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Cold War Anxieties, Patriotism, and Religious Antinuclearism in the Texas Panhandle

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On July 24, 1991, James W. Osborne, a farmer residing next to the Pantex nuclear assembly and disassembly plant, wrote a letter to his sister about his involvement in the protest against the site's expansion, in which he expressed his bitterness:

> I wish we hadn't built our home here and I wish we hadn't raised our children here. I hope they haven't been exposed to harmful amounts of hazardous materials. I'm still proud to be an American but I'm not as proud of the Department of Energy (DOE) as I once was. I think they consider downwind residents to be expendable. [...] I feel like we have been and are being violated by the system. (Osborne)

Osborne's disillusion was the product of secrecy and lies. His testimony reflects the evolution of opinions regarding the presence of the site in the Texas Panhandle: from pride to dismay and from numbness to action.

Pantex—the contraction of the Panhandle of Texas—was built during World War Two, 17 miles northeast of Amarillo, a town renowned for its location on the mythical Route 66 and home to the equally famous "Big Texan" restaurant. Originally an ordinance plant during the war, the site closed for a few years and reopened in 1951 to assemble nuclear weapons and high explosives. Since 1975 and the closure of the Burlington site in Iowa, Pantex has been the sole assembly and disassembly plant for nuclear weapons in the United States, now operated by Consolidated Nuclear Security, for the National Nuclear Security Administration within the Department of Energy. After another site in Rocky Flats, Colorado, shut down in 1989 following a contamination scandal, Pantex also became a storage site for plutonium pits. Today, most of the activities of the plant, which employs over 3,300 people, are high explosives manufacturing and weapon disassembly or maintenance by replacing aging warheads in the United States' arsenal of 6,800.[1]

Through most of its existence, the plant has operated under a cloud of secrecy, until local residents, employees, and peace activists started to protest various aspects of its presence and local impact. What they were confronted with was a web of lies, half-truths, and rumors, which took several forms: those that employers and officials told employees and residents, those that circulated in the local media and in meetings that opposed protesters to supporters

[1] Of these 6,800, 2,800 are retired, 4,000 are stockpiled, and 1,800 are deployed according to Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris at the Federation of American Scientists.

of the plant; but most importantly, those that residents told themselves to come to terms with the moral qualms of living next to a factory that produces weapons of mass destruction. Pantex epitomizes some of the most fundamental aspects of the Cold War: the manipulation of truth and fear, the patriotic pride of participating in national security, and the moral dilemma posed by nuclear weapons—especially in an area which is part of the Bible Belt. Through the case of Pantex, this article addresses the role played by secrecy and the concealment of truth in relations between populations who live in the vicinity of and work at nuclear installations and the politics of the nuclear military complex. First, retracing the history of the site shows how Pantex was able to thrive under a shroud of secrecy. This first stage lasted until the public became more aware of the activities concealed under this veil of mystery, which created fear and suspicion. Eventually, the years of secrets and scandals at other sites resulted in protests and controversies that pitted protagonists with diverging interests against each other.

Pantex's Numbing Shroud of Secrecy

Historically, the Texas Panhandle had always been a place of mystery and was colonized relatively late by Anglo-Americans. The Llano Estacado, which lies at the southern end of the Great Plains, also known as "the great American desert," terrorized many travelers because of its inhospitable climate. Captain Randolph B. Marcy described the area in the 1840s as "a land where no man, either savage or civilized, permanently abides; it spreads forth into a treeless, desolate waste of uninhabited solitude, which always has been, and must continue, uninhabited forever" (Rathjen 129). This view, similar to that of other locales in the American West, still affected the region's reputation in the 1990s when Nell Williams wrote in a letter to her political representatives, "many people in our country's center of power think of everything west of the Hudson and the Potomac Rivers as a wasteland which doesn't merit or require any care" (Williams 1991). Both Marcy and what Williams considered prevalent thinking east of the Hudson and Potomac Rivers were incorrect in their assessment of this "wasteland."

