

TIME magazine, in its cover story of August 23, called it the "Land Sale of the Century."

The Reagan Administration plans to sell large amounts of federally-owned land to private buyers or to lower levels of government. Over a period of five years, 35 million acres are to be disposed of in this way.

That's a lot of land. But there is a lot more in the public domain, totalling nearly 750 million acres – or one-third of the land area of the United States.

This is often cited as a shocking fact – but much of this land is wilderness, not wanted by anybody, and much is abandoned land that has reverted to the public domain.

National parks constitute a fair-sized portion. There are sites for government installations, some of which are no longer needed (they are included in the package for sale).

There is also a considerable amount of grazing and timber land; elsewhere, oil and minerals are being discovered, also on the continental shelf.

**I**N 1968, it was estimated that public revenue from all federal lands would amount to \$877 million by 1980. Actually, it was much more, and in 1981, it totalled \$12.6 billion.

This is expected to rise still further in the coming years, and this is with government collecting only a fraction of the worth of its land.

There is a brisk business in obtaining leases from the government and reselling them at a big profit – a clear indication of the potential of public land.

The Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, claims that private enterprise could use the public lands much more efficiently than government and this is cited as a reason for "privatizing" public lands.

*This is a switch from previous policy.*

Marion Clawson, a former Director of the Bureau of Land Management (a unit of the Department of the Interior), with Burnell Held, wrote a book on *The Federal Lands (1957 and 1968)* and outlined the development of public land policy.

● At first, the era of acquisition, followed by the era of disposal.

## What Reagan could do – if only he would try



**ROBERT CLANCY**  
reports from  
NEW YORK

● Then, with an eye to future conservation, the era of reservation and custodial management.

● And from 1950 onwards, the era of intensive management, whereby the government developed multiple uses, derived increasing revenues, and did not seek to increase the public domain but to retain and manage the land already held.

Messrs. Clawson and Held considered this a culminating and long-term era, but they reckoned without Messrs. Reagan and Watt. The quarterly publication of the Bureau of Land Management, previously *Our Public Lands*, is now called *Your Public Lands*. A sign of the times?

**T**HERE has been a sharp reaction to the new policy, mostly from conservation groups – almost the only organized opposition – who object to the squandering of our heritage and against "selling our birthright for a mess of pottage."

There is some question, too, as to whether private interests always use land in the best way, since they may be inclined to use it for quick profits, neglecting the long-range interest.

Thus, private ranch land has been overgrazed and private timber land has been overcut, whereas on federal land, a policy of conservation is followed.

This may give rise to the view that private lands are used more productively than public lands.

However, as pointed out by advocates of privatizing, government can keep an inefficient operation going because it does not have to be as cost conscious as a private enterprise.

**A** PANEL on the subject was sponsored by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (a supply-side organization with which George Gilder is associated). The chairman was Richard Stroup, Director of Policy Analysis of the Department of the Interior, and five panellists agreed on the desirability of privatization.

Interestingly, however, one participant, Willima Tucker, a former editor of *Harper's* magazine, saw the difference between government as manager of the public lands and as landlord.

He said: "I don't think there's any problem at all with the government owning land as long as it's willing to simply act the part of the landlord and collect the rents. The problem comes when the government starts playing the role of the capitalist as well."

This distinction deserves to be emphasized. The other panellists did not seem to appreciate it. Mr. Stroup referred to land as "a means of production," confounding the matter. (Amazing that conservatives go for Marxian definitions!)

*The revenue obtainable from the sale of public lands is small compared with the amount that could be raised as public revenue if the full rental value were taken.*

It seems certain, however, that the interests which are eyeing the proposed sale are quite willing to confound private use and private collection of rent, all in the name of private enterprise.

The issue goes beyond conservation, despite the fact that conservationists seem the only large group opposed to the sale.

*The issue is the right of the people to the land of the country – not just public land but all land.*

This right is not inconsistent with private possession and use of land. A private user satisfies the equal rights of all others when he pays the rent of land to all the people.

If this lesson could be learned, it points the way to the solution of both private and public lands. Public lands should be leased out at full rental value, and private lands should be subject to full land value taxation.