Geographic center monument at Lebanon, Kansas, dedicated in 1941.
Kansas “Dis-centers”: The Competition to Claim Ownership of the Center of the Nation

by Jeffrey P. Stone

Murray Wilson must have been surprised in early 1940 when he received a letter from the small town of Lebanon in north-central Kansas, requesting his assistance in locating the geographic center of the nation. His company—Wilson and Company, Incorporated—had been founded in 1932 to provide surveying and engineering services for the Kansas Fish and Game Commission, so validating a small town’s claim to fame was certainly not a routine request. Lebanon city boosters expressed concern that a “well known map maker” had recently maintained that the geographic center of the United States was located across the state border in southern Nebraska.¹ This dark news contradicted Lebanon folklore and civic pride, which held that the prestigious geographic point was located in or near Lebanon itself. The city’s hastily formed “Hub Club” sought Wilson’s assistance in reclaiming the national landmark from Nebraska and forestalling all other potential claims.² Intrigued by the letter, Wilson agreed to Lebanon’s request, with surveying engineer Lester T. Hagadorn leading the review of 1898 survey data from the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (USCGS). The USGS had initially calculated the position of the national geographic center in 1891 but the 1898 calculations were more recent. Their findings validated the city’s assertion—the geographic center of the nation was, in fact, located a few miles northwest of the town.

In the ensuing months and years, however, numerous other Kansas towns as well as several municipalities in other states argued that they, not Lebanon, possessed the national geographic center. This contentious competition for rights to claim the nation’s center only grew over the next two decades, becoming part of a larger competition across America for local and state tourism dollars, industrial development, strategic defense operations, and every conceivable claim of greatness. Citizens of Kansas, often led by resident partisans from the tiny town of Lebanon, historically have considered

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2. See manuscript titled “Lebanon, Kansas—the Town in the Middle: The Geographic Center of the United States” (attributed to the wife of Roscoe R. Wilson, mayor of Lebanon, Kansas, January 1961), 3. Special Collections, Lebanon Public Library, Lebanon, Kansas. The original title of the new booster club was the “U.S. Hub Club,” but all subsequent references refer to the organization as the “Hub Club.”
their national geographic centrality as inseparable from their very state and town identities. But as the twentieth century progressed, Kansans faced increasing competition from within and without the state for the elusive claim of national centrality and all that it seemed to promise.

Historians of urban planning have recognized that the conscious development of city identities associated with a unique location or geography “is almost as old as civic government itself.” Urban chambers of commerce and tourism departments have repeatedly utilized place to distinguish their respective cities from nearby competitors, to attract tourism and other industries, and to foster pride among their residents. These promotional endeavors are often integral to city “boosterism,” “city branding,” and “place branding.” This article will show that the quest to claim the geographic center of the nation as a civic identity not only involved the town of Lebanon and its rival urban claimants but was also a competition between Kansas and other states.

American cities and towns have long self-identified with place. San Francisco, California, is known as “the City by the Bay”; Denver, Colorado, billed itself as “the Queen City of the Plains” and more recently as “the Mile-High City”; Kansas City, Kansas, is identified as “the Heart of America” due to its central location in the nation; and, as historian Jay Price recently demonstrated in the pages of Kansas History, Wichita, Kansas, has tried out several different monikers, including “Peerless Princess of the Southwest.” Furthermore, the historical processes of national territorial expansion, territory and state building, and immigration into the wide and varied landscape have fostered an equally varied array of place-oriented civic identities that extend beyond the scope of the American city. One recalls the regional sectionalism between the North, South, and West of the 1850s that relied on identity labels inspired as much by politics as by location. Frontier states have often promoted themselves as “gateways to the West” due to their outlying locations and proximity to migration routes, natural waterways, and east-west-oriented railroads. Other states have cultivated identities based on natural resources and geographic features located within their borders. Modern state automobile license plates testify to these enduring place-oriented identities. Arizona still calls itself “the Grand Canyon State,” Massachusetts is advertised as “the Bay State,” and Arkansas’s nickname of “the Diamond State” touts its possession of the only diamond mine in the nation. The proliferation and endurance of these regional and state place-oriented identities highlight the power of location in the ongoing narrative of human settlement and contest that define much of the larger American identity.

Yet academics of social planning have largely ignored the topic of place-oriented identities at the regional and state levels. This omission is in part due to the “relatively few articles to be found in the academic literature with regard to the promotion of locations as brands.” In addition, community studies since the late Victorian Era (when modern social planning theories began to materialize) have focused on the industrial city and all of its ills as the de facto social problem to be solved. In


6. Most historians of urban planning recognize Sir Ebenezer Howard’s 1898 book, To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform, as the beginning of modern thought on the subject. This book was later reissued under
Obsession over the national geographic center increased after 1817 with the commencement of the first federal triangulation measurements of the nation. Beginning in the environs of New York City, federal survey markers—called national geodetic data—were placed ever westward by the USCGS to better map the expanding nation. In 1891 an important federal triangulation station marker was placed on Meades Ranch in Osborne County. The site of this key marker was chosen partly due to its close proximity to the geographic center of the United States, which had been calculated to lie forty miles to the north (near Lebanon). This map was published in 1901.

reality, however, place-oriented civic identities are quite often attached to areas of considerably broader limits than a city.