The area has been profitable to generations of a varied range of populations, from Native American groups, Spanish herders, and Anglo cattlemen to physicists, businessmen, and engineers, along with tycoons in industries such as cotton, helium, livestock, oil, and gas The juxtaposition of such diverse economic ventures is a fascinating aspect of the Panhandle. Following a traditional course in western history, the land's function was redefined multiple times with each new wave of populations and cultures that succeeded and superimposed each other. Before industrial development, these great expanses were the hunting grounds of the Comanche, Apache, and Kiowa Indigenous Nations. After the extinction of the buffalo in the

plains in the mid-19th century, these first inhabitants were replaced by sheep herders, farmers, and cattlemen. In 1875, Charles Goodnight, the archetype of the frontier hero—Indian fighter, Texan Ranger, and cattle rancher—famously built his ranch near Palo Duro Canyon.

Meat production remains to this day an economic mainstay of the Panhandle. Iowa Beef Processors, Inc. built a slaughterhouse on Highway 60 a few miles west of Pantex, so the beef and nuclear weapons industries are literally neighbors. In 1907, a German Catholic community settled around the parish of St Francis next to the current location of the plant. This detail is not devoid of importance, the German origin of these families could explain why they were evicted during the war according to their descendants. Their fear was that they might be interned into camps like the Japanese-American population (Philip and Doris Smith). In 1942, when the Army chose the site to build an ordinance plant, nineteen families were summoned to the Liberty Hall in Amarillo where an Army representative told them they had two weeks to vacate the premises. On September 18, the first bomb was assembled at Pantex. At the same time, Amarillo prided itself on hosting an Air Force Base, which would later be shut down by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. Rumors still circulate in the Panhandle that Johnson, who was from Texas, made this decision as retribution for the area not voting for him.

During the war, the *Pantexan* magazine helped boost local patriotism by presenting bombs and agriculture as a natural association on covers that showed the weapons being made in a field of wheat and proclaiming, “bombs and wheat, that is the story of Pantex Ordnance Plant” (Pantex Ordnance Plant 1943, 2). They also reminded the reader that, “[i]n frontier days, herds of sleek cattle grazed over the very plains where the plant now stands” (Pantex Ordnance Plant 1942, 2). Other articles underscored the importance of keeping the activities of the plant secret with posters that read, “Enemy ears are listening! Keep your eyes open and your mouth closed!” (Pantex Ordnance Plant 1943). Pantex closed down in 1945 for a duration of six years. During this interim period, the Texas Tech University (TTU) in Lubbock bought the land for one symbolic dollar and transformed it into a research farm to study cattle and crops. The farm was named Pan-Tech and thus perpetuated the bomb-agriculture alliance. Today, 6,000 acres of land between Pantex and the road still belong to TTU but research now mainly concerns wildlife.

After the plant reopened in 1951, its activities remained a taboo for thirty years. To this day the traveler on Highway 60 would never imagine what lies a few yards away. Cows are grazing on the flat grasslands, electric poles are lined up along the fields: the landscape is

pastoral and somewhat unremarkable. What is visible when approaching the site is actually the land owned by TTU. According to Philip Smith, who lives in St Francis, this land is a façade, a bulwark between the bomb factory and the outside world. For a long time, because of national security and secrecy, Pantex employees lied to their families about their jobs and said they were making soap, as Pantex's contractor was Procter & Gamble, which was famous for its soap products. Doris Smith remembers the "booms" she heard when she was a child, how the china would rattle, and the paintings would end up crooked on the wall. The joke was to say that a big bubble had burst over at the soap factory (Doris Smith). Residents believed in this version until 1969 when Pantex officially announced in a local newspaper that it "designs, develops, produces, tests, and stores nuclear weapons" (*Amarillo Daily News*). But even after having knowledge of this rather noteworthy fact, locals had accepted the plant's presence as normality.

