PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN has backed the demand that the Federal Government hand over control of millions of acres of land to State governments and private interests. The man charged with the job of carrying out this latest phase in America's historical alienation of the public domain is James Watt, the 43-year-old Interior Secretary and born-again Ctristian, who declares: "My responsibility is to follow the Scriptures, which call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns."
Watt is wasting no time. For, he informed startled Congressmen: "We don't know how many generations we can count on before Jesus returns." He is not impressed by the need to balance exploitation against ecological preservation: "People are provided for until the Lord's return."

THE SAGEBRUSH REBELLION has been called the "most widespread outbreak of sectionalism since the Civil War." The situation of the thirteen Western states of the US is also being compared by Sagebrush Rebels to the original thirteen colonies oppressed by a distant tyranny.

"You want to know what the Sagebrush Rebellion is all about?" asks Dean Rhoads, Nevada rancher. "I can tell you in one sentence – the people resent Washington, DC comin' out here with a packet of regulations and policies tellin' us what to do." Uncle Sam has also been referred to as "that perfidious absentee landlord on the Potomac."

Says Nevada Senator Paul Laxalt, Pres. Reagan's former campaign chairman: "We are seeking nothing more than control over our own destinies." And indeed in the minds and passions of many, the Sagebrush Rebellion has assumed the proportion of a "Second American Revolution".

Fomenting this new land struggle in America is the fact that the national government still controls a huge proportion of the West. Here are the figures: California, 45%; Nevada, 87%; Alaska, 95%; Utah, 66%; Idaho, 66%; Oregon, 52%; Wyoming, 48%; Arizona, 45%; Colorado, 36%; New Mexico, 34%; Montana, 30%; Washington, 29%. In comparison, the Feds own no more than 10% of any state outside the West.

However, the percentages are somewhat misleading. The Western states are far from poor in nonfederal land. The average Western state is so large that a comparison of land area reveals that the nonfederal land area of the typical Western state is bigger than the typical Eastern state.

YET SAGEBRUSH Rebellion flames are being fanned by several bold and brazen legislation steps which have been taken by various Western states towards appropriating vast amounts of federal lands for state control. The first bill was Nevads AB 413. Under its terms Nevada unilaterally appropriates 49 million acres of public lands. Following Nevada's lead, five other Western states – Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming – have passed laws laying claim to the federal lands within their boundaries.

California's proposal AB 2302 is more modest. It appropriates $25,000 to develop a masterplan of all state and federal lands in California. The study is to address questions concerning the legal basis for the state assuming ownership and jurisdiction of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Department of the Interior lands, as well as to survey the costs, economic impacts, and financial implications of such a move. If such legal action is deemed necessary and serves the best interests of the people of California the Attorney General shall take such action.

A group of Western senators have introduced legislation in Congress that would confirm state titles. Introduced into the House of Representatives, HR 7837, entitled the *Western Lands Distribution and Regional Equalization Act of 1980,* its intent is to provide for the cession and conveyance to the states of federally owned unreserved and unappropriated lands and to establish policy, methods, procedures, schedules, and criteria for such transfers. The state land grab would confiscate 544 million acres. Excluded from the takeover would be national parks, monuments, wildlife and bird refuges, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, military bases and land set aside for dams.

Such legislation has a good chance of passing. During a campaign speech to Utah Republicans in Salt Lake City Ronald Reagan declared: "I happen to be one who cheers and supports the Sagebrush Rebellion. Count me in as a Rebel."

Yet exactly how these lands would be managed under state control would vary from state to state. Some would no doubt advocate selling some of the land to private owners. There could be considerable variation from state to state in terms of conservation versus development issues. For example, Idaho laws would dictate sale of much of this land to companies that would quickly turn it into an ecological nightmare – with huge amounts of

REAGAN and the Sagebrush REBELS

minerals, fuels, etc. quickly being drained. In contrast, the general land ethic of the California State Lands Commission is much more of a stewardship approach.

The Rebels themselves catalogue a long list of specific grievances against the feds – cattlemen, miners, and timber companies swear they are being regulated right out of business. City developers say the BLM is holding on to land that western towns need for growth. Complaints include everything from the BLM's wildhorse adoption programme to the Pentagon's grand plan to install the MX missile system in the deserts of Nevada and Utah. The preservation of wilderness areas is also under attack, with environmentalists sometimes referred to as the "cult of toadstool worshippers".

