

The Point of the Spear: Nostalgia in Oregon's Militia Movement

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President Abraham Lincoln rendered the Union marble from rather haphazardly made brick. It took the most vicious of civil wars on US soil to make a mystique of it. But the tensions between the central government and fractious peripheries within the US did not dissipate. The US remains a complex entity of disparate factions, held together tenuously by the ideals of the Republic.

Since the weekend, armed militants have held sway in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon, with an intention of staying on "for several years". Some stem from Harney County, including Ammon Bundy, son of a Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy who won a 2014 standoff with officers over the use of federal land (*The Guardian*, Jan 4).

The refuge itself was seized by militia stemming from the Nevadan Bundy family (Ryan and Ammon); Montana electrician Ryan Payne; and Jon Ritzheimer and Blaine Cooper, both of whom hail from Arizona.

Ostensibly, the occupying militants seek the release of two local ranchers, father Dwight and son Steven Hammond. Both were convicted of arson on federal land. But much more seems to be at stake, with the whiff of the vigilante challenging authority coming to the fore. This was in evidence with the march on Harney County courthouse in the name of the Hammonds. Customary symbols of authority were rebuked, with the courthouse and the sheriff's office pelted with coins.

What Harney County sheriff David Ward saw was far more than a protest specific to the release of two ranchers whom the protesters felt had been hard done by. At stake was something of an anti-Occupy Movement, a reactionary effort to destabilise the federal compact in the name of an anti-environment, and populist land rights agenda. "These men had alternative motives to attempt to overthrow the country and federal government in hopes to spark a movement across the United States."

Ammon Bundy is certainly doing nothing to dissuade detractors of the broader mission. "This will become a base place for patriots from all over the country. We're the point of the spear that's going to bring confidence and strength to the rest of the people."

The refuge, deemed an ornithological paradise, is the purposeful point of Bundy's spear. It is the area which President Theodore Roosevelt declared protected in 1908 - a federally intrusive move that the militia can only see as negative. (It was, however, far more negative to the first nations who were effectively dispossessed by a conservationist ideal.)[1] According to these protestors, occupying the refuge and returning it to that nebulous consciousness of the rancher, the logger and the miner "would restore a poor

region to prosperity”.

At the core of this vision is nostalgia, one which has been violated and stolen by Washington. It is, in a sense, a joust between thieves and appropriators of territory, a dispute about who should control land that is deemed, miraculously, theirs. The federal government undoubtedly holds sway, being the largest landholder and effectively the greatest conquistador of all.

“The government has beaten us and oppressed us and took everything from us,” claimed Cooper. They, argue the militia members, own the land which needs to be leased, with loggers, ranchers, farmers and miners reliant on such arrangements.

The disintegrating family farm is the flashpoint of impersonal economic forces that have exerted their victimising pull on ranching. Agriculture has been heavily industrialised; environmental conditions such as drought have also taken their toll. Much American stuffing has been knocked out of the manufacturing and agricultural industries over the last three decades, victims of free trade ideology. Paired with a colonisation narrative, the interior parcelled out by banking and mining interests, and various grievances become potential flashpoints.

This Oregon militia fling may well be dismissed as some inane prattlers with a good degree of exhibitionism to boot. There is even an argument to be made that the actions are seditious, if not down right terroristic.[2]

How Bundy and his men will be able to stay “for several years” on the refuge, developing its prosperity, is by no means clear. But the butt of their grievances in certain respects is harder to dismiss. However artificial the anti-federal rhetoric may seem, the insistence on open rights in terms of recreation and grazing could just as well be a manifestation of libertarian bliss or agrarian socialist utopia.

As for a suitable response, Federal authorities have shown themselves ill-prepared and brutal in attempting to combat militancy in the past. The Waco disaster of 1993 casts a very long shadow indeed, with the spirit of David Koresh lingering as a terrible reminder about the costs of aggressive, centralised power. It is also hard to get past the fact that such a militia seizure, had been framed along the lines of Islamic State rhetoric, or a Black Panther narrative, would have been treated with a similar degree of reservation.

The Bundy crew remain somewhat spoiled in their indignation, irritants who have so far have been kept at a distance, to be possibly prosecuted at a later date. Ryan insists that the situation is grave enough to warrant a willingness “to kill and be killed if necessary.” Certainly, when consulting such sites as that of the Oregon Militia Alliance, one is struck by prevalent tin can paramilitarism in the name of being a good American citizen.[3]

Eventually, this militia account will be re-incorporated into the language of the Union. Ronald Reagan gave the impression he was on the side of the Sagebrush rebellion which seems to have been channelled into this latest Oregon “occupation”. Then, as now, the issue was who had entitlements to use land. Naturally, other landholders - primarily indigenous - were the great absentees from the debate. The language of theft tends to be jaundiced.

All that happened once Reagan took the White House was that land rights were privatised,

with ranching rights limited. The source of grief shifted from the government official to the private land holder. Such revolts, as ever, end up dying in circular fashion.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/01/06/the-malheur-wildlife-refuge-occupation-a-skirmish-among-colonizers/>

[2] http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/news/a40914/oregon-bundy-militia/#_new

[3] <http://oregonmilitiaalliance.webs.com/>

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