In the small town of Panhandle, a few miles to the east, one of the librarians at the Carson County Library talked about having grown up in Pantex's shadow all her life. On Fridays, windows rattle and dogs bark when they blow up high explosives, preventing neighbors from sleeping late in the morning, but they have grown accustomed to it. She says, "If there ever was an earthquake we would say: what is Pantex doing today? We joke about it. If they bombed it, we would be gone. It's been in the back of my head but you push it to the back of your mind because you have other things of life to worry about. Bills to pay, a family to provide for" (Carson County Librarians). The general apathy of the population regarding Pantex's presence can be connected to a concept psychologist Robert J. Lifton called "nuclear numbing," a derivative of "psychic numbing," which describes the tendency to avoid responding to and feeling detached from traumatic experiences (Lifton, "Beyond Nuclear Numbing" 16; *Death in Life* 540). Lifton considered the civil defense drills of the 1950s as part of the "domestication of the weapons" (Lifton and Falk 376). Even though the practical result of these efforts would most probably be very limited in case of a full-scale nuclear attack, it helped the US population accept the risks of living in the nuclear age. Furthermore, the reflex to focus on the home to numb the anxiety provoked by the nuclear threat is a defense mechanism directly inherited from the Cold War. This thesis was developed by Elaine Tyler May in her insightful work *Homeward Bound*. Interestingly, May also connects the baby and suburb booms of the Cold War era to the inclusion of religious affiliation into "the American way of life" (May 26). Religion in fact also played a role in accepting the possibility of a nuclear cataclysm. The bomb, May argues, produced fear that fueled people's craving for security in their suburban homes and communities, in which religious groups became increasingly influent in the postwar years. The communities in the Texas Panhandle perfectly fit that description.

The stasis around Pantex also developed because many locals depended directly or indirectly on the economic activity of the site. The Panhandle librarians estimated over half of the town's families had at least one parent who worked for Pantex, which is a source of prestige and financial comfort as salaries are high. In addition, the plant's Public Relations make enormous efforts in terms of public communication and community outreach by funding charities and associations, participating in events such as Earth Day or Volunteer Day. Buddy Stevens confirms "[i]n the different pieces of advertisement, different brochures, program ads and so on, [...] nine times out of ten you will find a Pantex ad or Pantex sponsorship for something like the symphony, the opera, the ballet, the Little Theater." He adds, "Pantex has a lot of employees that produce a lot of smart kids. Well-educated parents, and I think they have produced children that are interested in academic excellence. To me, that's a gift to the environment; that's a gift to mankind" (Stevens). The general sentiment is that Pantex families are a superior breed. According to the librarians, many of them left the area to go to college and came back to settle down and have children here, in a small, secure town where the children can play on the streets, which is an ironic twist on the notion of security considering the activities of the facility next door. More than a lie, this feeling is an illusion coupled with fatalism that dictates that Pantex is normalcy. The plant shutting down would mean gradual economic collapse for the small town and its social structure. Were Pantex to be bombed, however, the effect would be immediate, painless, numb.

The nuclear bomb factory was introduced into its neighbors' psyches in stages, by gradually lifting the veil of secrecy once the ideology of the Cold War had already taken solid root in people's minds. Acceptance came from the habit of having the plant there, an uncontested part of the landscape that provided jobs and economic stability to a region that was no stranger to influxes of alien populations and development of new industries. With more information available, however, came the uneasiness and the fear that the secrets that had helped Pantex thrive also concealed truths that those who benefited from its presence would have had rather left ignored.

