

towards an
Anti-fascist
analysis of
the malheur rebellion
and other essays



"Towards an Anti-Fascist Analysis of the Malheur Rebellion" originally published by It's Going Down, and features contributions from Ben Jones.

"Why We Should Stop Calling the Malheur Militia Terrorists, and Why We Should Start Calling Them Racists" originally published by Anti-Fascist News.

"Interview with Spencer Sunshine on the Oregon Militia Occupation" conducted and originally published by It's Going Down.

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Towards an Anti-Fascist Analysis of the Malheur Rebellion

Alexander Reid Ross

The Malheur Rebellion took overnight control of all screen time throughout social media and conversations about it quickly became pervasive. I felt compelled to go to the site and try to gain some perspective. I contacted Ben Jones, and we decided to go down together to get a sense of the people involved in the occupation to learn how to further organize against them. Although we were only in Burns for something like two days, taking only one trip to the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, we spoke to a number of people, both community members and militiamen, and got a better feeling for how to approach the ridiculous and horrific scene.

What surprised us most was the fact that we spent twenty minutes walking through the Malheur Wildlife Refuge where the Bundys are currently holed up with a number of patriot movement volunteers. We saw no police, no feds, and no security. Perhaps it was our scamouflage, but it was profoundly puzzling for the two of us to walk around in a right wing insurrection in broad daylight without any kind of alarms going off. However, according to recent reports, a new “security detail” has arrived “carrying rifles and side-arms and clad in military attire and bulletproof vests.” The Bundys were in a meeting, so we did not interview them, perhaps for the better. As Charlotte Roderique from the Burns Paiute tribe declared that morning, it was senseless “to dignify them” with that sort of attention.

Not that John Ritzheimer and Blaine Cooper deserve attention, either. However, we wanted a closer understanding what kind of people they were, who was in Burns, and how we can organize to stop them. What struck us as Ritzheimer went through his dogmatic rap about Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution was that his presentation of “liberating the land” for the use of the “local community,” the construction of the argument and even the precision of the rhetoric, seemed incredibly close to leftist discourse.

Besides that, their mission remains locked into the context of white supremacy, of “liberating land” for the ranchers and miners to carry on their business without regulations, restrictions, or accountability. For this purpose, they are met by their cohorts from Idaho, Montana, Arizona, and Alaska. One unique thing about this issue is that it is not Oregonians, but Threepers (Three Perceners) from other states.

The Threepers believe erroneously that only 3 percent of the original colonists participated in the 1776 Revolution. They see themselves as upholders of the revolution, rather than revolutionaries. There is an important truth to the rhetoric that cloaks the large distance between left and right.

The right remains faithful to its reactionary credo, while the left remains inherently progressive—not merely at face value, but on a deeper sense of emergent communities struggling to liberate themselves from a racist and colonial situation. That situation lies on one side of a disparate gap between rebellion and revolution. Whereas the right seeks a rebellion against the federal government and a restoration of the original deal—the constitution as they interpret it—the left seeks revolutionary transformation of the settler state premised on the rights of individual private property according to the productivist dogma of “Wise Use” and “waste.”

In this sense, the populist ideology of “land and liberty” fails completely, because it bears the traditional values of the Constitution, going back to the standard life, liberty, and the pursuit of property. The ideology of anti-government and anti-police also fails, because it establishes not community defense but armed paramilitaries and assault forces that go against the interests of local communities. Anarchists value the land for different reasons, we appreciate the land in itself, for itself, and seek to defend it from the interests of capitalist exploitation. Like most of the Burns community, we uphold everyday people’s rights to maintain their way of life against psychotic militiamen and federal intervention.

After interviewing some six different militiamen, we noticed a few general trends.

- ✦ The militiamen did not come from the local communities, they came largely from Arizona, California, Idaho, and Montana. With this in mind, it is difficult to locate an “Oregon Patriot Movement” as an agent in this “stand-off.”

- ✦ Outside of a few people, the reality there is not really a militaristic professionalism, in spite of the fact that many of those there have arms and perhaps even come from that background (or are pretending to do so).

