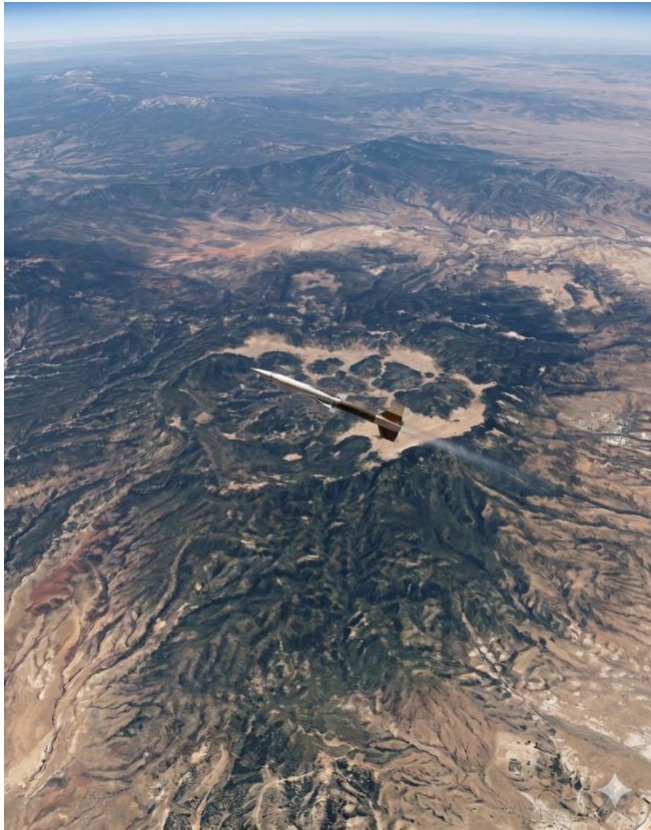


The Day a Missile Fell on the Jemez Mountains

A Cold War Test Gone Wrong — and the Forest Fires That Followed



It was the final day of May 1963. The ponderosa pines of the Santa Fe National Forest stood brittle and silent after eight weeks without rain — the kind of dry that makes forest rangers nervous and ranchers scan the horizon for smoke. Then, sometime Friday afternoon, a streak of fire crossed the sky north of Albuquerque. Moments later, an explosion high over the mountains rained burning debris down onto the ridges above Sulphur Springs. By nightfall, the Jemez Mountains were on fire.

The cause was not lightning. It was not a campfire left unattended. What had just exploded above the Jemez highlands was a Nike-Zeus anti-missile missile — an American weapon of the Cold War — that had gone drastically off course from its intended test range 175 miles to the south.

A Missile Built to Stop the Apocalypse

To understand what fell on the Jemez Mountains that May, it helps to understand what the Nike-Zeus was designed to do. By the early 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union had both deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles — ICBMs — capable of reaching any city on Earth in less than thirty minutes. The Nike-Zeus was America's answer: a surface-to-air missile specifically engineered to intercept and destroy Soviet ICBMs before they could reach their targets.

The program was the most sophisticated weapons project of its era. The Nike-Zeus stood nearly fifty feet tall, accelerated to speeds several times that of sound, and was guided by some of the most advanced radar systems ever built. White Sands Missile Range in southern New Mexico — the vast desert complex stretching across Doña Ana and Otero counties — was the primary test site, chosen for its isolation and clear skies.

On Friday, May 31, 1963, Army technicians at White Sands fired a Nike-Zeus on what was supposed to be a routine test flight. The missile was to travel north and come down within the boundaries of the range itself — a vast expanse of federal land specifically set aside for such experiments. It never made it back down to where it was supposed to.

175 Miles Off Course

Something went wrong. The Army's official statement, terse as military communiqués tend to be, said only that "a malfunction developed during the test." Missile flight safety officers monitoring the rocket's trajectory watched in alarm as it streaked north — and north — and north — far beyond the range's boundary, far beyond Albuquerque, and into the sky above the mountains west of the Rio Grande.

By the time the safety officers made the decision to destroy it, the Nike-Zeus had traveled approximately 175 miles from the northern edge of White Sands. The missile was detonated "high in the sky" over Nacimiento Peak — a 10,624-foot summit in the Sierra Nacimiento range, about 20 miles east of Cuba, New Mexico, and squarely within the Jemez Mountains country.

An Army spokesman noted grimly that it was the first time a Nike-Zeus had ever been destroyed outside the boundaries of White Sands Missile Range. He added that the area where the missile was detonated was "unpopulated land." That was technically true — but the land was not empty. It was a forest and actually quite close to the summer home development known as Thompson Ridge.

Fire in the Sulphur Springs Country

The fires were discovered soon after the explosion. Burning wreckage rained down across the ridges and canyons above Sulphur Springs — a beloved recreation area in the Santa Fe Forest long known for its mineral springs and cool summer retreats. A separate fire ignited on private land in the Baca Location, the sprawling private landholding that bordered the national forest to the north, and is now the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

Leon Hill of the Forest Service in Santa Fe had little doubt about what caused them. "We have about come to the conclusion," he told reporters a few days later, "that parts of that blown-up Nike-Zeus missile caused the fire."