Nuclear Anxieties: Morality, Annihilation, and Contamination

The Panhandle of Texas is located in the larger geographical and cultural entity known as the Bible Belt, a term coined by H.L. Mencken in the 1920s to refer to "areas of the United States characterized by an ardent fundamentalism, and in particular to places that are populated by those valuing a literal interpretation of the Bible" (Heatwole 50). Religious conservatism is in fact widespread in Amarillo and the communities around Pantex. In 2010, there were over 300 congregations and almost 50 different denominations in the town's area, with a clear

majority of adherents belonging to churches of Evangelical Protestant tradition, and among them a majority of Baptists (The Association of Religion Data Archives). The association between nuclear weapons and religiousness inspired novelist Grace Mojtabai to write her main work of non-fiction, *Blessed Assurance: At Home With the Bomb in Amarillo* (1986), in which she studied "the intersection of nuclear reality and religious vision," asking the question: "How do you live—eat, laugh, love, sleep—in the shadow of final assembly?" (Mojtabai 7). To illustrate some of the extreme points of view she encountered and the permeation of religion in people's approaches to the nuclear age, one resident told her that "the only reason for having to use bombs is that people won't be converted. If you're red, you are dead. I'd rather be in Heaven with the lord than controlled by communism" (Mojtabai 95). The book demonstrates that this position was rather commonplace in Amarillo in the 1980s.

It was a newspaper clipping that sent Mojtabai on her cross-country journey from New York City by Greyhound bus in January 1982. She then decided to stay and still lives in the Panhandle. In *Blessed Assurance*, she examined the juxtaposition of two world views: one technocratic and the other apocalyptic, one that she called "steady growth" and the other, a dispentionalist view she called "end-timing." Instead of using concepts such as nuclear numbing, Mojtabai talks about "cognitive dissonance" to account for the detachment of locals regarding Pantex and focuses on the Apocalypse, which was on people's minds and in the local lingo in various forms during the last decade of the Cold War (Squyres). For fundamentalists, it involves waiting for the second destruction of a corrupted world: after the flood, fire. Scientists can also be apocalyptists: the difference, however, between the religious and the secular is that the former have accepted their fate, believing their faith will save them, while the latter are still searching for solutions to avert disaster. Mysticism is part of the aura of nuclear weaponry, but it is even reinforced by the veil of secrecy that becomes a veil of invisibility. To some, the bomb factory is a mirage, it disappears in the scenery as well as in their psyche: "more puzzling than the invisibility of trucks and trains [carrying nuclear weapons and components] is the long invisibility of the Pantex plant itself" (Mojtabai 95). Curiously, the aura around Pantex eventually also affected her: "What I have learned from living here is that I don't think about it as much as I did back in New York. The objects that are constantly before you put on, as the critic Roger Fry[2] said, a cap of invisibility" (Squyres). If confronted with them constantly, the mind accustoms itself to threats, especially when they are so immeasurable that they enter the realm of abstraction—the yield of thermonuclear weapons is measured in megatons (a million ton) of TNT.

[2] See Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics."

It is precisely the morality of such powerful weapons that attracted attention to Pantex in the 1980s. The newspaper article that led Mojtabai to cross the country was about the story of Bishop Leroy Matthiesen. After reading the clipping, she had attended his symposium on nuclear weapons at Riverside Church near Columbia, where he gave his famous speech: "I did not know the gun was loaded." This catholic priest from Saint Francis ignited the controversy when he called on his parishioners to quit their jobs at Pantex on moral grounds: "The matter is of immediate concern to us who live next door to Pantex… We urge individuals involved in the production and stockpiling of neutron bombs to consider what they are doing, to resign from such activities, and to seek employment in peaceful pursuits" (Nocera 162). In 1981, when the neutron bomb—which produces less material damage but releases more radioactivity—was being developed, the Bishop started pronouncing sermons against nuclear weapons, which attracted the national media. Remarking on the invisibility of Pantex, he later declared: "On the whole I accomplished what I wanted to by bringing an issue to the consciousness of people. It's amazing how people have begun to live with the unlivable" (Briggs). He said that living next to Pantex was like "living in the shadow of death" and that the plant's workers were "in a sinful situation" (Nocera 162). So while some believed their faith would save them from inevitable annihilation, others thought their faith was the reason why they should not support mass destruction, lest it should cost them their chance at an afterlife.