Efforts to specifically locate the geographic center of the nation, and claim it as a civic place identity, began in the earliest years of the republic. In 1779 Southerners claimed that the national center resided in Georgetown, Maryland, (now D.C.) so as to promote the building of the new national capital in their port city. Citizens of Wright’s Ferry, Pennsylvania, countered that their city was a more logical center of the nation. The current site of Washington, D.C., was selected for the capital in 1791, both for its proximity to the nation’s geographic center and as part of a political deal between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. Obsession over the national geographic center increased after 1817 with the commencement of the first federal triangulation measurements of the nation. Beginning in the environs of New York City, federal survey markers—called national geodetic data—were placed ever westward by the USCGS to better map the expanding nation. By 1899 the national triangulation system had been established linking the various geodetic data in a coordinated network.7

the title Garden Cities of To-Morrow and underwent several revisions. The latest revision was published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press in 1965. Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of To-Morrow (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1965).

In this new national mapping survey, Kansas played a central role. In 1891 an important federal triangulation station marker was placed on Meades Ranch in Osborne County. The site of this key marker was chosen partly due to its close proximity to the geographic center of the United States, which had been calculated to lie forty miles to the north (near Lebanon). The Meades Ranch marker placement also pinpointed the intersection of two major arcs of triangulation: the 39th parallel and the 98th meridian. Together, these factors prompted the USCGS in 1901 to officially designate the Meades Ranch marker as the singular base for “the control of all triangulation in the United States.” It was immediately relabeled the Geodetic Datum of the United States. The importance of the Kansas marker was further enhanced in 1913 when Canada and Mexico adopted it as the base datum (reference point) for their respective national surveys. Its official title then became the North American Datum to reflect its new international and continental importance.8

The establishment and prominence of the Meades Ranch triangulation marker cemented—at least for the federal government—the placement of the geographic center of the nation near Lebanon. Citizens of the town rejoiced in their new official prestige, but this federal declaration went largely ignored by rival claimants within and without Kansas. In fact, the establishment of the North American Datum coincided with a revived debate over the true location of the center of the nation, in part due to the arbitrary nature of defining and determining the geographic center of an irregularly shaped territory. As a 1964 report from the U.S. Department of the Interior noted, “There is no generally accepted definition of geographic center, and no completely satisfactory method for determining it. . . . Because of this, there may be as many geographic centers of a state or country as there are definitions of the term.”9 When surveyors at the USCGS placed the national center near Lebanon in 1898, they defined the national geographic center as “that point on which the surface of the area [of a map of the United States] would balance if it were a plane of uniform thickness.” They constructed a map of the nation, printed it on stiff paper, and balanced it on the head of a pin. The balance point was determined to be “about 1 mile north of Mud: The Secret History of Washington, D.C. (Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2014), ix; Walter H. Schoewe, “Kansas and the Geodetic Datum of North America,” Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science 51 (March 1948): 121.


and 1 mile west of Lebanon.” The USCGS admitted that this deterministic method produced results that “might be off [by] about 10 miles.” The ambiguity of defining and determining the nation’s geographic center is probably why the federal government has never sanctioned any official marker for the site.10

Citizens of Lebanon were undaunted by the ambiguity of their claim to fame. Indeed, by 1941 city boosters already had a history of defending their geographic notoriety. Though spurred by the 1912 addition of the final two states to the continental United States—Arizona and New Mexico—feverish public debate over the proper location of the center of the nation was hardly unprecedented. The U.S. Geologic Survey (USGS) was inundated by “letters of inquiry from persons wanting to know ‘where they’re at,’ [and] where the geographical center of the United States is,” reported the Topeka State Journal in September 1922. Shortly after America’s entrance into World War I, the U.S. Army erected a monument locating the center of the nation near the newly constructed Camp Funston on Fort Riley, Kansas.11 Around the same time, a farmer in Reamsville, Kansas (in Smith County, near Lebanon), posted a sign denoting his property as the center of the nation. These claims not only challenged Lebanon’s claim but also challenged astonishing contemporary claims by boosters in Boston, Massachusetts, that their city was the “hub” of the nation. The USGS responded by pointing a “finger of scorn at the Massachusetts city” for not being the center of the nation and also for “not even being the center of the state.” Citing USCGS survey coordinates, the Topeka State Journal gleefully proclaimed on September 5, 1922, that “Boston as a ‘hub’ as it claims to be, doesn’t amount to a row of pins” and that any “ideal ‘hub’ of population, government and industry should also be the geographic center.”12 While the article refrained from naming Reamsville or Lebanon as the proper claimant to the national center, it did acknowledge the center’s location in Smith County.

