he trillions of dollars that the United States spent to fight the Cold War are usually condensed into images of high-tech aircraft and missiles, or reports of $600 military hammers. But it is easy to forget that many of these expenditures were, and still are, buried away in secret programs and black budgets out of the public view. Others have been camouflaged within remote or unremarkable landscapes: the midwestern farm fields that harbor missile silos, Washington's Hanford Reserve—or Colorado's Rocky Flats, a scrubby stretch of mesa land between Denver and the Rocky Mountains. Most people drive by the unimpressive industrial buildings with hardly a second glance.

For six months during 1990–91, however, artist John Craig Freeman's five garish red billboards helped call significantly more attention to this now-closed nuclear processing facility. Standing near its entrance gate and proclaiming "Today we made a commitment for 250,000 years," they reminded people that this piece of Colorado landscape was thoroughly saturated with plutonium, the radioactive poison that had been produced in Rocky Flats' factories for over 40 years. In fact, the main production building alone was discovered to have more than 62 pounds of plutonium dust scattered throughout its nooks and ventilation systems. (Scientists have estimated that a few micrograms of plutonium breathed in by a person could be enough to cause cancer.) The 250,000 years to which the billboards refer represents the period it will take for this plutonium to decay into a relatively harmless state—quite a long time indeed, Freeman points out, since the entire history of human farming spans only about 12,000 years.

What did it cost to produce this plutonium in the frenzy of the Cold War? What will it cost to clean up and contain it during the next decade? What will it cost to secure it during the next 250,000 years? What did it cost many unknowing Americans who were experimented upon without their knowledge or consent, in terms of lost health and income, or pain? Similarly, what did it cost the thousands of soldiers who were positioned near atomic-bomb explosions—many fueled by plutonium from Rocky Flats?

These were the kinds of thoughts that motivated artist Freeman to convert a previously blank set of billboards into a potent communication tool. Freeman undertook the entire project on his own, designing the images on a Macintosh computer, and then printing them out—one letter-sized piece of colored paper at a time—on a laserprinter, and assembling them onto the boards that would cover the five 20-by-30-foot billboards.

With support from Greenpeace, Freeman was able to secure leases on the billboards and get the posters put into place. Ironically, a local environmental group opposed the project, arguing that the billboards were ugly and detrimental to their surroundings, even though the message they carried was noncommercial and ecologically crucial. Ultimately, it was this conflict on the political left that attracted tremendous media attention to Freeman's project, bringing its message to an even wider audience than originally had been envisioned.