- ✦ The militiamen also claim to be standing up for the ranchers, but aren’t all really ranchers. Ritzheimer told us he doesn’t know the first thing about ranching, but he wants ranchers who have “harmonized” with the land to have a bigger say than college graduates at the BLM. While this is certainly populist talk, to repeat, the populist movement does not actually seem

communities are in economic distress. There are Oath Keepers and 3%ers in New York City, but they don't have much political gravity. In the West, however, they tend to get their clawhold in areas with high federal land ownership; Oregon for example is 53% federal land, and in Harney County (where the Mahleu refuge is) it is 75%.

The radical rightists are offering false hope; for example, they claim they will bring rural wealth back through logging, but industry automation means the mass of old logging jobs will never come back—even if every last tree on public land is cut down! They have also started to establish dual power structures, such as right-wing militias in place of non-existent 911 service in areas where county governments are defunded.

To counter this, I would say that antifascists will need to work in larger coalitions with a variety of non-radicals to develop community-based opposition—and concrete alternatives. There is no reason this needs to be “liberal” in the sense of campaigning for Democratic Party politicians, or calling for police intervention. That said it might not be “radical” in the sense that it is designed as a front group to draw people into more radical politics; sometime we just have to engage in self-defense, lest things get far, far worse.

Compromises will have to be made. If we want the community to reject the Patriot paramilitaries' overtures, radical antifa may find themselves working with moderate—or even conservative—ranchers who are also anti-militia, but who want help in influencing their ranching community. This is going to be a challenge to activists, especially those used to living in the big cities where you never have to work with people who don't belong to your specific ideological tendency. However, those anti-militia ranchers aren't going to stop ranching just because you don't work with them—but they may lose this battle unless they get outside support. A community run by Patriot movement activists and militias—a real possibility in some areas—is an intolerable answer. As one sign said, “No Bundy Caliphate in Harney County.”

IGD: How can people follow your work and what resources can people check out to learn more?

Spencer: Folks can check out my webpage spencersunshine.com and follow me on twitter [@transform6789](https://twitter.com/transform6789). I am an associate fellow at the think tank Political Research Associates, and we produce research on a variety of right-wing movements for social movements and struggles.

IGD: Thanks Spencer!

genuine. Instead, it appears that the militia continually taps into a growing marginal fringe.

While at the compound and in Burns, we noticed at least three basic personality types coming from the small, but growing, fringe. Their commonalities are that they seem truly “ready to die.” They are believers, but their commitment also locates them, to some extent, on the apparently informal loose chain of command.

The Predator: John Trudell, the famous Native poet and activist, used to speak about a “predator spirit” that exists in the colonial context of the US. The Predator is single minded, hateful, ruthless, cold, efficient, and fanatical. He is certain of his task, he has made up his mind, and acted on his convictions. He inspires others by nature of his austere discipline, and the “top dog” way that he takes others on his team down a notch, either through reprimand or a jocular insult.

The True Believer: These guys look dotingly to the Predator for condescending appreciation. They are wide-eyed devotees, and their autonomous capacities are questionable. Although they seem almost naive and emotional, they commit some of the most atrocious acts, simply out of the desire to be appreciated and even loved. For their acts, they are equipped by top dogs to look and feel like part of the hierarchy.

The Low-Bagger: Just like any movement, the white supremacist movement has its low-baggers. These guys are the militiamen who come from all over, and are largely disorganized. They are attracted to the anti-authoritarian appeal of some aspects of the militia movement, and are more into booze, pot, and women than they are militant discipline and brutality. However, ideologically, they are not “true believers” so much as they are skeptics and often wingnut conspiracy theorists who can think their way around justifying attacks against the state and minorities in some, though not all, instances.

“Low bagger” is generally a term for a kind of traveler who contribute to activities where needed. For small movements with limited local support, low-bagging can be extremely helpful and even crucial. The low baggers who are part of the militia movement seem to have relatively low commitment to the “cause,” and are more drawn to the lifestyle of danger and rebellion. It is tempting to suggest that the left could be winning them over. However, the question becomes not “do we want to court low-commitment members of the right,” but “is it possible to cut the cord between them and the militias, and attempt to show them the errors of conspiratorial thinking of white supremacism and the corporate private property ideology?”