Despite these rival claims, and in response to the early 1940 challenge by the “well known mapmaker,” the citizens of Lebanon hastily mobilized to validate their claimed ownership of the national center. On March 11, 1940, members of the town’s Chamber of Commerce, called the Lebanon Commercial Club, agreed to form the Lebanon Hub Club with the specific goal of publicizing the town’s unique proximity to the geographic center of the nation. The new organization was presided over by Raymond J. Schuete, owner of the Schuete Motor Company, and initially consisted of 109 “business men and women of the Community.”13 Other members

13. See “Lebanon, Kansas—the Town in the Middle,” 3.

Marie Beck, Etta Beck Warner, and an unknown person pose in front of the Lebanon Hub Club’s monument marking the “Geographic Center of the United States” in this 1953 photograph.
included town founder Gay L. Felton, drug store owner C. J. Arbuthnot, and resident Gladys Kennedy. As of this writing, Mrs. Kennedy is the last surviving member of the Hub Club, and at ninety-eight years of age she proudly carries the moniker of “the oldest person in Lebanon.” In the summer of 1940, one of the Hub Club’s first initiatives was to erect a sign advertising the national center on Main Street in the town square. A plot of land measuring approximately one-half acre located in the “center area” was secured by Hub Club members Roy R. Wilson and P. A. Derge for the sum of fifty dollars. The land, to be held in the public domain, was located approximately 1,340 feet west of property locally known as “the Grib Farm.”

The Lebanon Hub Club’s most enduring accomplishment was the construction of a stone-and-mortar monument marking the center of the United States on the newly acquired property. Dedicated on June 29, 1941, the six-foot-tall edifice’s location was based on the coordinates provided by the aforementioned Wilson and Company the previous year. It must be noted, however, that although the USCGS acknowledged that the Lebanon marker “may be considered for all practical purposes in its correct position,” federal coordinates of the national geographic center placed it roughly 2,270 feet northwest of the Lebanon monument. The rapidity of the monument’s construction is evidenced by the fact that although a time capsule containing “maps, pictures, letters, magazines and newspapers” was arranged to be buried under the monument by the Hub Club, construction was completed before the capsule was donated. Instead, the Hub Club settled for a simple registration book, encased in a metal box on a pole situated next to the marker, to record the names and places of origin of future visitors. Hasty construction also negatively impacted the landscaping around the monument. Rapid leveling by heavy machinery of the monument site grounds apparently removed too much topsoil to allow for the planting of trees and grass there. This sad news was discovered by the Hub Club in April 1947 when it voted to improve the monument grounds with landscaping. Though trees were successfully planted on the site later that year, it was only after Hub Club president, C. R. Cline, had consulted with a professional “nurseryman” on how best to replace the topsoil. The club then erected a large city-owned sign on Highway 36 near the outskirts of Lebanon to advertise the monument.

Lebanon’s new geographic center monument was immediately embraced and celebrated by various state agencies and officeholders. In 1941 the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) granted the monument official state recognition and installed a state historical marker nearby. Kansas Supreme Court Justice Hugo T. Wedell, the featured speaker at the dedication of the booster sign in late June 1941, proclaimed the site “sacred [and]
hallowed ground.” The Kansas State Highway Commission (KSHC) also lent its support, with KSHC public relations representative Leslie Edmonds speaking at the dedication of the monument. Access to the monument was improved when the KSHC constructed a mile-long blacktop road connecting it to State Highway 281 (later renamed the American Legion Highway) in 1942. That same year, the KSHC also began regularly noting the national center in its state road maps, a departure from the sporadic references of the 1930s. In a similar vein, the Kansas Industrial Development Commission (KIDC) began publishing state travel maps depicting Lebanon as the “Geographic Center of the United States” in 1945. Thus, by the mid-1940s the national geographic center complex was an integral part of Lebanon’s civic identity and Kansas state pride.

The state of Kansas emerged from World War II with two potentially powerful, federally endorsed “central location” landmarks with which to attract tourism and postwar industry. But although the two most prolific state booster commissions, the KSHC and the KIDC, had teamed up since 1941 to produce “attractive folders and maps telling the story of Kansas to the nation,” they never gave the two markers equal billing. From 1945 to 1950 the geographic center of the nation was highly publicized while the North American Datum site was largely ignored. This ranking was rather at odds with the official federal establishment of the latter and the local, rather ambiguous origins of the former. A categorical difference between the two markers may explain the discrepancy in their public notoriety. The geographic center of the nation as a valuable point of state and local pride has always been vulnerable to dispute due to the multiple ways it can be calculated. Rival inter-city and inter state claims have kept the topic of the national center recognizable to the public. The placement of the national geodetic center, by contrast, near the convergence of two preexisting survey lines, was largely an arbitrary, although scientifically exact, endeavor not open to public debate. The esoteric nature of the geodetic marker and lack of debate over its precise location has relegated it to back page news. Moreover, it is probably true that most Americans then and now have never heard of the North American Datum, nor do they appreciate its importance to geodesy. Dissimilar accessibility of the two markers may also explain the difference in their public appeal. Simply put, the geographic center of the nation was located near a major state highway on public land, while the North American Datum was enclaved on remote private agricultural property.

