

The Washington Times

Bundy-led Oregon standoff a mixed bag for Western federal lands crusade

Valerie Richardson

January 11, 2016

The Bundy-led occupation unfolding in rural Oregon may have delivered a public relations blow to the lawful effort to loosen the federal government's grip on Western lands, but in one key respect, the protest may also be helping.

Even as the group led by rancher Ammon Bundy comes under criticism for the takeover of a federal building at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, there's no denying that the standoff with law enforcement has heightened the profile outside the rural West of the often-ignored public lands debate.

"I'd like to think it's hurting their cause, but it is raising public attention," said Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former forester who lives near Bend, Oregon.

The issue received front-page treatment Monday in The New York Times, which hasn't shown that kind of interest in the public lands debate since the last Bundy-led protest in 2014: the standoff between Cliven Bundy, Ammon Bundy's father, with federal agents over his refusal to pay up in a dispute over about \$1 million in grazing fees.

As to whether the armed protesters locked in a low-key standoff with law enforcement at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters will ultimately harm their cause, "time will tell," said Mr. O'Toole.

Nobody is more closely associated with the federal lands issue than Utah state Rep. Ken Ivory, the West Jordan Republican who leads the American Lands Council. After three sons of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and others took over the unoccupied building Jan. 2 near Burns, Oregon, Mr. Ivory condemned the action.

“A modern day Shays’ rebellion is NOT the way to solve fed abuse, overreach and mismgmt of public lands,” Mr. Ivory said on Twitter.

At the same time, Mr. Ivory, who has pushed for state legislation to start the process of transferring lands to the states, said he understands what motivates such protests, citing the “deep frustration” over the federal government’s vast property holdings.

About 50 percent of the land west of the Rocky Mountains is federally owned, versus about 5 percent of the land east of that.

“You’ve got bureaucrats thousands of miles away that put policy over people. They put politics over the health and welfare of the land,” Mr. Ivory said Monday in an interview with The Washington Times. “To the extent that we’re having a national dialogue on that, it’s a very positive thing. But the solution is education, legislation, litigation.”

The occupiers themselves have been compared to terrorists and tagged with sarcastic nicknames like “Y’all Qaeda” and “Vanilla ISIS” on social media.

In a Jan. 5 op-ed, The Oregonian newspaper dismissed the group as a “flock of loons,” but the liberal-leaning paper also said that “the frustration of rural Oregonians with federal land management is understandable.”

Life in the Burns community moved closer to normal Monday as local officials reopened the public schools, which were closed last week over public safety fears stemming from the standoff at the wildlife refuge about 30 miles from town.

Everyone from Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to Harney County Sheriff David Ward has called on the armed militants to exit the premises and return to their homes, while Ammon Bundy has said the group will not leave until there is a plan to transfer control of federal lands to localities.

Mr. Bundy said Monday that his protest would actually help avoid violence because the status quo is untenable.

“We know if we continue to go down the road we have been continuing to go down, we will ultimately create a war among the people,” Mr. Bundy said Monday at a media briefing posted on Portland TV station KOIN, channel 6. “This is an effort right now, a peaceful effort, to make sure that war never comes, to make sure that there is not a war between government and the people.”

The occupiers also issued a call for more supplies, from sleeping bags to coffee creamer, as the protest moved into its second week. A list posted Saturday on Facebook by Mr. Bundy’s mother Carol cited 80 items, including wool socks, cigarettes and toiletries.

The armed militants may have also accessed government computers during their takeover. Oregon Public Broadcasting reported that the occupiers were interacting with desktop computers last week.

Mr. Bundy denied those reports Monday and said his group is not accessing personnel files. But he did say his occupiers were going through government documents to “expose” government actions against local cattle ranchers.

He also told reporters that the papers would also help secure the release of the two area ranchers at the center of the dispute, albeit unwillingly.

The Bundy team set up shop at the unoccupied wildlife refuge headquarters after a rally on behalf of Dwight and Steven Hammond, father-and-son ranchers who returned voluntarily to prison last week on arson charges resulting from prescribed burns in 2001 and 2006 that spread accidentally to adjacent federal land.

The Hammonds, who had already served jail sentences of 12 months and three months, respectively, were resentenced to five years’ imprisonment each at the behest of federal prosecutors under the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which carries a minimum five-year sentence.

“I mean, would anybody in Washington, D.C., know that we’re sending people to jail for five years under a terrorism act for doing an ecologically sound practice if it weren’t for the Bundys?” Mr. O’Toole said. “So maybe it is helping their cause. Especially if [President] Obama gives them clemency, which I think he should do.”