To do this, it seems important to continue to sharpen distinctions between us and the Patriot movement. This does not mean debating them or giving too much attention to their causes. It means allying with black people and other communities of color, as well as Indigenous peoples and other disenfranchised people struggling for collective liberation, including rural white opponents and potential-opponents of militia activity.

Though the “anti-authoritarian” streak is strong in the militias, and the rebellious broken hierarchies are awkwardly personality driven and non-militaristic, the militias’ power is reinforced by the institutional repression that backs them up. In particular, that support comes from the white supremacy of the government that would ruthlessly destroy similar dissent from communities of color. It also comes from the media, which offers them control over the stream of images, giving them full attention and preferable treatment by covering up their cracks and hypocrisies, rather than focus equal attention on other key problems (such as the awful methane leak in California). By fighting against institutional repression, we might also be able to create space for honest discussions of reactionary activity and how to confront it.

The Patriot movement’s twisting of the narrative toward “white civil rights” and anti-oppression directed toward the “abolishment” of the BLM is also important to fight—even while we continue to propose the kind of response that anarchist thinker Shawn Wilbur has been writing about, such as alternative approaches to land management. In my recent anthology, *Grabbing Back: Essays Against the Global Land Grab*, I observed the rising conflict of extremes after the housing market crash, and compiled a number of essays by leading thinkers and organizers such as Keisha-Khan Perry, Noam Chomsky, and Vandana Shiva contemplating alternative approaches to land grabs, federal land management and “market based solutions.” These contributors call for solidarity, an end to extractive and exploitative economies, and what Javier Sethness-Castro calls “ecological self-management.” There must be an “abolition,” but this general abolition must extend to the abolition of prisons, deportations, and capitalism, in favor of not just land redistribution by a central authority, but autonomous autogestion, producing for one another in the spirit of mutual aid.

The militiamen use the term “abolishment” intentionally as though it was connected to the abolition of slavery; it fits into their vocabulary of pseudo-anti-oppression and anti-authoritarianism. However, the error here is important, in that it attempts to ignore the unjust inequalities in treatment that give white people greater privileges over non-white people, despite the

Spencer: Ammon Bundy said the occupation was the “point of the spear” of their movement to privatize (or otherwise remove restrictions on) the use of federal land for mining, logging, and ranching. It’s no doubt that for many, if not most, of the folks occupying the refuge this (as well as the Hammonds’ sentence) is just a single element of their larger political ideology, and they hope to launch a “second American revolution.”

The movement’s beliefs are a grab bag of toxic politics which commonly include: opposition to any restrictions on gun ownership; anti-immigrant xenophobia and Islamophobia; unrestricted use of private and public land; legal strategies of right-wing decentralization; a commitment to completely unregulated capitalism; various conspiracy theories about how our supposedly socialist government is planning to allow the UN or China to invade; climate change denial and anti-environmentalism—and of course an implicit racism.

I am astounded by how the authorities have treated them. Of course making them martyrs is a bad idea. But I am not sure of what to make of the fact that the authorities haven’t established a corridor around the occupied buildings (currently supplies, more paramilitaries, and curious folks from the community can come right in, through their checkpoints on public roads), nor cut the heat or power. The sheriff and his family, his deputies, and the deputies’ families are being followed around, their tires slashed, and their homes monitored—all without repercussion. So the Patriot movement really is the the dominate armed force in the community. Almost everyone recognizes that what has happened to the militia is some special treatment for white right-wingers. If this was black radicals, Islamists, or even white environmentalists—the compound would have already been stormed, if not bombed.

This action comes on the heels of there never being any prosecution for the Bundy ranch standoff, where Patriot movement activists pointed weapons at federal agents. Even long afterward, no one was arrested, and Cliven Bundy has never paid grazing fees for his use of public land. So these folks clearly feel they can get away with waving guns around to get their way.