THE REBELLION is supported by thousands of ranchers, miners, truck drivers, teachers, and county employees. Business interests and politicians have capitalized on it. In California many rebels are motorcyclists disgusted with recent federal rules designed to preserve some of the Mojave Desert from their machines. Real estate speculators, miners, oil and gas developers are among the backers elsewhere in the West.

The Western Coalition Clearinghouse in Nevada lists among the groups supporting the rebellion the Western Council of State Governments, the National Association of Counties, the Western State Lands, Commissioners, the Western Association of Attorneys General, and the National Cattlemen's Association.

It is interesting to look at some of the underlying economic motivations of one of the leading spokesmen, cattle rancher Dean Rhoads, In 1967 a federal range survey showed that his grazing privilege on federal lands should be reduced 54% in order to conform to the land's carrying capacity. Subsequently, the ranch went through an adjudication procedure in which the grazing privilege was reduced by 30%. The practical financial effect of such a cut is twofold.

- It becomes harder to make a profit because less range means fewer cattle to sell.
- The grazing privilege has a value in the market place. When a rancher sells his spread, he sells not just the "base" property but the grazing privileges to the federal land attached to it. Thus a reduction in the rancher's grazing privilege directly reduces the sales value of his ranch.

According to Rhoads, the forage right for a single cow on the public range now sells for anywhere from $1,500 to $3,000 in the Elko area – so the 1967 cut represented a hole in the Rhoads family pocket of around $700,000 to $1.4 million in resale rights.

Since his grazing privilege should have been reduced a full 54%, mr. Rhoads has an especially good reason to object to the new federally ordered environmental impact statement process which is due to reach his valley in 1983. If the same conclusion is reached, Dean Rhoads's estate stands to be diminished by another million dollars or so. Multiply that expectation by several hundred ranchers and you end up with a lot of angry constituents.

EARL SANDVIG, forest service range manager, sheds no tears over what he regards as a paper loss. "The rancher did nothing to earn that grazing privilege," he says. "That was a gift from the American people. Today these permits are closed to you and me. If you want to graze your cattle on public land you've got to go to some guy and buy his land and his permit privilege." Sandvig argues in favour of a competitive bid process, modelled after public timber sales. "The average American doesn't have the wildest idea what's goin' on," he contends. "We've given the permittee everything but a title in fee simple to the land."

Such a competitive bid process as Sandvig suggests may very well show that grazing is not the highest and best use of the western range. In the grand scheme of things, public lands produce enough forage for only about 4% of the nation's cattle. The real cattle-raising states – Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa – do so in feedlots. Nevada's annual beef production was 37th in the nation in 1979 – about on par with Vermont.

There was no active Sagebrush Rebellion before the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) was passed in 1976. The act spelled out the BLM's legislative mandate for the first time. It embodied important environmental concerns and declared that it is the national government's policy to keep its land in perpetuity. This marked the official end of an era of do-nothing federal management.

> **Through most of that era, ranchers, miners, oil companies and prospectors had such free rein that the land seemed to be their own personal property. Progress meant development of all possible natural resources.**

In large part, rebels want the transfer so that environmental safeguards can be removed. The anti-environmental backlash is clearly a central force in the rebellion. According to Utah Attorney General Hansen: "If those lands are owned by the state or private interests, they're going to maximize their economic usefulness." He added: "The federal government has been very substantially dominated in recent years by environmental interests."

Idaho Senator Steven D. Symms has a different slant towards the energy development issue: "The same government that didn't allow companies to explore for minerals was willing to draft our sons to send them to Africa to fight over chrome and cobalt. Rather than let companies drill for oil in Idaho or Wyoming or Utah or Colorado, that government was willing to send our boys to the Persian Gulf to keep the sea lands open. And out of this frustration has come the Sagebrush Rebellion.

ALANNA HERTZOG
reports from San Francisco

We've locked up strategic minerals, oil and gas, uranium and coal. Seventy per cent of the federally owned land in the US has been set aside so you can't explore it or extract minerals. I'd rather have my 19-year-old son working on a drill rig in Alaska than carrying a rifle in the Persian Gulf."

SECRETARY of Interior Watt has moved to open wilderness areas for mineral and energy development, protect large corporate farms from losing cheap federal irrigation water, end further national park acquisitions and abolish the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

For now, the pro-development voices of the West are in full cry. But in the view of some resources analysts, this could change with devastating political results for those who fail to gauge accurately the West's changing conditions – particularly the pressures of population growth and energy development on the area's limited supplies of water for drinking and farming and relatively clean air.

