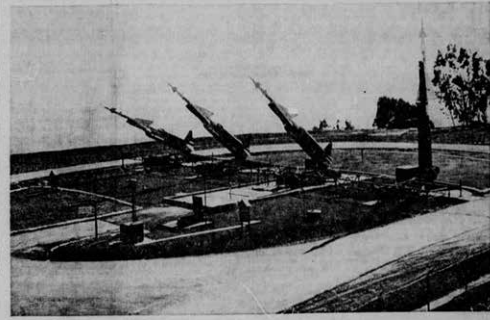
Also present were: Max Q. Williamson, Attorney General of Oklahoma, and assistants; three justices of the Criminal Court of Oklahoma; special agents of the Oklahoma Bureau of Investigation and FBI; and faculty of the OU law school, who presented papers on various phases of law enforcement important to the office of a county attorney.

Reviews for C. E. McClure, Belton, Tex., 30-year-old former president of the Stafford and Butler communities, were held at 2 p. m. Thursday from the Clinton First Christian church with Rev. Grant Barry, pastor, officiating. Burial was in the Orrell cemetery.

Mr. McClure died following a heart attack while working near Homestead, Fla., Sunday.

For the last 20 years he had been employed by the Messemograph Service Co. of Tulsa. At the time of his death he was 61.

Nike Missile Base Site Scheduled South Of Elk



Completion Date Expected In '59

One of the two U. S. Army Nike Hercules missile battery sites planned for this area to give protective air defense for the Clinton-Sherman Air Force base area will be located near Elk City, Col. Lester J. Staab, commanding officer of the 4th region, United States Army Air Defense Command at Kansas City, announced today.

Nike Missile South

Col. Staab said the location will be approximately nine miles south of Elk City and 11 miles east of Bayre. The missile battery launchers and control areas will be divided by State Highway 116.

Commander Staab said that a selection team composed of representatives of the 4th regional Army Air Defense Command and the U. S. Army Engineers, Tulsa District, have made a detailed reconnaissance of the Clinton-Sherman area and that they have recommended the base south of Elk City and four miles south of Clinton were selected as the best.

Completion Due In '59

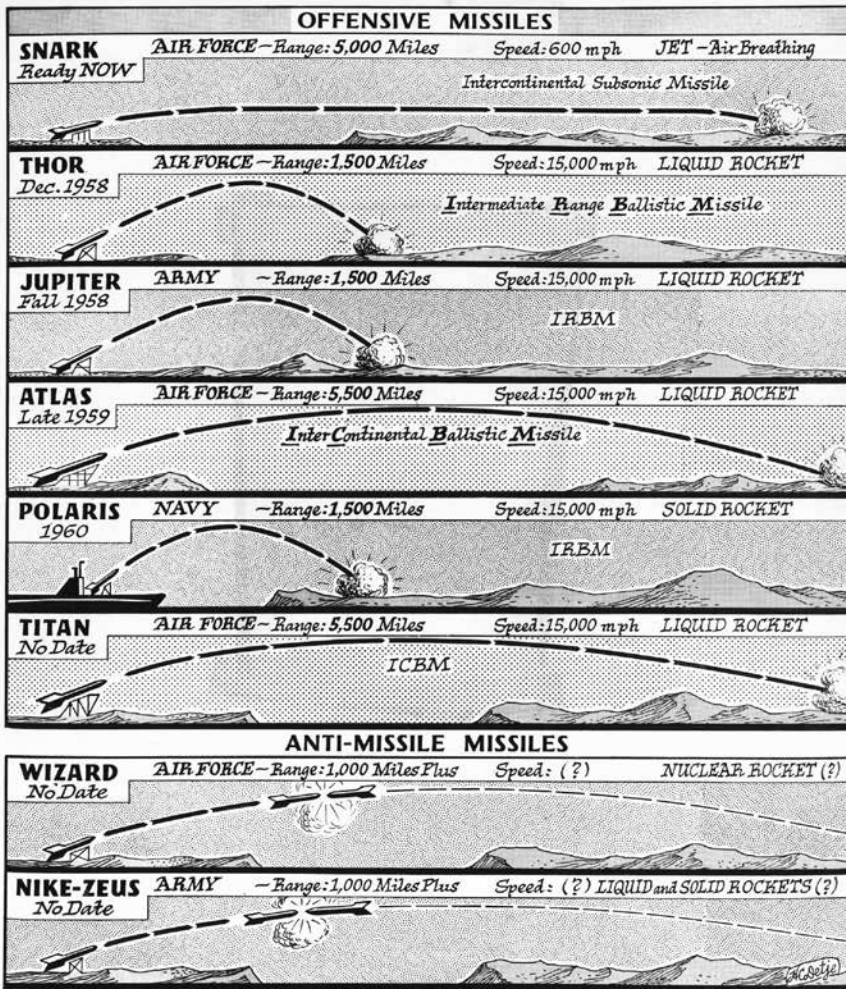
The contract and final construction of the battery area is expected to be completed this year with an estimated cost of more than \$1,000,000 for each site. Each of the batteries will be capable of defending an area of 3000 square miles, Col. Staab said.