How activists involved in autonomous radical political movements should react to all of this is far too complex to answer here, although it is well worth serious consideration. I know that some antifa folks are already trying to decide what approach to take if Trump is elected.

The Patriot movement groups are often getting footholds in areas where antifa and other radicals are almost entirely non-existent, and where the

1994, a public rally was held for them which included Wise Use activists (an astroturf anti-environmentalist movement).

The two Hammonds were convicted of two arsons (and had a different story for each fire) on federal land; according to the authorities, one was to cover up a poaching incident, and one was for setting an illegal backfire. They agreed to a five-year sentence to avoid further charges, but the judge gave them much, much shorter terms. The prosecution appealed the sentence, during which the Hammonds did their time and were released. The courts finally held the original sentence the judge gave was not legal, as five years was a mandatory minimum under the 1996 terrorism act for arson on federal property (this is the same sentencing enhancer that was applied to most of the Green Scare prisoners). So now the Hammonds have gone back to prison to serve the rest of the mandatory minimum sentence.

It's unclear why the Hammonds were treated this way—perhaps their decades of conflict with federal authorities had been a sore spot for the feds, and they were harboring a grudge. But, again, that's just speculation.

I don't know about the specifics of the Hammond's politics—as I said, it's a muddy political milieu—but in the last few months they have been courted by the 3%ers and the Bundy's. Oregon and Idaho are criss-crossed with Oath Keeper, 3%er, and militia groups, and so while the occupiers are from out of state, they can draw on thousands of activists in the region.

The majority of the rally was planned by the Idaho 3%ers under the auspices of the Pacific Patriots Network, formed after the April occupation in Josephine County, which served as the networking place for them to get organized. They were able to bring out 300 people for the march and rally, but note that even the Oregon groups were not from Burns or Harney County, and were not called in by the family, who have denounced the occupation. Many people from Burns who originally intended to participate, or to even watch from the sidelines from curiosity, chose to boycott the event because of the blatant disrespect toward the Hammonds' publicly stated wishes.

The Patriot groups are just using the Hammonds to further their own agenda.

IGD: Based on the YouTube statements of some of the militia members, some have a martyr complex in regards to what they're engaged in and see this as the start of the potential overthrow of the federal government. How does possible direct confrontation play into this? How should anti-fascists respond to the growth of far-right anti-federal government groups without falling into liberal trappings?

universal claims of civil rights. The narrative of “white rights” and “reverse racism” is only a dressed up version of “white power” that the media prefers. Strong opposition to these terms of discourse is important to provide an adequate reframing of the discussions taking place in society.

Serious work is happening on the ground by the Rural Organizing Project (ROP), which organizes against militias, mapping it out strategically, and organizing with local communities, we need to take these factors into account. The 1,001 opinions on the internet remain important, but the fact remains: the opinions on the ground matter the most, and the local base for militias doesn't exist in Burns, and their dissent is given expression thanks in part to groups like ROP. Militias require outside assistance to maintain these kinds of occupations, which means they are still parachute-type situations that rely on low baggers who bring all kinds of problems to their group, such as fist-fights, binge drinking, and lies. Accountability to the local community seems important to the militias on the surface, but really the point is to gain attention and to do what the left calls “raising consciousness” in order to spread their movement. Their hope is that eventually, once they occupy one place, others will begin to occupy areas in their regions. In reality, they are disempowering the local community.

In many of these problems, the left can recognize some of its own embarrassing realities, and learn from their mistakes instead of simply ridiculing them while repeating the same errors. Without a base of support from the community, and because they are propped up by institutional oppression, this hope for a spread of their actions is cast in a kind of faith in a spiritual awakening. Rizheimer told us that more people from Burns did not join them, because they are afraid. In spite of the fact that neither the community nor local law enforcement supports them, they have a psychological complex of success—they have accomplished a foothold in a longer narrative that stretches back not just to the Sugar Pine mine and the Bundy Ranch, but the anti-immigrant movement in Arizona, and other extremist interventions in mainstream political life. The narrative goes back to Ruby Ridge, Waco, and even the 1979 Sagebrush Rebellion. It is, then, an inter-generational movement with something like an “activist” mentality.