The unwelcoming inaccessibility of the North American Datum marker is evident in many of the contemporary documents that described its location. In 1948 the Kansas State Geological Survey (KSGS) described it as “at a place 8 miles east and 14½ miles south of the intersection of county road 388 with K.8 in the east part of Osborne . . . on pasture land known as Meades Ranch.” That same year the Kansas City Times likewise described it as “a little bronze marker sunk in a cement block on Meades Ranch.” Ten years later the Smith County Pioneer lamented a two-mile horse ride through fenced fields and that “when you’ve traversed the prairie all you find is a circular cement mound set with a bronze seal.” The North America Datum marker was not recognized in the National Register of Historic Places until 1973, and even then its location was described as “a circular concrete marker no more than six inches high and two feet across situated in an isolated pasture. . . . The site is not readily accessible; the only approach is by way of rough ranch trails.” This desolate rural setting offers a stark contrast with the easily approachable geographic center located just off the American Legion Highway.

Contributing to a lack of public interest in the North American Datum marker is that the inconspicuous metal disc, unlike the beflagged geographic center stone monument, is purely scientific in nature, thus holding little interest for a public unmoved by meridians and


Kansas “Dis-centers” 55
parallels. The lack of public concern with the Meades Ranch marker was summed up by the Topeka Daily Capital in December 1946 with the declaration that “nobody really cares except mapmakers, geologists, geographers, weather men, oil experts and mining engineers who depend on a fixed point for making geodetic surveys.” The KSGS noted the difference in public appeal of the two markers in 1948 when it stated, “Unlike the geographic center which is of great public interest as evidenced by the thousands of visitors who have recorded their presence in the registration book at the monument site but which has no practical or scientific significance, the geodetic datum is of utmost practical and scientific value.” The situation was unchanged ten years later, according to the Smith County Pioneer when it observed, “Two continental markers bedded in the Kansas prairie 30 miles apart—one lonely and unattended, the other a center of controversy—provide a stony study in contrasts.”

In the final year of World War II, Kansan promotion of the geographic center of the nation increased so as to encourage industrial relocation to the state. The KIDC endeavored—as did numerous industrial booster commissions in other states in the West and South—to attract factories from dense industrial belts in New England and on the West Coast. This was part of a larger national campaign led by influential Senator Pat McCarran (D-Nevada), who led a bipartisan Senate commission of rural, underindustrialized states to investigate the negative economic impact of regionally concentrating national industry. Although Kansas never formally joined this coalition, the KIDC nevertheless echoed the Senate commission’s recommendation that the national economy would benefit by dispersing its factories away from coastal areas and into the open spaces of the West and South.

To support its assertions, the KIDC published a widely distributed, full-color pamphlet in 1944, designed to compel coastal industrialists to “investigate Kansas for good living conditions, pleasant environment and outstanding industrial opportunities.” In its argument for industrial relocation to the state, the pamphlet repeatedly capitalized on Kansas’s geographic centrality; the state’s location “At the Geographical Center of the Nation” was listed as the foremost attraction.

In language similar to that of the pamphlet, many advertisements referenced the state’s geographic centrality as a major industrial draw with statements

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23. Sidney A. Govenar, “NE Senators Ready Fight against McCarran,” Nashua Telegram, September 28, 1945. Although the membership of this committee changed over time, its core state membership was represented by Senators Guy Gillette (D-IA), Orrice Abram Murdock, Jr. (D-UT), John W. Thomas (R-ID), Gerald Nye (D-ND), Edward V. Robertson (R-WY), and John Hollis Bankhead II (D-AL).

24. Let’s Look Into Kansas, pamphlet, Kansas Industrial Development Commission (Topeka: KIDC Press, 1944). State Archives Division,
including “Kansas [is] in the exact center of the nation” and “Kansas, being in the center, is closer in time and distance to ALL other sections of the country than any other point can be.” Although it is impossible to determine how many factories, if any, relocated to Kansas in response to the pamphlet, the following year the KIDC reported that it had received 257 replies from industrialists seeking information about the state’s suitability for relocation there.  

The onset of the Cold War in the wake of World War II altered the relocation argument from one of economics to one of perceived military necessity. Fueled by events such as the Greek Civil War and Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain Speech” as well as fears that the United States might lose its nuclear arms monopoly due to Soviet weapons advancements—leaving coastal areas vulnerable to Soviet bombers—Midwestern states were now seen by many as logical locations for American industry. Many dispersal advocates argued that the best place to relocate industry was the state of Kansas due to its possession of the geographic center of the nation.