MIGHTY NIKE HERCULES MISSILES, such as these, will be on guard to protect the Clinton-Sherman area once base installations are complete, probably this year. The Army Air Defense Command has chosen a site for one of the Nike bases approximately nine miles south of Elk City.

Elk City Journal, January 15, 1959 (gateway.okhistory.org).

missile, the Nike Hercules was ready for deployment near New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In the late 1950s and early '60s, the Hercules was positioned close to cities that included St. Louis and Kansas City as well as near several SAC bases.⁵

Word arrived that a SAC base in Washita County would soon be protected by US Army surface-to-air missiles. The August 13, 1958, edition of the *Elk City Daily News* carried a United Press International story announcing that locations for Oklahoma's first Nike Hercules batteries would be placed near Elk City and Clinton to protect the Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base. Early estimates revealed that each of the two launch batteries would bring one hundred men and include a \$25,000 monthly payroll, and the batteries' headquarters would require another forty men with a monthly payroll between \$17,000 to \$20,000. This information was presented the day before by Colonel James F. Farren of the Fourth Army Air Defense Command to a group of local media members, government officials, and business leaders at Clinton's Pop Hicks restaurant. Farren told the attendees that each battery would require 114 acres of land. Each Nike battery would include a control



Drawing created for a newspaper owned by the Oklahoma Publishing Company depicting proposed missile systems, c. 1958 (2012.201.OVZ001.1594, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

site that required ten acres and a launch area a mile or two away that needed another twenty-seven acres, plus an additional seventy-seven acres of easements. Barracks would also be built for single and married crew members. Farren assured the crowd that missiles would not be tested there and would only be fired if the air force base was at-

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tacked. He also reassured the audience that the missiles' nuclear warheads posed no radiation threat for those living or traveling near the missile batteries. Meeting attendees included Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base commanding officer Colonel Bill Martin, Clinton Chamber of Commerce President Frank Say, and Elk City Mayor Paul Creason. Other Elk Citizens present were Paul Wade, Ted Shearer, Carl Mitchell, Del Smith, Don Wilson, Gwen Hollingshead, Fred Wright, Harry Harness, Ray Damron, Noel Jones, Wayne Woodman, and Gene Grubitz Jr.⁶

On January 15, 1959, Colonel Leslie J. Staub of the US Army Air Defense Command announced that one of the Nike Hercules batteries protecting Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base would be located nine miles south of Elk City, and the other battery would be four miles south of Clinton. Staub projected that each site would cost more than \$1 million, and construction would be finished by year's end. When completed, each battery would be operated around the clock. The Elk City and Clinton batteries would be housed on two separate pieces of land each. One area would house radars and guidance equipment, and the other would be the launch area where the missiles would be located and ready to fire. State Highway 152 would separate the Elk City control area and launch site, and US Highway 183 would divide the Clinton control area and launch site.⁷

In early April, Colonel John D. Bristor of the US Army Corps of Engineers Tulsa office announced that the Oklahoma City-Tulsa firm of Coston-Frankfurt-Short Architects and Engineers had been hired to design the Elk City and Clinton Nike site plans.⁸ The next month, however, news arrived that the US Senate Armed Services Committee planned to dramatically cut millions from Nike Hercules funding. In response, an army spokesman criticized senators for endangering national security after the committee chose to trim \$17.3 million from the army's requested \$22.4 million for new Nike Hercules site construction.⁹

Amid public bickering over which antiaircraft missile should receive congressional funding—the army's Nike Hercules or the air force's Bomarc—Secretary of Defense Neil H. McElroy returned from Geneva, Switzerland, on June 6 and announced a forthcoming plan that he had discussed with President Eisenhower to clearly define those services' roles in bomber attack defense. McElroy had admonished both military branches to discontinue publicly feuding lest they alienate “our good

NIKE MISSILE FAIL



Above: Gene Grubitz Jr., 1959
(2012.201.B0231.0335, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

Below: Ray Damron, 1953
(2012.201.B0290.0037, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).