The Bishop's call had little impact on the plant's employees, for working there remained a source of pride and financial stability. Matthiesen became the target of criticism and was accused of being a Russian spy. Only one worker resigned. Buck Ramsey, a resident of Amarillo and interviewee in the extravagant documentary *Plutonium Circus* (1997) explained, "[t]here was a quiet and mysterious source of pride because the town was among the top ten targets that the Russians might hit with one of their missiles." The director of the film, George Ratliff said that people growing up in Amarillo get used to the idea of the apocalypse and that there is something comforting in knowing that Pantex is a kind of "easy way out" (Savlov; Ratliff). Other protagonists in the film, such as the eccentric Stanley Marsh III, were more critical, accusing Pantex of making Amarillo "the murder capital without even telling [them]." To him, the plant is "America's Buchenwald" (Mojtabai 57-58). Most people thus seem to respond to the possibility of annihilation with humor as a way of distancing themselves from the disturbing notion of potentially vanishing in an instant. Their reaction could also be accounted for by the belief popularized in the 1980s that in the event of a nuclear war, the ensuing so-called nuclear winter would make the living envy the dead, so residing in Amarillo would indeed be the easy way out (Badash).

Throughout the years, Pantex's strategy to dissociate its activities from the notion of risk has relied on maintaining a reputation as a safe facility. In 2008, it proudly announced that it had been voted one of the safest companies in the country and won an environment protection award for the use of biofuels. The irony was not lost on some residents and employees, as one of their main concerns was the plant's impact on the environment and on their health. Radioactivity produces paranoia because it is ubiquitous: it contaminates without discrimination, it is invisible, inodorous and thus insidious. The fear of contamination was also heightened by sanitary scandals at other nuclear sites, such as Rocky Flats. During the controversy over plutonium processing, the Texas Health Department found above-average cancer rates in 3 counties around Pantex between 1981 and 1992 and 64 cases of leukemia in Potter and Randall Counties, when 33 had been projected. In Carson County, host to the plant, leukemia deaths were double the state average (Weiner).

These hazards are a foremost concern for Pantex employees who work with radioactive materials. In June 2000, some of them voiced their anxiety at a public meeting organized by Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson to discuss the health issues they had developed as a result of their exposition to radioactive substances. Sarah Ray, a former Pantex critical safety systems training specialist, referred to the plant's employees as "walking time bombs" (Berard). Some talked about the effects on children who were born with birth defects: Arnold Chiari syndrome, pulmonary stenosis, no thyroid or pituitary gland, craniostenosis, tumors, hypoglycemia, and heart failures. Three of one employee's grand-children were concerned. "We've had children born without fingers, toes, parts of legs, and blind," he said (Howard McCampbell in Cargle). Another, whose wife worked for Pantex for 28 years, said she had received a parcel containing radioactive materials while she was three months pregnant. Their daughter was born with malformations on her hands and without feet. Her tongue was stuck to her palate; it had to be cut lose so she could nurse. His wife, who developed a lung tumor and six brain tumors, passed away in February 1999 (Duncan Seitz in Cargle).

Some participants addressed the deception frontally, explaining that employees did not realize they were being exposed. They were told not to worry, that exposure was minimal and doses harmless, but the "latent" part was the most dangerous. "And part of it, of course, the hurt, is the people who doubt [...] your honesty about the whole thing," one of them said (John Bell in Cargle). In addition, the conspiracy of silence among employees guarantees that no one will dare talk about the danger because "[o]ne thing that people at Pantex fear more than maybe their sickness is retaliation," despite "whistle-blower protection" (Robert Gauna in Cargle). They were several accusing the supervision department of downplaying the hazards. Perhaps the most remarkable psychological aspect of the job is how the notion of