As we left the compound, we saw in the margins by the fire two younger people sitting by a fire. One looked like a back-woods low bagger and the other, a young woman with hair dyed blue. Were they journalists, or were they fringe Cascadian bioregionalists unsure as to whether or not they supported insurrection by any means against the federal government? In either case, the symbolic effect rang true, because we have seen too many comrades

publicly consider supporting the ranchers and vigilantes.

We need the Cascadians, moderates, and anti-statists of every variety to come out directly against the Malheur Wildlife Refuge occupation and all other occupations motivated by colonial narratives lodged in racism and the interests of capital. We also need to be respectfully and responsibly introspective about the small ways in which we perpetuate what Joel Olson called “white democracy” in everyday life. The racists, Islamophobes, and lunatics involved are clearly manipulating our rhetoric for the use of big business and private interests. Their hope—to bring down the government by enshrining the corporate state even further through the sacralization of the patriot movement and its would-be martyrdom—remains the enemy of all we stand for.

While we empathize with many people in Burns who distrust of the FBI, police, and federal government, we also agree with their higher levels of animosity toward the Bundys for bringing those forces to bear in their community. We believe that the far right is ultimately not the government’s responsibility to deal with. Antifascists must organize to stop the spread of the far right with local communities, because no one else will.

full size pickups, often with custom militia decals.

So who are these people? Clearly middle-class, and mostly male. My guess would be that the majority were ‘movement’ people, people who got their information, community, and world view from the increasingly diversifying and multiplying internet right-wing media culture. In this sense, they were the mirror opposites of the people who turn out for climate change marches and anti-globalization rallies, etc., only better-off economically. They were activists whose personal bacon was not directly in the fire, and they were there for ideological reasons.

All reports state that most of the community doesn’t want the Bundy’s there; there were no Burns residents in the occupation, and only a handful of Oregonians. A large public town meeting was held on January 6, where the vast majority of locals present expressed their wish that the occupiers should leave. When asked to raise their hands if they wanted the occupiers to leave, only a handful of the 400 attendees didn’t raise their hands. The Oregon Farm Bureau and the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association have condemned the occupation.

However, in the last couple days, there are also reports that the individuals from the area are beginning to wonder if the national media attention will help the Hammonds or their issues with the BLM, and get them on the radar of political leadership who have, by in large, failed their county.

IGD: How big a deal is the sentencing of the two ranchers in Burns? Is this out of the ordinary for the government to come down on them like this and is this why the militias have responded in this showing of force? What does this also say about the size and influence of the militias in Oregon and the surrounding areas?

Spencer: I think the Hammonds have been cynically used by the Patriot movement paramilitaries. But their legal case is very odd, and in particular their sentencing under the terrorism enhancement has helped whip up a frenzy among the Patriot movement activists, as one of their typical beliefs is that the federal government is about to round up the militias for being “terrorists” as a prelude to dictatorship.

As far back as 1994, the national media was reporting on the conflict between the Hammonds and federal officials over grazing rights on federal land; the family apparently made a number of death threats and have been arrested numerous times, usually with the charges reduced or dismissed. And this is not the first time they have garnered outside political support; in

Marxist-Leninist), has also condemned the occupation. But the 3%ers are decentralized—anyone can identify as one, and there are numerous, overlapping local and regional groups—so he is merely a high-profile ideologue. We’ve heard that a number of individual Three Percenters have been in the occupation, despite the fact that a number of local Three Percenter groups who helped organized the march have disavowed the occupation (although internally they are beginning to line back up behind the Bundys —he’s one of them, after all). The FB profile of Malheur occupier and virulent Islamophobe Jon Ritzheimer—who previously organized armed marches outside of mosques, including the misleadingly titled “Global Rally for Humanity” that took place in many cities across the country—has Three Percenter symbols. Currently, a Three Percenter flag has been seen flying over the occupied buildings.