One of the earliest to champion Kansas as the place best suited for the new strategic dispersal of industry was Massachusetts multimillionaire economist Roger W. Babson. In mid-October 1946 the seventy-one-year-old Babson. In mid-October 1946 the seventy-one-year-old Massachusetts multimillionaire economist Roger W. Babson arrived in the small Kansas town of Eureka to begin scouting locations to build his third college, to be christened “Utopia” College. The stately name was a reference to Sir Thomas More, the British philosopher who had written a treatise titled “Utopia” in the early sixteenth century that linked Christianity and geographic centrality. With this in mind, Babson’s first choice for the Magic Circle’s epicenter was the nearby farming community of Utopia (roughly six miles north of Eureka), but the town proved too small for his plans. His ultimate selection of Eureka was no doubt bolstered by his admiration for noted journalist and social commentator William Allen White. Although Babson and White had never met (White died in 1944), Babson had been attracted to the author’s heartland values; his denunciation of America’s great urban centers as a moral “menace to America;” and his purposeful, lifelong residence in the small Kansas town of Emporia (located forty miles north of Eureka).
Emporia’s geographic centrality in the nation and its small-town middle-class progressivism were likely draws for both men. With Eureka at its center, Babson saw his Magic Circle as the logical strategic, economic, and ideological refuge for American industry in the early Cold War period, and he began touting the region as “the richest in time of peace, safest in time of war.”


Babson’s selection of Kansas as the future center of the Magic Circle in part reflected his love of maps and globes. The Babson Institute dedicated an entire wing to his collection of rare and historic maps—maps that, he noted, reminded him of both his “ancestry and the possibilities of the future.” In his 1949 autobiography, entitled Actions and Reactions, he boasted of possessing the “first and oldest map of the United States.”


31. “The Magic Circle,” 82. See Caldwell News, June 6, 1953. The Babson Globe was officially dedicated in 1955. An image of the globe was featured in an ad for Bethlehem Steel in the same year. See Bethlehem Steel ad in U.S. News and World Report 39 (November 18, 1955): 168. The globe fell into disrepair over the years and was refurbished in 1993. For images of the refurbished globe, see http://www.babson.edu/about-babson/at-a-glance/babsons-history/archives-and-collections/Pages/the-babson-world-globe.aspx. Notably, the 1955 globe displayed the Magic Circle, but the revised 1993 globe did not.

Roger W. Babson, an advocate of national industrial decentralization, selected the town of Eureka, Kansas, as the center of his “Magic Circle,” a geographic region chiefly comprising the states of Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. All were selected primarily for their strategic inaccessibility and perceived industrial potential. Eureka would serve as the educational and industrial “capital” of the Magic Circle, as well as the home of Babson’s Utopia College. His promotion of the “Magic Circle” erroneously identified Eureka as the center of the nation. His qualifications of “almost” and “practically” when describing Eureka’s national geographic centrality hint that he knew of Lebanon’s certified claim to the center of the nation.

Surely Babson’s affinity for maps, coupled with his statistical acumen and love of cartography were strangely absent from promotions of the Magic Circle that erroneously described Eureka, Kansas, as the center of the nation. Despite Eureka’s location 184 miles southeast of the Lebanon marker, in 1946 Babson described Eureka’s location as “almost the exact center of the U.S.” and in “the center of the country.” In March of the following year he stated that “the geographical center of [the Magic Circle] is Eureka, Kan., which also is practically at the center of the entire United States.”


However, Johnson quotes journalist Walter Lippman, who stated that White’s residence in Emporia, with its location at the “geographical heart of America,” reinforced White’s conviction that he was “specially equipped to interpret America’s soul.”
obession with Kansan geographic centrality, would have familiarized him with maps produced by the KSHS and KIDC—state agencies that had been boosting Lebanon’s cartographic claim since the early 1940s. Although no direct cooperation between Babson, the KSHS, and the KIDC to promote Babson’s Magic Circle or Utopia College has been found, maps produced by the two state organizations were quickly amended to include Babson’s vision. As an example, the small town of Utopia had not appeared on KSHS state tourism maps before 1947 but regularly appeared thereafter, as did Utopia College, until 1960. These sudden, yet temporary, state map references to Utopia and the new college handily coincided with Babson’s national campaign to disperse industry and college students to the area. Moreover, Babson’s appointment of Dr. Walter A. Bowers as president of Utopia College in 1947 hinted at an informal tie between the college, the Magic Circle, and the KIDC, as it coincided with Bowers’s research for his coauthored 1948 book titled Industrial Development in Kansas, published in coordination with the University of Kansas and the KIDC. Yet despite the contemporary KSHS and KIDC promotions of both the Magic Circle and Lebanon’s possession of the geographic center of the nation, Babson and Bowers never publicly acknowledged Lebanon’s marker or its importance. On the contrary, their frequent labeling of Eureka as the “center of the nation” detracted from Lebanon’s pridelful claim.

