

# GREAT BASIN IMAGERY IN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF YUCCA MOUNTAIN\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Place imagery in printed news is a vital but overlooked feature of the public debate regarding the disposal of the nation's nuclear waste in the proposed Yucca Mountain repository northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada. A content analysis of newspaper coverage reveals that participants use Great Basin imagery in the rhetorical strategies involved in making arguments for and against the site. This article identifies specific elements in the news-production process that privilege certain conceptualizations of the Great Basin over others, and it highlights alternative visions that have appeared in editorials, travel pieces, and commentaries. Taken together, the data and analysis suggest that journalistic sensitivity to value-laden imagery can result in more balanced and critical news accounts of public debate. *Keywords:* *Great Basin, media, Nevada, Yucca Mountain.*

For most Americans, the Great Basin is nothingness. In the popular imagination, the basin is a dry, crater-pocked land of endless scrub populated by tarantulas and jackrabbits. It is seen as a place without use or value, a wasteland that has intimidated the most intrepid of travelers. After explorer John C. Frémont first identified it as a distinctive physiographic province in 1844, the basin entertained a succession of engineers, agriculturalists, and developers who tried to transform this part of the nation into a productive landscape (Raymond 1997; Francaviglia 2003). With the notable exception of Las Vegas, Nevada these attempts failed, and even this burgeoning metropolis is rapidly confronting the region's physical limitations on urban development (Moehring 1989). Perhaps as a consequence of its seemingly incalculable expanse, the basin's residents—urban and rural—have traditionally lacked a strong regional identity, a situation exacerbated by the recent influx of Californians (Starrs and Wright 1995). Nevertheless, the Great Basin is of great spiritual and cultural significance to many people; it is a place that “give[s] us a glimpse of both infinity and eternity here on earth” (Francaviglia 2003, 205).

Great Basin imagery has been instrumental in promoting Yucca Mountain, a ridge of lithified volcanic ash located some 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, as an ideal site at which to entomb the nation's spent nuclear waste. On the surface, the debate over Yucca Mountain turns on the geological suitability of the site and the logistics involved in transporting loads of nuclear waste across the country to a single repository in the desert. But the debate itself is inherently geographical, and its central question undeniably spatial: Is it safer to bury nuclear waste in a single location or to maintain the current decentralized arrangement of more than 130

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