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friends in Congress.” Critics of the Nike Hercules and the as-yet-to-be-deployed Bomarc missiles pointed out the looming obsolescence of anti-aircraft weapons once the emerging Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile threat surpassed that nation’s long-range bomber threat.¹⁰

According to General Earl Partridge—head of the North American Air Defense Command—in a June 1959 interview, the US government was spending between \$5.5 billion and \$6 billion annually to defend the nation’s skies, but costs were constantly rising. The army’s Nike Hercules missiles, developed with the help of contractors Douglas Aircraft and Western Electric, had already cost \$3.7 billion and were deployed at approximately sixty sites. The Senate Armed Services Committee considered the Nike Hercules missile “seriously inadequate” and already “virtually obsolete.”¹¹

Despite congressional intent to cut funding, the search for Nike Hercules battery locations near Clinton–Sherman Air Force Base continued. A June 17 *Oklahoma City Times* story announced that an assistant US attorney filed condemnation suits in federal district court in Oklahoma City so that 214 acres of agricultural land in Beckham and Washita Counties could be used to house Nike batteries at an estimated cost to the US government of nearly \$28,000. The sites near Elk City and Clinton were fifteen miles from the Clinton–Sherman base, and they would protect the B-52 Stratofortress bombers and KC-135 Stratotankers operated by the Strategic Air Command there “from enemy attack.” The article’s author described the missile-sites’ construction as “a ‘rush’ project by the department of the army” and characterized the Nike Hercules as the “latest edition of the U.S.’s famed missile and plane killing weapon” that was “a five-ton missile that can be guided by radar to shoot down an object in the air 75 miles from the Nike launching pad.” The story conveyed that “Tulsa army engineers spokesmen described the bases as ‘the first and possibly only missile sites’ to be constructed in Oklahoma.”¹²

Project progress continued, and the following week the Tulsa District of the Army Corps of Engineers announced that Houston construction firm Robert H. Smith and Co. won the construction contract with the low bid of \$1,789,555. According to the local newspaper story announcing this, completion of the two missile batteries would be required within 270 days of contractor approval.¹³

That came to a halt, however, on the last Friday in July when the Department of Defense canceled the Elk City and Clinton Nike Hercules



Steven E. Bash, the son of Captain and Mrs. John W. Bash from Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base, was a finalist at the National Science Fair in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1961 for his modulated light transmitter. Bash attended Burns Flat High School. Bash's participation in the science fair shows the connection between the local school systems and the population of the air force base (2012.201.B0072.0175, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

bases. According to the August 2 edition of the *Elk City Daily News*, which made the cancellation news known there, no explanation accompanied the announcement. The threatened congressional funding cuts had eliminated plans for Nike Hercules batteries to be placed in central western Oklahoma along with the accompanying influx of construction-payroll revenue to build them and army-payroll revenue to operate them.¹⁴ Critics of programs like the Nike Hercules, who argued that anti-aircraft weapons would soon become obsolete because of the new Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile threat, won the day.¹⁵

The abrupt announcement that the Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base-area Nike Hercules missile batteries were being canceled pre-saged the base's closure a decade later. Locals in and near Clinton-

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Colonel Raymond P. Lowman and his crew before their final take-off from Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base, December 1969 (2012.201. B0376.0310, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).



Sherman had heard rumors since December 1965 that the base would likely close within four years as the Department of Defense looked to downsize its number of bases, but the late-1969 announcement still surprised many. “We were completely blindsided,” Frank Kliever, former Cordell businessman and Base Area Civilian Advisory Committee chairman, was quoted as saying in a 2005 Newsok story. “We went to Washington several times after that, trying to stop the closure . . . but it didn’t work.”¹⁶

The base closure adversely affected Burns Flat and several nearby communities. More than three thousand people were employed by Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base, including 298 civilians. This translated into \$14.4 million in annual wages lost, which negatively impacted area businesses. The \$2.2 million for groceries, \$2.25 million on housing, \$2 million on automobiles, \$1 million for furniture and nearly that much for clothes and entertainment spent annually was lost. All of this was felt in Elk City, where 1,156 residents were affiliated with the base; Cordell, where 865 were; and Clinton, where 709 residents were connected to Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base.¹⁷

The schools in those communities also lost students and \$390,000 of school aid each year. Understandably, Burns Flat was hit hardest. The Burns Flat school system was Washita County's largest in 1965, but that changed when the base closed. Former Burns Flat teacher Garline Thomas taught her first semester there in the fall of 1969. "When we returned from Christmas break our enrollment had dropped from some 1,700 students to 250 kids," she told Newsok. "I suddenly had my own classroom, but I had two, three, and sometimes six kids in a class."¹⁸

The number of military personnel and their families, and the amount of government-generated revenue would have increased for the municipalities and school districts near the Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base had the Nike Hercules missile batteries been implemented nearby as was proposed in 1958–59. The post-closure losses to Burns Flat and surrounding communities would have, therefore, been more dramatic and the losses felt more acutely.