The commencement of Babson’s 1946 campaign to disperse national industry to Kansas barely presaged the federal government’s initial efforts to disperse defense-related industries away from large urban centers the following year. Although the U.S. Army and Navy had studied “the merits of industrial dispersal . . . of key defense materials and factories” in early 1946, important federal legislation on the matter began with the 1947 National Security Act, which prioritized the “strategic relocation of industries, services, Government and economic activities . . . which [are] essential to the Nation’s security.” The onset of the Korean War in 1950 prompted President Harry S. Truman to issue an executive order on dispersal in September of that year as part of the larger Defense Production Act, which offered federal tax incentives to industries building new factories outside coastal industrial zones.

Several defense-related government and industrial operations chose to relocate to the Midwest due to the region’s relative inaccessibility to Soviet nuclear bombers and proximity to the geographic center of the nation. The Strategic Air Command relocated from Andrews Field, Maryland, to Offut Field, Nebraska, in 1948 based upon the new site’s “strategic location near the geographical center of the United States.” The following year, the U.S. Air Force convinced the Boeing Aircraft Corporation to build its new B-47 plant in Wichita, Kansas, rather than near its corporate headquarters in Seattle, Washington, prompting fears among coastal defense contractors that the federal government was “in favor of dispersal to the Midwest.” In 1950 the Chance-Vought Aircraft Division relocated for strategic reasons from Stratford, Connecticut, to Dallas, Texas, to build its new fighter planes for the U.S. Navy. Federal dispersal policies factored heavily in the 1951 relocation of Bell Helicopter headquarters from Buffalo, New York, to Fort Worth, Texas, the move promoted as “in keeping with military requirements of dispersion as well as the company’s long-range program.” Missouri profited heavily from federal dispersal of military resources to the Midwest. In 1955 the U.S. Air Force chose to build a $10 million rocket-engine plant at Fort Crowder in Southwest Missouri because the site “conform[ed] with the policy of dispersing critical production and test facilities.” Additionally, the army base at Fort Leonard Wood, constructed and given temporary wartime status in 1940, was made a permanent installation in 1956 partly due to its location “far enough removed from large industrial centers to minimize atomic bomb fall-out hazards.”

38. “U.S. Army Fort Leonard Wood Means Big Industry for Missouri,” Missouri Business 7 (October 1955): 6–7; Missouri Chamber of Commerce
Despite efforts in 1946 and 1947 by the Kansas Academy of Science to have the Lebanon national geographic marker recognized as a national landmark, the city’s claim was frequently challenged by nearby cities and states in the crush to attract dispersed industries and federal offices from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s. Competing city and state boosters frequently described their locations as near the geographic center while omitting any mention of Lebanon, cleverly de-emphasizing the city while glomming on to the marker’s fame. A booster of Denver, Colorado, employed just such a strategy in late 1946 during a campaign to relocate the national capital there. In an article appearing in the New York Times in October of that year, the Denver enthusiast asserted that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself had suggested moving the U.S. Supreme Court and the White House to Denver in a conversation with Justice William O. Douglas as early as 1941. Denver (342 miles from Lebanon) was lauded as “a mountain city only a few hundred miles from the point in northern Kansas that marks the exact center of the nation.” Similarly, an April 1950 Wall Street Journal article described Wichita, Kansas (160 miles from Lebanon), as a “Kansas community near the geographic center of the United States . . . fast becoming the center of the light plane industry.”

The most ambitious claim of proximity to the national center, however, was made by a spokesman for the General Electric Corporation in 1951. In a Wall Street Journal interview, the company’s executive vice president announced plans to build an industrial park “near the geographic center of the United States” and named Louisville, Kentucky (an outrageous 695 miles from Lebanon), as the primary consideration. A more inventive challenge to Lebanon’s claim to fame arose as a by-product of a federal court case. Federal prosecutors in Chicago (588 miles from Lebanon) had filed an antimonopoly lawsuit against the Du Pont Corporation in the summer of 1948. Attorneys for Du Pont proceeded to file a petition in November of the following year for a change of venue to Wilmington, Delaware, where the company’s headquarters were located. A counterpetition filed by federal attorneys stated that Du Pont “operated on a national basis and that Chicago represented the geographic center of the nation.”

The greatest challenge, however, came from Missouri state, county, and city agencies. They had the longest consistent history of rivaling Lebanon’s civic prestige, claiming to be the “center state in many things” as early as the 1920s in Missouri Magazine, a publication of the Missouri State Chamber of Commerce. The city of St. Louis was frequently promoted as the National Dairy Center, Dunklin County fashioned itself the “radish center of the United States,” and the Northwest Missouri Chamber of Commerce—representing nineteen counties—labeled the region the “Center of the World’s Breadbasket.” The popularity of these local monikers of centrality coincided with larger campaigns by the Missouri Division of Resources and Development (MDRD) promoting the state as the “Heart of America” and center of the “Mid-Continent Area.” In later attempts to attract dispersed industry, MDRD ads employed cleverly manipulated maps featuring an enlarged Missouri superimposed on a map of the nation. The resulting image effectively placed most of Kansas, and more importantly the precise section of Kansas containing the geographic center of the nation, firmly within Missouri’s borders. Beginning in 1956, Missouri claims of national centrality were further enhanced by publicity of the annual “Mid-America Jubilee” hosted by St. Louis. The inaugural exposition, sponsored by the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce at a cost of $900,000, generated over $1 million in paid exhibitions spread over thirty acres.