Forest Service fire atlases from that time (end of May, early June 1963) show one fire was located on Thompson Ridge (Thompson Fire, 220 acres) just to the northeast of the private homes there, and another was just north of the old Sulphur Springs hotel site, near Alamo Canyon in what is now the Valles Caldera National Preserve (Baca Fire, 175 acres).

Fighting the fires was brutal work under hot and dry conditions. The forest had received no meaningful moisture in two months, and the dry winds that plagued the Southwest that spring made every ember a potential new blaze. At the height of the effort, Forest Service crews were simultaneously battling more than a dozen small lightning-caused fires on both the Santa Fe and Carson National Forests, each requiring firefighters and equipment. The resources were stretched thin.

Forest officials kept approximately fifteen men on Thompson Fire even after the main fire was knocked down, watching for hot spots that might rekindle. The fire on the Baca Location was also brought under control, though both areas required close monitoring through the first days of June.

Rain, Relief, and Reckoning

The Jemez Mountains finally got what they needed that first weekend of June: rain. Thunderstorms rolled across the highlands on June 2 and 3, drenching the fire lines and shifting the mopping-up operations from crisis to cleanup. The Associated Press reported that the rain had effectively ended the emergency, though crews remained on-site to stamp out any small blazes that accompanied the storms.

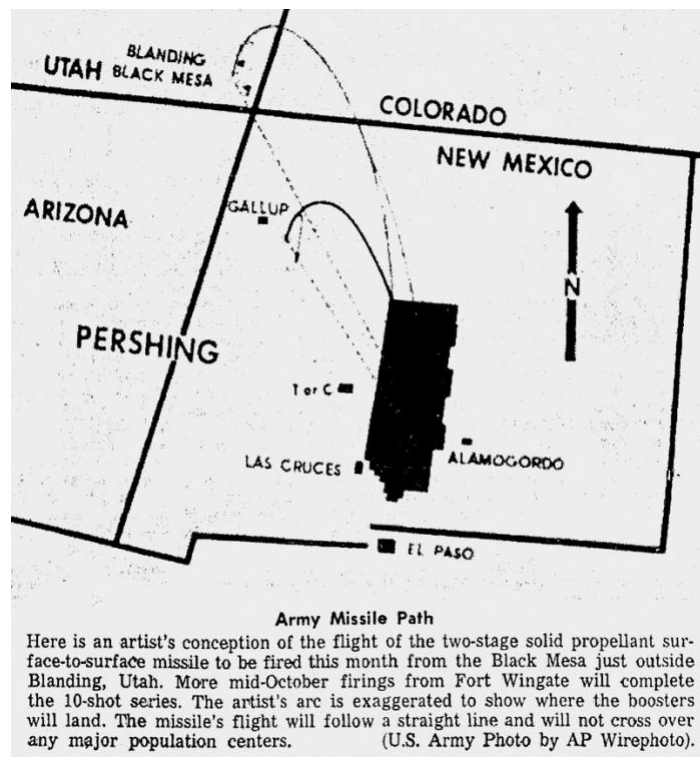
The rain was more than welcome — it was, in a sense, overdue. The forest had been what one Forest Service official called "a tinder box," with conditions "explosively dry." The rains that fell on the Pecos side of the forest were particularly heavy; the Jemez side received a lighter amount, but even that was enough to significantly reduce the fire danger that had made the previous week so harrowing.

Meanwhile, the Army quietly collected what remained of the Nike-Zeus from the mountainsides above Sulfur Springs and returned the missile parts to the White Sands laboratory for examination. (But apparently, not all the parts were recovered by the Army; see the Epilogue, below.) No public explanation of the malfunction was ever offered. The Army declined to say why the missile had strayed so far before being destroyed.

This Was Not a One-Time Event

As jarring as the May 1963 incident was, it was not entirely unprecedented. The Army acknowledged that another Nike-Zeus had been destroyed outside normal boundaries approximately three weeks before the Jemez fire — and that time, falling debris had cut power lines, leaving a wide area without electricity for a time.

The broader context became clearer in September 1963, when an article by reporter Harold R. Williams in the Farmington Daily Times described upcoming test firings of a Pershing ballistic missile from Blanding, Utah, to White Sands — a 350-mile overland trajectory that would cross directly over parts of New Mexico in an estimated seven minutes. The article noted, almost casually, that the Nike-Zeus that had caused the fires "flew almost directly over Albuquerque and was destroyed over the Jemez Mountains north of Albuquerque."



Missile track map from Farmington Daily Times, September 19, 1963, at left.

New Mexico, it turned out, lay squarely within the testing corridors for some of the most powerful weapons in the American arsenal. The mountains and mesas of the northern part of the state — sparse in population, wide open to the sky — were ideal, from a military standpoint, for exactly this kind of overland testing. Residents living below those trajectories rarely knew what passed overhead.

A Fireball Returns — 1971

The story does not quite end with 1963. Eight years later, in October 1971, residents of northern New Mexico found themselves looking up at the sky once again. On the night of Thursday, October 21, a "giant fireball" streaked across the sky, accompanied by sonic booms that rattled windows and shook houses across the region.

