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Story proposal: Fort Ord

People in the Monterey Bay area of California talk about real estate prices the way people in 1930s Oklahoma talked about drought. That is, constantly, and often in the context of who's been pushed out. Housing prices here are higher, compared to wages, than anywhere else in the country, and lots of people don't make it. The main industries, agriculture and tourism, employ thousands of low-wage workers who, if they want to live near their jobs, must compete for housing with the kind of people who can afford to relocate for perfect climate and peerless scenery. It's common to find two or three families sharing a two-bedroom \$400,000 house. Either that, or they move inland. "Gone to Hollister" is the modern, local equivalent of "dusted out."

Sitting square in the middle of this housing desert is a vast oasis: thousands of apartments, condos, and houses of decommissioned Fort Ord. When the Army left Fort Ord in 1993 it bequeathed to the citizens of the Monterey Bay a priceless treasure. Bigger than the city of San Francisco and stretching from the Bay to the foothills, Ord not only encompasses vast parklands and miles of beach, it also contains subdivision after subdivision of former army housing – from simple apartments built for married privates up through sergeants' condos to officers' lovely ranch houses. In all, some 5,824 units of ready-made housing, much of it built in the seventies and eighties, was supposed to transfer to civilian ownership.

Instead, they remain boarded up, weeds growing through the driveways and choking the playgrounds. Ford Ord today is like one of those creepy end-of-the-world movies. Vacant subdivisions stretch on and on, wrapped in fog and silence. One recent Saturday I picked a house at random, ignored the no-trespassing sign and opened the unlocked door. The place was ready to occupy: new carpet and paint, fridge, stove, water heater, the works.

Gradually, the magnitude of the scandal dawns on anyone who looks; amidst arguably the worst housing squeeze in the country, thousands of

publicly owned homes sit vacant. In the context of Monterey Bay, it's like hoarding food during a famine.

The Fort Ord problem is a study in class warfare and racial politics. The federal government has a social agenda. It wants the grounds where we once trained young men for war to provide low-income people with affordable housing. But the two communities that Ford Ord straddles – Seaside and Marina – don't want to become the low-income (read: hispanic) ghetto of Monterey Bay. Their mayors – and powerful developers -- want to raze the houses and build the kind of million-dollar mansions that choke Monterey and Carmel, and that would certainly sell.

So the transfer of Fort Ord housing to the people of Monterey Bay is endlessly delayed. For a while local authorities argued the houses couldn't be occupied because of asbestos and lead paint. A small group of veterans gave that the lie when they maneuvered to wrest a few streets from the Fort Ord Reuse Authority, and moved in. Coming upon this vibrant little neighborhood amidst Ord's vast ghost subdivisions is eerie. But the vets didn't end the impasse.

Now it may be too late for the rest the neighborhoods; in the moist seaside air, the empty houses have developed mold in their walls that may make them uninhabitable. The debate now is about whether to fill Ford Ord with McMansions or newly built "affordable housing." Everybody from developers to the central labor council has a contrary idea as to what constitutes "affordable."

The local congressman, Democrat Sam Farr, threatened last month to hold up final transfer of the Fort to Seaside and Marina until they come up with a plan that includes lots of housing genuinely affordable to people picking strawberries, mowing the Pebble Beach golf course, and making hotel beds for \$8 a hour. You should hear the howling.

When the Cold War ended, many people expected a lavishing of former military treasure upon the civilian economy. This so-called "peace dividend" never materialized and the struggle over the body and soul of Ford Ord sheds light on why. Ord is the biggest military installation decommissioned since the end of the Cold War, part of what Farr calls "the biggest transfer of land from military to civilian use since Westward Expansion." Yet the transfer isn't happening, because for reasons of race and class, avarice and pride, the locals don't want what the Army wants to give them.

I live 15 miles from Fort Ord and have been following the issue – attending public meetings, interviewing Farr and others. I propose a feature about the Battle of Ford Ord.

Thank you for considering the proposal.