The national imperative to protect against a Soviet nuclear attack led to the creation of the Nike Ajax surface-to-air missile, then its successor, the Nike Hercules. The same imperative to protect the nation and divert revenue amid skyrocketing costs demanded an abrupt end to anti-aircraft missile programs as the United States confronted the Soviet ICBM threat that surpassed the bomber threat. As a result, not only did Elk City and Clinton not house the state's first Nike missile batteries, but Nike missiles were never placed anywhere in Oklahoma. Ironically, counties to the south would soon benefit from ICBMs—the class of weapons that rendered the Nike Hercules missiles obsolete. While Beckham, Washita, and Custer Counties did not benefit from the influx of military personnel and revenue from Nike Hercules missiles being placed near Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base, Oklahoma would play a prominent role in, and benefit economically from, housing nuclear-tipped Atlas F intercontinental ballistic missiles that were attached to Altus Air Force Base in southwest Oklahoma from 1962 to 1965.¹⁹ By then, the Nike Hercules missile program that failed to launch in Elk City, Burns Flat, and Clinton in 1959 was just a memory.

Endnotes

* Landry Brewer is Bernhardt Assistant Professor of History for Southwestern Oklahoma State University and teaches at the Sayre campus. He is also the author of *Cold War Oklahoma* (The History Press, 2019), *Cold War Kansas* (The History Press, 2020), and *Cold War Texas* (The History Press, 2022). Brewer and his wife, Erin, have five children and live in Elk City, Oklahoma. The photograph on page 132 is a Nike Hercules site in Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1974 (2018654078, U.S. News and World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, [lccn.loc.gov/2018654078](https://ocw.loc.gov/2018654078)).

¹ James L. Crowder, "Clinton-Sherman Air Force Base," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CL017.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John C. Lonquest and David F. Winkler, *To Defend and Deter: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Missile Program* (Rock Island, IL: Defense Publishing Service, 1996), 2–3, 29, 55, 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97, 99, 177, 181–82.

⁶ "Army Surveys Set For Nike Missile Sites," *Elk City (OK) Daily News*, August 13, 1958, 1, [gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2087652/?q=August%2013%2C%201958](https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2087652/?q=August%2013%2C%201958;); "Army Plans Nike Missile Base In Area," *Elk City (OK) Journal*, August 14, 1958, 1, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2080380/?q=army%20surveys%20set%20for%20nike%20missile%20sites.

⁷ "Nike Missile Base Site Scheduled South of Elk," *Elk City Journal*, January 15, 1959, 1, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2080407/?q=army%20surveys%20set%20for%20nike%20missile%20sites.

⁸ "Design Contract For Nike Missile Base Here Is Let," *Elk City Journal*, April 2, 1959, 4, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2080419/?q=design%20contract%20for%20nike%20missile%20base%20here%20is%20let.

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¹⁰ Sam Fogg, "Defense Boss Set To Buff Services Over Missile Row," 1, *Elk City Daily News*, June 7, 1959, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2088818/?q=June%207%2C%201959.

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¹² Jim Cantrell, "Nike Sites Are Sought At Clinton," *Oklahoma City Times*, June 17, 1959, 1, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2002925/?q=nike%20sites%20are%20sought%20at%20clinton.

¹³ "Texas Firm Submits Apparent Low Bid On Nike-Hercules Bases," *Elk City Journal*, June 25, 1959, 1, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2080431/?q=Texas%20Firm%20Submits%20Apparent%20Low%20Bid.

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¹⁴ “Pentagon Rejects Area Nike Bases,” *Elk City Daily News*, August 2, 1959, 1, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2089072/m1/1/?q=Pentagon%20Rejects%20Area%20Nike%20Bases%20August%202%2C%201959.

¹⁵ Sam Fogg, “Defense Boss Set To Buff Services Over Missile Row,” *Elk City Daily News*, June 7, 1959, 1, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2088818/?q=Defense%20Boss%20Set%20To%20Buff%20Services%20Over%20Missile%20Row%20June%207%2C%201959.

¹⁶ Ron Jackson, “Burns Flat and surroundings surprised by air base closure,” *Newsok*, February 13, 2005, newsok.com/article/1419130/burns-flat-and-surroundings-surprised-by-air-base-closure.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See Landry Brewer, “The Missiles of Oklahoma: Southwest Oklahoma’s Role in the American Cold War Nuclear Arsenal, 1960–65,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 95, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 260–81.