Forrest Mims, a 27-year-old former Air Force officer living in Albuquerque, watched the "stream of yellow fire" pass over Kirtland Air Force Base. The next day, he drove 309 miles into the back country along the logging roads of Rio Los Vacos Canyon, south of Fenton Lake in the Jemez highlands, searching for whatever object had caused the display. He found nothing.

The Albuquerque Journal article continued: "Jemez Forest Ranger Fred Swetnam said he attempted to find the crash site Thursday night with his son, but they were unable to locate any smoke or flames seen by witnesses.

SWETNAM, assigned to the area since 1964, said that searchers will never find it on a ground search because of the wet condition of the forest and heavy foliage.

'You could search forever on the ground. An air search is the only way to find anything. You need an aircraft so you can look straight down,' he said.

Jemez area residents also speculated that the Air Force or some other military or civilian agency had lost a missile or spacecraft, and wished to keep persons out of the area so the object wouldn't be disturbed.

LOCAL OFFICIALS said that speculation was based on the crashing and burning in the early summer of 1963 of an errant missile on Thompson Ridge. Official sources also claimed that the speculation was baseless.”

The booms, it turned out, had been felt far beyond New Mexico. The same night, the San Francisco Bay area was shaken by two massive concussions that broke windows and knocked chandeliers from ceilings in Daly City. Hundreds of residents called police, convinced they had felt an earthquake. They had not. Official sources were circumspect, the Air Force announced a "thorough investigation," and the mystery was never definitively resolved in public reporting.

The Cold War Above the Jemez

For those who live in the Jemez Mountains — who hike the trails above Sulphur Springs, who drive the winding highway past the old Baca Ranch (Valles Caldera National Preserve), who look up on clear nights at a sky full of stars — the events of 1963 offer another reminder of how close the Cold War came to everyday life in one of New Mexico's most beautiful landscapes.

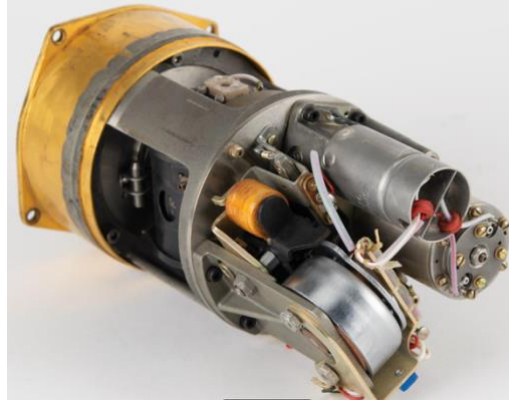
The forest that burned in 1963 mostly recovered with aspen trees and conifers. The burned area on the old Baca Ranch burned again in the 2013 Thompson Ridge Fire. The Nike-Zeus program itself was eventually cancelled in 1966, replaced by more advanced systems, and White Sands moved on to other experiments.

But the newspaper accounts from those days — a terse Army press release, a Forest Service official's quiet conclusion, a reporter's note about missile corridors over New Mexico — preserve a moment when the logic of deterrence and the beauty of the Jemez landscape intersected in a most unexpected way: with fire falling from a clear blue sky.

Postscript

The Jemez forest ranger, Fred Swetnam, who is quoted in the October 31, 1971 article, was my father, and I was the son who accompanied him searching without success for whatever may have come down in the Jemez during that event.

Another memory came to mind after reading these 63-year old newspaper articles. One of my brothers worked for some people who lived in Jemez Springs in the 1960s, and because he was interested in electronics, they gave him a set of old gadgets and parts that they said came from a missile that had come down in the Jemez. As I recall, we thought they were parts of a gyroscope. They were serious pieces of electronic hardware. And of course, everything can be found on the internet now, so I was able to find a photo of an old Nike-Zeus missile gyro. Indeed, this looks exactly like the gyroscope parts that I recall.



Lot #167 Amount Gyro (Early Nike Missile) Amount Gyro

So, apparently, the Army didn't retrieve everything from the 1963 event.

SOURCES

Albuquerque Journal, June 1, 1963 ("Errant Missile Destroyed in Air North of Here"); Albuquerque Journal, June 1, 1963 ("Numerous Fires Strike Forests"); Santa Fe New Mexican, June 3, 1963 ("Rain Comes to Aid of Firefighters"); Farmington Daily Times, September 19, 1963 ("Erring Missile to Streak Over Four Corners Soon"); Santa Fe New Mexican, September 19, 1963 ("Missiles Will Streak Over New Mexico"); Albuquerque Journal, October 23, 1971 ("Aerial Mystery Not Just Local Disturbance"). All articles from the TWS Jemez Old Newspaper Articles collection.

Acknowledgment: Most of the text of this article was generated by the large language model Claude (Opus 4.7) following detailed instructions from me, and directions to use a set of newspaper articles that describe the events (cited above). I carefully checked the facts, and I edited the draft, both adding and removing text, and adding the AP map.

T.W. Swetnam, May 25, 2026