41. See ad for Missouri Magazine in Missouri Magazine 2 (December 1929): 26.
Yet another tactic employed by Missouri boosters to attract industries encouraged to disperse during the Cold War was to portray the state as centrally located between the geographic center of the nation and the national population center. Exact coordinates for the national population center, also called the mean center of national population, have been calculated by U.S. Census Bureau surveys every ten years since 1790. In a process similar to determining the geographic center of the nation, the mean center of national population is calculated as “the point at which an imaginary, weightless, rigid, and flat (no elevation effects) surface representation of the [United States] . . . would balance if weights of identical size were placed on it so that each weight represented the location of one person.” From 1940 to 1950 the national population center was located in Sullivan County, Indiana—ironically, close to the city of New Lebanon.45 Interestingly, Indiana’s departments of commerce and public relations had published numerous ads in the mid-1940s in the hopes of attracting industry, touting the state as the national “center of railways, highways, [and] airways,” but they did not claim ownership of the national population center until after 1950. By that time, however, the population center had officially shifted westward to Richland County, Illinois.46 Unconcerned with the exact location of the national population center, Missouri booster ads throughout the late 1940s and 1950s simply touted the state as “just between the geographical and population centers of the nation.” Businesses in St. Louis were especially prone to make this claim. Ads by the First National Bank of St. Louis described the city as “the nearest major city to the U.S. center of population [and] at the center of activity in business.” The Union Bank of St. Louis claimed that the city was the center of the national market because it was located “between the geographical and population centers of the U.S.A.—truly the center of centers.”47

Federal efforts to disperse national industry to the Midwest and South ultimately failed by the late 1950s for two primary reasons: money and politics. Despite support by the president, the military, and Midwestern and Southern states, the projected costs of dispersing national industry so far inland proved prohibitive. The cost of continued tax amortization credits alone was staggering. From 1947 to 1950 the federal government issued over $8 billion in tax credits to defense-related industries relocating existing factories or building new factories outside coastal target areas, yet 80 percent of defense aircraft industries remained concentrated in traditional industrial zones. A federal estimate of the government’s cost to complete industrial dispersal totaled a monumental $300 billion.48 These disconcerting statistics compelled the Office of Defense Mobilization in mid-1951 to order a sixty-day moratorium on amortization in order to review the program.

Industry itself also balked at the high price of dispersal. The transportation industry alone stood to lose millions of dollars per year, with railroads resisting as early as 1944, fearing the loss of huge profits from the transcontinental shipping of goods and raw materials. Many major New England–based defense-related corporations, such as General Electric (headquartered in Fairfield, Connecticut), came out publicly against federal dispersal and cited prohibitive costs of relocating away from market areas and industrial resources. Business management and labor unions also complained that skilled labor was too hard to find more than ten miles away from coastal industrial areas. Although defense-related industrial labor increased 63 percent from 1939 to 1953, mainly from lucrative federal government contracts, most of those same industries were vocal critics of federal recommendations for defense-related dispersal.49 The cost advantages of concentrated industry ultimately

45. U.S. Census Bureau, Centers of Population for the United States, 1950–2010 (Washington, DC: Geography Division, U.S. Department of Commerce, March 2011), 1, 3. The U.S. Census Bureau also calculates the decennial “median center” of national population by an alternative method, but this center does not represent a center of gravity and is not officially reported. No government or private advertisements are known to have referenced the median center of national population in this limited study.

46. Ad by the Indiana Department of Commerce and Public Relations in Newsweek 27 (June 17, 1946): 102; ad by the Indiana Department of Commerce in Fortune 51 (May 1955): 6. The latter ad described Indiana’s state market as “closest to all markets, to exact U.S. population center.” See also U.S. Census Bureau, Centers of Population for the United States, 1950–2010, 3.


trumped Cold War fears of atomic attack fanned by industrial dispersal advocates.