risk is almost always compensated for by patriotism, by the heroism of handling hazardous substances to contribute to the viability of the country's nuclear arsenal. The head of the main union affirmed that "the work [they] do on nuclear weapons" is "a good thing [...] because without our national security, we lose our freedom, so we do have a mission" (Franck George in Cargle). This mission was the reason why one employee at the meeting expressed how proud she was of her participation in maintaining world peace thanks to nuclear deterrence, but when she fell sick, Pantex "tried so many different ways to fire [her]" that her professional life became "absolute hell" (Brenda Britten in Cargle). She was made to sign a document attesting that her disease was not related to her job as a high explosive machinist. The doctor who had established a correlation between her occupation and the diagnosis warned her against mentioning his conclusions at the workplace. Despite all this, she still believed in her "wonderful motherland, America the beautiful" and hoped those who had died "for this cause to maintain world freedom" would be remembered. She said their philosophy was "to sacrifice a few to save the many" and the employees "just didn't know [they] were the sacrificial lambs" (Brenda Britten in Cargle).

In September 2015, the plant's employees rebelled against the BenVal study that required of DOE to make sure its health insurance would not exceed 105% of the average in the industry. It was the first strike at Pantex in forty years. Roger Richards explained that for people working at a nuclear site, health insurance and medical benefits are the most important thing. Unionist Clarence Rashada also underscored the non-discriminatory aspect of the job by saying that, "[i]t's not prejudiced [...]. If you're on the plant [...] you'll get something eventually" (Hotakainen et al.). Therefore, although government cannot guarantee zero risk, it can at least guarantee proper coverage. The signs that the strikers held read: "1,346+ sick, dead, or dying"—this was the number of employees who had applied for coverage through the Energy Employees Occupational Illness and Compensation Program (Hotakainen et al.). Nonetheless, in a classic paradox of nuclear weapons plants where patriotism meets activism, the strikers maintained that they enjoyed their jobs and were proud of their contribution to national security. In other controversies, though, the line between opposing and supporting the plant was more clearly drawn.

The Politics of Pantex: Protesters versus Boosters

Despite its enduring invisibility, Pantex eventually attracted protesters. "The death factory," as its detractors dubbed it, was more disturbing, it seems, to Americans who lived outside of the Panhandle than to some of its immediate neighbors (Savlov). Activists saw the site as the symbol of everything that was wrong with the arms race and the Cold War era. Founded in 1986, the Peace Farm was a convergence point for anti-Pantex crowds who established the

farm as a presence across the road from the plant. According to Jerry Stein, a retired priest of Saint Francis—who came to Amarillo in 1987 to support and later succeed to Matthiesen, the farm was a moral witness and a key actor in the antinuclear fight: "It contributed by making the plant visible, public, and making people think about its morality" (Stein). In other terms, activism forced local populations to become cognizant of the presence of the nuclear factory, challenge its economic hegemony, and counter the effects of nuclear numbing. The focus of the Peace Farm was on "morality, honesty, and truthfulness," a triad that would be opposed to the immorality, dishonesty, and secrecy of the plant. Putting a sarcastic spin on the patriotic justification for the production of nuclear weapons, Stein comments, "it was a very good, patriotic thing that we incinerated a couple hundred thousand people [in Hiroshima and Nagasaki]" (Stein). This comment can be interpreted as adding an element of guilt to the stance of anti-nuclear activists who associated truthfulness with a form of atonement, making their position radically different from that of pro-nuclear fundamentalists who fatalistically accepted the imperfectability of the human race who deserved to be annihilated for its sins. He too noted a prevailing sense of fatalism and inertia by mentioning people who considered that plutonium or radioactivity "was not that much of a big deal" (Stein). In an effort to account for this position, Stein referred to the concept of American exceptionalism, the belief in God's love for Americans, and to the utilization of the following rationale to substantiate virtually any argument: "God talks to me, therefore, I can say my truth is better than everybody else's" (Stein). Several truths, however, were pitted against each other in the Panhandle in the 1980s.