The West's critical natural resource issue of the future is water. Its arid regions are fast running out of new sources. Its subsurface aquifers are being depleted. Yet there is little inclination in Washington now to pay for grandiose water projects of any type.

Such circumstances cut to the heart of the West's growing water dilemma. And though most sagebrush rebels apparently haven't realized it yet, the federal government's reluctance to finance any new water projects while pushing for more energy development could throw Reagan right out of the sagebrush saddle.

"If you are going to develop the West's energy resources, you've got to have water," said Helen M. Ingram, a University of Arizona political science professor, "and if you are not going to develop any new sources of water, then you will have to take the water from the present users. And these are primarily farmers."

In addition, the population boom is continuing to put more pressure on the region's static water supplies. Since the shift to the south-west is predominantly urban, cities have grown largely at the expense of irrigated agriculture.

The Administration's announced policy to expand energy, and mineral development in the West's federal lands, therefore, will aggravate what already is becoming an increasingly cruel competition for the region's limited water supply. According to Ingram: "If one includes both projected and planned energy development, the total projected demand for water may well exceed surface supply in a decade."

She predicts that when the West has to accommodate energy and mineral development by giving up water for farming and domestic needs, the Rebellion will undergo an abrupt metamorphosis. Once the energy-water-environmental trade-offs become clear, state governments will opt against energy and mineral development. They will not want to sacrifice their constituent vital water uses for the uncertain economic gains from oil shale projects and more coal-fired power plants, particularly if the major benefits end up in the East or in Southern California.

So far, Watts does not appear to be taking the evolving dynamics of the West's water politics very seriously. In a recent interview he repeatedly stressed his belief that "the market place" would achieve all the Administration's goals. "There is no national water policy that will work," says Watt. "There will need to be state and regional water policies and programmes. The federal role should be restricted to helping states come together to develop policies that will assure water quantity and quality that are essential."

Western concerns over farming, population growth, fishing and the environment may also have to contend with the national security issue. Before the House Interior and Insular Affairs Subcommittee on Mines and Mining, Sec. of State Alexander Haig, Jr. warned of an impending "resource war" with the Soviet Union over control of such strategic minerals as cobalt, titanium, chromite and zinc. To forestall the potential calamity of Russian interference with our foreign suppliers, he urged that the government allow US mining companies "to seek our domestic deposits of the strategic minerals we need."

OIL AND MINERAL interests have raised the issue of the lock-up of federal lands through wilderness studies and fish and wildlife refuges. But just how much of the 823 million acres of federally owned land – a third of the country – is actually off limits to mineral and energy development is not clear.

Ironically, 43% of the federal land withdrawn in five states and estimated to have energy potential is managed by the Defence Department. The Bureau of Land Management, the second biggest owner, controls only 17%. The 11.1 million acres located in Colorado, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico and Wyoming represent 55% of the total federal acreage withdrawn from mineral leasing in those states.

Sagebrush Rebellion or no, however, the debate between stewardship ethics and longterm production vs. development for immediate gain promises to be tense and drawn out on local, state, federal and indeed global levels. After all, no matter what level of political and bureaucratic reality we are dealing with, actions taken will reflect certain constellations of human needs and greeds, values and understandings. The pendulum promises to swing dramatically between the development and conservation ethics for some time to come.

The best purpose that can be served by the Sagebrush Rebellion may well be in raising questions rather than in supplying answers. There is a real consciousness-raising task here in terms of asking "Who owns the Earth? How much is it worth? Who benefits and who loses?"

LAND GRAB CREATES CULTURE CRISIS

ILLEGAL LAND-GRABBING is destroying the culture of South America's Indians, according to a report submitted to the International Non-Governmental Organisations Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Land, held in Geneva in September.

"From the Mayan-populated highlands of Guatemala in the north, down to the Mapuche reservations of Chile in its southernmost tip, governments have used both extremes of violence and repressive legislation to break up Indian communities and organisations, and thus prevent them from regaining or retaining those land areas which are rightfully theirs by law," declared the London-based Anti-Slavery Society.

Indians have mobilised themselves into defensive groups, but this has intensified State repression. Tension has grown, leading to murder – by both sides – in the fight for land.

"World opinion must realise that the protection and recognition of Indian land rights is no longer a charitable or humanitarian act. It is becoming a precondition for peace and stability in Latin America,' warns the Society.