Political opposition to federal dispersal contributed to its failure as well, with two powerful Cold War-era fears squaring off in the debate. The fear of atomic attack was propagated by dispersal advocates in the Midwest and South who hoped to acquire new industry for their states. Opponents from New England and the West Coast, seeking to retain their states’ lucrative defense industries, argued that “federal dispersal” was akin to communism. As one New York representative stated before a 1951 House hearing on a federal dispersal bill, “I say the privilege to send workers from one part of the country to another section, when they might not want to go, belongs to the Soviet Union, and has no place in this country.”50 The bill was subsequently defeated with a bipartisan majority of 134 to 79. By the early 1950s many politicians and defense experts had come to oppose dispersal not because of fears of communist influence but because of the realization that the rapid development of nuclear technology, especially for Soviet nuclear weapons, would eventually render moot any ideas of industrial safety through dispersal. American hydrogen bomb tests at Bikini Atoll between 1946 and 1958 yielded death zones in excess of 7,000 square miles, and Soviet acquisition of the hydrogen bomb in 1954 convinced American defense experts that even a dispersed national industry could be wiped out with relative ease.51 The nuclear arms race thus decimated the argument that the best defense against nuclear war was distance.

The battle to claim the geographic center of the nation not only survived the economic and political defeat of dispersal efforts but was soon reinvigorated. Washington’s announcement in mid-1958 that a new state, Alaska, would be added to the Union the following year generated new debate over the proper location of the national center. The hulking new state would add over 663,000 square miles, and Alaska’s outlier location far to the northwest of the continental United States promised to shift the “balance point” of the nation. The federal government’s contemporary declaration that the national geographic center would migrate 439 miles to western South Dakota brought panic to the citizens of Lebanon. The ever-vigilant Hub Club mobilized to defend the city’s geographic renown. Emergency town meetings were held, and the mayor vowed “to continue plugging that we are the center.” Lee Johnson—proprietor of the U.S. Geographical Center Motel-Café since its construction in 1955—fearing the loss of his $50,000 investment, proclaimed, “The center has not been taken yet. . . . The Hub Club is going to get

50. The comment was made by Representative Edwin Arthur Hall (R-NY). See “News and Notes—Dispersal Amendment Also Defeated,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 7 (September 1951): 277.
busy on the situation.” In October 1958 the Hub Club organized a tongue-in-cheek posse of round-the-clock armed watchmen to protect its monument from being “spirited away by South Dakota.”

But spirited away it was. The USCGS officially declared the shift with cartographic accuracy within ten miles. The new coordinates of the uprooted geographic center placed it in Butte County, South Dakota, just east of Castle Rock. Not unexpectedly, the state of Kansas was recalcitrant in its refusal to acknowledge the loss. State maps produced by the KSHS persisted in depicting Lebanon as the “Geographical Center of the U.S.” as late as 1962. The Lebanon Hub Club predictably resisted change as well. Indeed, its 1941 national center marker stands intact today—Alaska be damned! At some uncertain point in time, however, signs around the monument were altered to read “the exact center of 48 contiguous states” (emphasis added). The redefined monument thus retained a significant, if qualified, appeal. A nearby one-room roadside wedding chapel still retains the title “U.S. Center Chapel.” Inside the tiny space hangs a homemade board cutout of the continental United States, painted in slightly awry stars and stripes. A large wooden cross with a heart at the crux is positioned over the map; the center of the heart marks the center of the map. The altar and church are simple yet earnest testaments to the small town’s tenacious, prideful, and enduring grand claim. The Lebanon Hub Club today remains an important agency for city pride tied to the geographic center designation. In 1950, under the presidency of Robert Manely, the club was incorporated and immediately obtained title to the property occupied by the national marker. Town citizens have gathered at their shrine ever since for holiday and civic events throughout the year, including Easter-egg hunts, Halloween and Christmas festivities, and Boy Scout functions.

Alas, at least one challenge has been made to South Dakota’s new claim to the geographic center of the nation. Citizens of Castle Rock barely had time to realize their elevated prestige when in March 1959 the federal government announced the possibility of Hawaiian statehood later that year. The USCGS declared that the addition of the islands would once again shift the geographic center of the nation a few miles west of Castle Rock, give or take ten miles. Would this slight adjustment threaten Castle Rock’s newfound celebrity? Was the new geographic center of the nation now, in fact, closer to another town? State boosters in Oregon believed not only that Castle Rock had now lost its prestige but that the center now belonged to their state. In June the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) protested in its “News Notes” that the USCGS placement of the new national center did not accurately account for the effects of the impending statehood of Hawaii. The OHS further asserted that the correct position of the new geographic center was nearest the small southeastern Oregon town of Pondosa. It is not known whether any further challenges to Castle Rock’s claim were made by the OHS or any other Oregon state organization. What is certain is that the USCGS stuck by its calculations over the years and that it is the national authority. That authority names Castle Rock, South Dakota, as the closest town to the national geographic center. It would require some artful, imaginative thinking to contest the federal government’s calculations in the future. But it has happened before.

52. “Miffed at Shift: Dis-centers,” 115; “Lebanon, Kansas—the Town in the Middle,” 14; Worth, “Armed Kansans Guard Center of the U.S.,” 128.
55. Kennedy interview.
56. U.S. Department of the Interior, Geographic Centers of the United States. According to the USCGS, the exact coordinates of the geographic center of the nation, accounting for Hawaiian statehood, are 44°58’ north latitude, 103°46’ west longitude.