Basically, Bundy couldn’t get local buy-in for his action, and didn’t tell the other groups what he was going to do beforehand. The Oregon groups are definitely trying to expand their large grassroots movement and probably saw this tactic as too alienating and a potential liability—especially as the day before the march, the Idaho 3%ers promised the community they would only take nonviolent action and that civil disobedience would not be a component of their action. Seeing that the Bundys and friends are still alive and in the media every day, the 3%ers and individual Oath Keepers are now trying to get back in on the action. They went to the refuge to try and be buffer between the Bundy group and the any potential feds, but were sent away by Bundy. They then marched on the courthouse in Burns displayed their “troops” around town. The feds have humored them, too.

IGD: What are the internal class dynamics on the ground in Burns? Between not only the leadership of the militias and the rank and file but also within the townspeople and the ranchers the militias are trying to support.

Spencer: I’m not in Burns so I can’t speak to this. One person who attended the march described the class character this way:

...this was not a crowd of rural ‘producers’. The strategy might be about opening up Federal lands, but this movement didn’t make its living off the land. The real ranchers were off watching from a distance in their Muck boots, their trucks with sheep dogs and tools and welding rigs in the flatbeds. Also on the outskirts of the crowd, a group of young Native people watched the rally intently, with no sign of wanting to participate, and no acknowledgement from the rally organizers. The protesters were wearing ‘tacticool’ clothing, carrying \$500-1000 worth of hardware on their belts, and driving late model, clean

Why We Should Stop Calling the Malheur Militia Terrorists, and Start Calling Them Racists

Anti-Fascist News

This last week has seen news coverage dominated by the resurrection of the Cliven Bundy ranch stand-off, this time in rural Oregon. The story, which has been a little difficult to track down in the dense media coverage, reflects much of what sparked the Bundy standoff a couple years ago: rich white ranchers being incensed that they cannot use federal land at will and do what they want without legal recourse. Dwight and Steve Hammond, ranchers in Eastern Oregon, own around 12,000 acres of land, as well as federal land use rights, that they use to graze cattle. In 2012 the two were found guilty of lighting fires on Bureau of Land Management land in 2001 and 2006, which was listed as their way of hiding their illegal poaching attempts. A judge friendly to the family gave them less than the mandatory-minimum sentences, which the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals later overturned after the two men had been released from their light prison stay. They were court ordered then to return to prison to carry out their five year sentences. Part of this comes from a perceived terrorism that was used to enhance the sentence, which comes from the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 because of the threat the fire had to trap four BLM firefighters and the fact that it was an arson on federal land.

This terrorism enhancement and recall of their release was seen as “double jeopardy” to many on the right, and it was taken up by a growing militia movement that see this as the federal government overreaching into the property rights of rural ranchers. Ammon Bundy, son of white supremacist rancher Cliven Bundy, used this as an opportunity to restart the militia movement response to his family’s fight with federal authorities over his unpaid grazing fees for use of federal land. What came next was well watched, as Bundy and Ryan Payne, a well known Islamophobic conspiracy theorist, came to Burns in December and set up a meeting called the Committee of Safety to try and stop the sentencing of the Hammonds. As the group swelled, almost entirely from non-residents, they moved on to enter and occupy an administration building at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. This is essentially a federal building used to protect the habitat and wildlife of the area, and likely an example of the kind of “liberal” public use of land that they want to see turned over to ranchers, miners, and loggers.

Left wing press jumped on this immediately, as it should as the danger of the right-wing militia movement brings the current threat to its peak in the early 1990s. The conversation quickly shifted to the double standard that refuses to label this occupation as “terrorism,” especially given the fact that they are discussing “violent revolution” and are brandishing semi-automatic weapons. While this rhetoric brings up obvious dissonance in media characterizations of things like Black Lives Matter versus the militia movement, it draws a problematic narrative that can have consequences that the radical left will feel. When looking at the ongoing occupation of the federal buildings, there are a few key reasons that left wing commentary should move away from consistently calling them terrorists.

