

Honorable Raul Grijalva
United States House of Representatives
Tucson District Office
738 North Fifth Avenue, Suite 110
Tucson, Arizona 85705

Honorable Bennie Thompson
United States House of Representatives
Jackson District Office
3607 Medgar Evers Boulevard
Jackson, Mississippi 39213

Dear Representatives Grijalva and Thompson:

My name is Chris Gardner and I am a board member of the Friends of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Below is an opinion piece I wrote during the armed occupation of our refuge earlier this year. I respectfully request that you accept this letter as a statement for your Extremism on Public Lands Forum on June 15, 2016.

Thank you,
Chris Gardner

Letter: Stand up for the values assaulted by Malheur occupation

By Chris Gardner Published Jan 26, 2016 at 12:02AM

The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by armed men is an assault on the profoundest of our values.

It is an assault on democracy. Though democracy is messy and frustrating, it has created an essentially fear-free, physically secure society that is the envy of the world.

Sometimes it does need to be prodded forward by civil disobedience.

However, Rosa Parks didn't have or need an assault rifle in her lap when she illegally seated herself on a segregated bus. This simple, peaceful act sparked an available underlying response, which profoundly — though not perfectly — changed our nation. These armed men have hijacked our refuge and our democracy. The vast majority of Americans support shared use and protection of our public lands. These self-appointed “patriots” would not need guns if they had broad political support. Their tactics, though dangerous, evidence their weakness. They are just “paper tigers” whose tactics and agenda need to be rejected.

Democracy needs to be protected, because it can break down and then we reap the whirlwind.

Second, it is an assault on the truth. It is baked in human desire to believe in some perfect garden to which we can return. However, the garden at Malheur was the world of the Paiute who inhabited the valley for thousands of years. Before the refuge, the cowboy world was a nightmare of range wars, land grabs, arson, murder and wildlife slaughter, which despoiled this beautiful valley for profit. Behind the “Marlboro Man” myth is cancer.

It is a sad double irony that today we have “cowboys” asking for exactly the same thing “Indians” asked for 150 years ago — “Leave our land, and leave us alone” — and that they are again facing an armed takeover.

The truth is Malheur is an outstanding example of management for multiple uses for the benefit of all, and it also maintains its primary purpose as a refuge for both the indigenous and transient wildlife from two continents who use the refuge as a rest stop or nesting area in their journeys.

The Paiute are happy their sacred sites are protected and their access for traditional purposes is guaranteed. It seems the majority of local ranchers are happy with agreements that give them necessary grazing access while protecting wildlife. Finally, the many thousands of recreational users — from hunters to birders, from students to hikers — are delighted by their access to the jewel of the Oregon high desert.

This is successful management for multiple uses and not the overreach of tyrannical government.

Finally, and most profoundly, it is an assault on beauty. Once you have seen the desert sunrise over the Malheur’s valley, the iridescent emerald flash of passing ibises, the dance of pairing sandhill cranes, the delicate step of feeding avocets and stilts or a rising cloud of thousands of snow geese, or once you have heard the morning call of a warbler, the midday announcement of a meadow lark or the evening hoot of an owl, you cannot deny it is beauty we seek to preserve at Malheur.

Beauty is our means of connecting with the oneness of nature. In 1491, North America was essentially a self-tending wilderness where buffalo and salmon returned year after year. Though there was some human impact, compared with the impact of today’s populations, it was minimal.

Today we have relegated that wilderness to refuges where we have accepted stewardship. Teddy Roosevelt recognized this responsibility and in 1908 created the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge to be an oasis in our shrinking wilderness as part of a system of protected parks and wildernesses.

Imagine an America without Yellowstone, Yosemite or Malheur. We would be the worse for it, as profit is no substitute for the beauty.

Democracy, truth and beauty are under assault at Malheur, and we need to stand up for these values.

— Chris Gardner lives in Bend.