The tactics employed by activist-outsiders included yearly antinuclear pilgrimages on the anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, blocking the access road to the site, crossing the fence to pray on the other side, sitting on the railroad tracks to block the immaculately white trains carrying the bombs or components. In several cases, these actions resulted in arrests for civil disobedience. Pilgrims were not always welcome by locals who needed the economic dynamism generated by the plant and considered outsiders should not meddle with their regional affairs. Jerry Stein testified to there being animosity toward protesters who clearly "didn't know what they were talking about" (Stein). Intrusion of any kind is not perceived well in the Panhandle, especially when it might put in jeopardy an entity that elevates the region's stature. According to history professor at Texas Tech University Sean Cunningham, the Cold War created a "war is never but a day away" mentality, and the fact that people in the Panhandle were taking part in a struggle opposing good and evil by having weapons of mass destruction in their backyards was largely accepted (Cunningham). The Texans' sense of individualism and independence is deeply rooted in their history. They will always prioritize these values, with one exception: defense. They will accept big government,

environmental risk, and infringement of their individual freedom to play a role in protecting the country and enhancing American exceptionalism, reflecting a sense of responsibility that was repeatedly expressed by US leaders throughout the Cold War (Cunningham). In some ways, this attitude is the same as supporting second-amendment rights: owning a gun or having nuclear weapons stored next door might be dangerous but it is also reassuring. This principle called nuclearism was defined by Robert Lifton and professor of international law Richard Falk in 1982, as a "psychological, political, and military dependence on nuclear weapons, [and] the embrace of the weapons as a solution to a wide variety of human dilemmas, most ironically that of 'security'" (Lifton and Falk ix). By the same token, residents of nuclear company towns such as Los Alamos or Panhandle have an ironic sense of security and perceive their environment as safe to raise children, despite the potential leakage of radioactive substances or nuclear accident. Bishop Matthiesen, on the other hand, described "the idea of global security through nuclear armaments" as another "illusion" (Alston).

Even though most of the population is supportive of the plant, especially in the business community that has been profiting from economic growth generated in part by Pantex, a few local businesspeople were involved in the protest against plutonium. Bill O'Brien, a cattle tycoon who was friends with Matthiesen, organized "Operation Common Sense" with support from the farming industry. Before explaining his involvement, he pointed out that two thirds of the beef consumed in the US come from the Texas Panhandle to highlight the weight of the cattle industry for the local economy. Other businessmen did not understand why he would criticize Pantex: they thought all businesspeople would support any activity that was "good for business." But O'Brien thought it would not make sense for him to support a business that would harm the community as evidence had shown everywhere plutonium processing had been attempted—he cites Rocky Flats, Colorado, Savannah River, South Carolina, and Hanford, Washington. It angered him that newspapers would praise the "pristine" environment around Pantex when the place actually was on the list of superfund sites,[3] where long-term cleanup of contaminated perched groundwater is ongoing. The "hypocrisy" led him to take action; he asked, "Do we want to be a trash can? Or do we want to protect our community and grow it in other ways? There's kind of a sell-out mode: do you want to sell out for money and screw up [sic] your community?" Like many Texans, what O'Brien criticizes the most is government bureaucracy. He talks about the "pioneer spirit" of the region and how Pantex clashes with this image (O'Brien). His efforts during the controversy in the 1990s focused on creating a network of influence individuals that would lobby against expanding the plant.

[3] See the Environment Protection Agency website for a list of the sites and a description of cleanup operations at the Pantex plant. Superfund sites are the nation's most polluted lands where the superfund program is working toward remediation.