1. The Term “Terrorism” Is a Bully Club of the State to Criminalize Dissent

Over the last fifty years of political organizing and conflict in the U.S., it is not the right-wing that has been the ideological victim of the word “terrorist.” In the early 2000s, the environmental and animal rights movement saw all semi-militant action moved directly under the banner of “eco-terrorism” with legislation like the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. Using the term “terrorism” is to a method of re-labeling militant actions as outside of possible political behavior and discourse, discredits it as conscious political activity with logical motivations, and attempts to reinforce the narrative that the state and its parallel institutions need to be protected from these “terrorists.” This narrative is important because it creates a social support for the state and the ways it sets parameters of “acceptable political behavior.” This notion does not necessarily undermine the reality that terrorism does exist, with a clear example of this being the culmination of the 1990s militia movement in the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing of 1995. Instead, going after non-violent direct action and labeling it as terrorism creates a model where by militant action of any kind, not just on the right, has the ability to be undermined and criminalized as such.

This issue is especially true when looking at the tactics of the militia’s confrontation currently, which is a building occupation. This has been a staple of movements on the left for decades, many of which have matched its use of armed personnel and revolutionary rhetoric. An example of this is the occupation of Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes, lasting for almost two years from 1969-71. Citing the Treaty of Fort Laramie, unused federal land must be returned to the First Nations people who resided on it previously. The occupation drew on the Civil Rights Movement and the growing anti-war movement, where occupations of tactical buildings was common-

not in direct defense of anyone. The right way to go would have been to respect the right of the locals on the Committee of Safety to call the shots, decide what needs to be done, and to actually let them be in charge of all outside volunteers, including you.

Nonetheless, individual Oath Keepers were at the march, including Richard Mack, who is on the board of the organization and also leads their sister organization, the Constitutional Sheriffs and Police Officers Association. We know that leadership of the Oregon Oath Keepers (who communicate regularly with Stewart Rhodes and receive significant resourcing from Oath Keepers national) are in Burns, visiting the refuge and giving interviews to right-wing media about the occupation. It’s my guess that many of them think the ideas of the occupiers are sound, but are just worried that their tactics will delegitimize their movement. A colleague of mine thinks they are now interested in getting a piece of the action (media, funding), but don’t want to appear to be hypocrites who are only interested in headlines and fundraising.

The Harney County Committee of Safety, by the way, is a local group formed under the Bundys’ influence in November; the Bundys visited the community several times leading up to the occupation and set up this group as a front. Once the Committee got word of the proposed occupation by the Bundys and the threats and intimidation pointed at the Sheriff and his wife and parents, they turned on Bundy, opposing him publicly. At the town meeting called by Harney County Sheriff Ward on January 7, Tim Smith stood alongside his five fellow Committee members and introduced themselves to the crowd of several hundred locals—who responded with hollers of, “Who are you?”

He said that he was appointed at the time of the first Bundy meeting in town a couple months ago to “change the way the county is controlled.” Committee members were nominated and selected—they aren’t volunteers, he bragged. The Committee earlier that day went to the refuge and delivered a letter asking the occupiers to leave; three members had signed it, but three declined. Right-wing media is now rife with chatter about grand juries and other jargon about Sovereign Citizen “legal” procedures. (The Sovereigns have a whole, made-up parallel legal system, which is descended from Posse Comitatus. They create their own courts, for example, and have been known to threaten to execute those they “convict.”) I think much more will come out about the Committee later.

Mike Vanderboegh, the co-founder of the 3%ers (and, strangely, a former

may be changing at the camp, as the SPLC just reported yesterday that two ideological white Supremacists are now part of the occupation.

Researcher JJ MacNab describes the occupiers as a mixture of “Mormon land rights guys looking for muscle and militants looking for an excuse to engage the feds.” Ammon Bundy and LaVoy Finicum, neighbor of Cliven Bundy, and at least one other person apparently follow a political brand of radical-right Mormonism associated with the writings of Ezra Taft Benson and Cleon Skousen, both supporters of the John Birch Society [a far-Right and anti-communist group].

