

Countering Extremism on America's Public Lands Forum

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Prepared Remarks

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Thank you for the giving me the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is J.J. MacNab and I am a Fellow with the Program on Extremism at George Washington University's Center for Cyber & Homeland Security. The mandate of our group is to explore complex issues such as terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism through a non-partisan and empirical approach. Any opinions I express are my own.

For eighteen years, I have closely monitored a growing, loose-knit movement of anti-government extremists—people who, unable to change the laws of this nation through traditional means, have resorted to extralegal and, on occasion, violent means. I've watched this movement grow from a few thousand tax protesters in the late 1990s to roughly 100,000 sovereign citizens in 2010, to a quarter of a million participants in 2014. The members of this loose-knit group may consider themselves tax protesters, sovereigns, militia, doomsday preppers, three percenters, Oath Keepers, Constitutional Sheriffs, or any combination of these subgroups.

This movement's steadfast reliance on flawed legal theories has resulted in hundreds of failed court cases, and the anarchistic nature of their beliefs has recently led to violent encounters with law enforcement, to threats against judges and other government officials, and to a growing number of domestic terrorism plots. Most of this growth and activity, however, has taken place in the shadows because the nation's eyes have, since 9/11, been focused almost exclusively on Islamic terrorism.

When Cliven Bundy announced his Range War in April, 2014, the anti-government extremist movement, sometimes referred to as the Patriot Movement, knew next to nothing about land rights, cattle grazing, or the various recent attempts of Sagebrush politicians to transfer the ownership of federal land to state control. Almost none of them had ever heard of the Bureau of Land Management.

They bristled, however, at Bundy's false claim that the federal government had pointed sniper rifles at his family's heads. They packed up their weapons and camping equipment and traveled to Nevada from as far away as New York and New Hampshire.

On April 12, 2014, even though Cliven Bundy had learned the night before that the BLM was packing up and leaving, the rancher sent more than three hundred supporters to confront a group of approximately three dozen federal law enforcement officers under a bridge in rural Nevada. Several armed Bundy supporters were positioned on the overpasses, on the hillsides, in cars and truck, and sprinkled throughout the crowd, prepared to shoot federal agents. The crowd

below was a mix of cowboys on horseback, unarmed protesters, children, dogs, and armed militia men. Bundy had ordered his supporters to stop traffic on the highway, and when curious onlookers got out of their cars to watch the confrontation, they effectively acted as human shields for the Bundy snipers on the overpass. Had a car backfired, or had anyone on either side of the conflict fired a weapon, dozens, if not hundreds, would have died. It came very close. The federal agents retreated and released the cattle back to Bundy.

The confrontation under the bridge was a dangerous but effective charade. The movement celebrated what it saw as a major victory against the federal government.

Over the next few weeks, there was a constant flow of militia men and women traveling to and from the ranch. Their goal was to prevent the further roundup of the cattle and to shoot any federal agents that tried to arrest Bundy or his family members.

Since 2014, the situation in Nevada has been tense, and at times, extremely dangerous. The presence of an unknown number of Bundy family members and supporters has effectively made the Gold Butte area too dangerous for federal employees to manage and for the public to enjoy their public lands.

While hundreds of armed supporters participated, two years later, only Bundy, four of his children, and fifteen others have ever been charged with any crimes related to this standoff. This minimal prosecution has greatly emboldened the movement.

The following are a few examples.

On May 6, 2014, two people wearing hoods brandished a pistol at a federal worker driving a BLM truck in Utah. They held up a sign that read, "You need to die."

Four days later, approximately 200 protesters converged on Recapture Canyon in San Juan County, Utah. Led by Sagebrush Rebellion politicians and by Bundy family members, armed protesters rode prohibited All-Terrain Vehicles through an area that had been closed by federal land managers to protect an archeological site.

In June of 2014, two Bundy supporters, kicked out of the militia campsite for being too vocal about killing police, ambushed and killed two Las Vegas law enforcement officers and a bystander before dying in a shootout.

A week later, a sovereign citizen who had expressed support for Bundy online was caught living illegally on federal land in California. When confronted, he shot and wounded a federal ranger and a California Highway patrolman.

One year after Bundy Ranch, more than 100 militia men, many of whom had participated in the 2014 standoff, converged on a mine in rural Oregon to take an armed stand against federal agents. Their goal was to protect two miners who refused to submit a written plan of operation. The militia remained at the mine for several weeks and confronted BLM employees at the office in town. No arrests have been made.

Last summer, hours after Cliven Bundy and his son confronted three surveyors working on federal land, shots were fired near the surveyors' campsite.

In Montana, dozens of armed militia men gathered to protect miners whose plan of operation had expired in 2014. No arrests have been made.

This last January, three of Cliven Bundy's sons led a group of armed militants to take over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. They placed men armed with rifles in a watchtower and on a ridge overlooking the Refuge buildings. They blocked the entrances to the compound with trucks and heavy equipment. Other militants stayed 30 miles away in the nearest town of Burns, putting pressure on the local citizens, threatening the County Sheriff and County Judge, and making the environment so dangerous that federal employees and their families had to leave for their own safety.

On January 27th, the FBI and Oregon State Police stopped a caravan of cars driving from the Refuge to a neighboring county where the sheriff had expressed support for their cause. Two Bundy brothers were arrested along with four armed supporters. One militant, a rancher from Utah, was killed by police as he reached for a firearm in his jacket pocket.

Many, but not all, of the key figures in the Oregon Refuge takeover have been arrested and charged with crimes. The leader of the takeover, Ammon Bundy, claimed that some "deep pockets" were supporting his stand, but no person or group has been with funding these crimes.

This list of recent events does not include the hundreds of threats aimed at federal land employees and law enforcement in the two years since the Bundy Ranch. Photos of federal law enforcement agents were distributed among militants, along with their names and home addresses. Bomb threats were called in to hotels when federal land employees were staying.

Online propaganda has been vicious and graphic, ranging from death threats to doctored photos of federal employees with digital targets added to their foreheads.

Some Constitutional Sheriffs in various Western states have warned federal land employees to stay out of their counties. Within the Mormon corridor, some of these fights and

threats have taken on a strong religious overtone, a factor that heightens an already tense situation.

A number of potential federal land-related conflicts are currently brewing: the possible Bears Ears national monument designation in Utah, a hotbed of Sagebrush Rebel activity, is the most likely candidate for a future standoff. Another is the Montana case of a miner who built a series of ponds on land he didn't own. The miner was recently convicted on multiple felonies for releasing pollutants into U.S. waters and is awaiting sentencing in that case. A third possible hot spot is the rumored designation of the Owyhee Canyonlands in rural Eastern Oregon as a national monument.

Other than the extremely rare arrest, there have been no attempts by any agency or group to address or even acknowledge, this serious problem. The anti-government movement in the United States claims hundreds of thousands of participants, and various outside interests have tried, with varying degrees of success, to harness their numbers and anger. Sometimes, the call for armed protection is direct, as seen at Bundy Ranch, and sometimes, it's implied. The threat to federal land employees is very real either way.

Thank you for bringing attention to this growing problem.