Meanwhile, similar operations were conducted by the remaining farming families who still lived next to Pantex and felt threatened by the expansion. Doris and Philip Smith, whose farm abuts the nuclear plant, organized Panhandle Area Neighbors and Landowners (PANAL) to fight the expansion project called Complex 21. Pro and anti-Pantex crowds clashed particularly on the issue of welcoming plutonium processing activities at the plant. Those in favor put forward economic arguments and the number of new jobs that would be created, while critics expressed their concerns for the area's environment and agriculture. The Amarillo Economic Development Corporation spent $350,000 "in the hope of luring" the plutonium processing facilities to Pantex (McBride). Panhandle 2000, a lobbying company in Amarillo that provides services for energy and nuclear industries, distributed leaflets entitled "Why in the world would we want the Pantex expansion? For a lot of good reasons!" They listed economic, technological, and educational opportunities: "The current annual payroll of $115 million could double or triple. […] If Pantex were expanded, we could likely attract some of these private business to the Amarillo area. […] the expanded educational opportunities would give our brightest students a reason to stay, learn, and seek jobs here" (Panhandle 2000).

The Smiths, however, did not want to suffer the same fate as the previous generation who had had to cede land to the Army during the war—including Doris's grandparents who arrived in 1906 and lost their property in 1941. In 1948, Philip's father was the first manager of the TTU research farm, which Doris called a "cover" and a "façade" to maintain the illusion that farming and nuclear weapons are a natural association. When the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) took over, his father helped put up the fence, which they humorously called "the iron curtain." The family continued to grow crops and raise livestock on the land owned by the university. Doris expressed bitterness at the farmers' community never living up to its full potential and debunked the bomb-agriculture alliance by saying, "agriculture is the continuation and propagation of life, it's what it means. Pantex to us is the propagation of death" (Doris and Philip Smith). Despite their history of making a living on their farm, their land was referred to as untillable farmland in the proposal that the city of Amarillo put together in favor of Complex 21. Their revolt was primarily against these lies. A secondary purpose of their protest was to educate people on Pantex and make the word "plutonium a household word" even though they had never heard of it. They met with politicians, industrialists, farmers, cattlemen, and asked for impact studies on agriculture and water to protect the Ogallala Aquifer, which is a water source for eight states. Rumors circulated on the quality of water. Nell Williams, for instance, talked about "one neighbor who found that every time that she took a shower she broke out in a rash," and how Pantex would announce

"that the water was perfectly alright, but that they would now provide drinking water for people who lived around Pantex" (Williams).

According to these retired activists, their protesting resulted in the disclosure of more information. Throughout their involvement, they "always wondered if [they] were hearing the actual truth" (Doris Smith). People accused them of lying and being simple farmers who did not know what they were talking about. In the end, to the regret of some Texan politicians and the Amarillo Economic Development Corp., Pantex lost the processing mission to the Savannah River site in South Carolina in 1998. For all that, the plant did not shut down, contrary to some arguments that had been put forward by local boosters to alarm the public into supporting the project.

Conclusion

In the case of Pantex, the concealment or manipulation of truth inherited from the Cold War era remains a prevalent technique to address some of the most embarrassing aspects of the nuclear weapons complex, all the while promoting its expansion and local economic interests. Residents are entangled in a web of lies and semi-truths that they hear neighbors say, that they read about in the local newspapers, or that Public Relations staff from the plant tell them. But the most powerful lie is the one that many tell themselves: that the plant simply does not exist. Coupled with profound patriotic sentiments and a deeply-rooted sense of fatalism or nuclear numbing, this combination seems to be the key to the industry's deep implantation in the Panhandle.

According to West Texas University professor Alex Hunt, "the region cannot ultimately be epicenter both of the nation's beef production and its plutonium experimentation." Overviewing the region's history and its ties with the rest of the Great Plains, Hunt anticipated that the absence of the nuclear plant would become "arguably a decisive chapter in a continuing story of Great Plains regional decline" (Hunt). However, considering the stance of the current administration and the one-trillion-dollar modernization plan for nuclear warheads and delivery systems the US are currently embarking on, it would rather seem that Pantex will soon have new opportunities to lobby for the expansion of its activities, such as refurbishment, life extension programs, and even, potentially, renewed debate on controversial plutonium pit operations (Egel).

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