Those of us watching Oregon’s Patriot movement were aware something might happen in Burns well beforehand as there had been lots of discussion about it in their networks. The Bundy Ranch conflict was a huge shot in the arm to the Patriot groups. The movement has been trying to spark a conflict to replicate it, and in at least two instances established armed camps where miners were in conflict with federal authorities; this happened in Josephine County, Oregon in April 2015 and in Lincoln, Montana during the summer. The Patriot movement is huge in Oregon and Idaho, so even though the Bundys were from out of state, there is a large base of potential support.

Some of the movement are more aggressive and seeking a fight, while others—expecting a dictatorship to be established by our Muslim socialist overlords any minute now—are taking a more defensive posture. The Oath Keepers, the most legitimate and above-ground of the groups, try hard to keep up the pretense of legality (standing police officers are members, after all), and are trying to mainstream.

Oregon Oath Keepers helped organize the Saturday, January 2 rally and march through Burns (from which the occupation split off), but the just beforehand the Oath Keepers’ national leadership decided they wanted nothing to do with the march, and threatened to expel the local members who were organizing it. Their justification was that the Hammond family—who had been on the fence about having armed support—finally decided publicly against it. The Oath Keepers felt they did not want to go where they were not welcome, and probably also thought it would be a hard sell to the cops in their organization. Their leader, disbarred lawyer Stewart Rhodes, has told Bundy:

We oppose what you have chosen to do by occupying the wildlife preserve there in Oregon, specifically because it is not being done with the consent of the locals or at their request, without the request of the Hammond family, without even their knowledge of what you were going to do, until you did it, and because it is

place. Since then, occupations have been used as a radical option in nearly every movement with direct action components, and on the flip side we have seen the BLM targeted by Earth First! organizers in similar ways.

Beyond its application for radical movements on the left, the term terrorism has been one of the primary forces of victimization in the all out assault on Muslims, both in this country and abroad. The broad “war on terror” has been one of the most disasterous periods of U.S. foreign policy, leading the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and an ongoing crisis of bigotry that singles Muslims out as prime suspects in almost every type of offense. Simply the concept of terrorism, both undefined and inconsistent, is one that has lost almost all useful descriptive power, and its mere invocation is one that brings us back to the underlying bigotry and imperialism that it is used to justify. In a similar way to discussions around “hate crimes” legislation in places like Against Equality, it is difficult to see why invoking terrorism can do anything but further empower an “anti-terrorist” state apparatus that is unequally victimizing to people of color and other minorities. It is not going to be the shotgun clad ranchers that feel the brunt over any resurgence of “terrorist” fervor, it is going to be the most oppressed classes in general.

The judge that issued the terrorism enhancements and called for the Hammonds to return to prison to serve out a much longer sentence was Judge Anne Aiken. People may remember her as the Judge who ruled over the 2005 Operation Backfire arrests, where members of the Earth Liberation Front had terrorism enhancements added to their sentences for property destruction actions. This was part of a larger “Green Scare” that labeled this sort of radicalism as terrorism in the wake of 9/11, and here we saw possible sentences into the hundreds of years as a way to intimidate both the public and the defendants into informing on each other. The same principle is at play here, yet it is exactly the tools of the state and “anti-terrorism” infrastructures that will attack left-wing radicals and minority groups more severely in the future.

If the term terrorism is empowered to confront the militia standoff, it maintains that power to be used to marginalize later on. This essentially “borrows from Peter to pay Paul” in that, while using the term to win this rhetorical battle, it can then be used against us later.

2. “Terrorism” Is Besides the Point

The Bundy occupation is a ridiculous show of privilege from rich ranchers who exhibit racist, sexist, and bizarre conspiracy ideas that should be ex-

posed and openly opposed. They represent a regressive part of the American middle class, which holds onto their white privilege as their last life line as they see demographics shift in the U.S. The militia movement itself was on the decline dramatically through the Bush years, but rose up along with the Tea Party once there was a person of color in the white house. Most of their narratives see the federal government as “overreaching” and “oppressive” mainly because of minor inconveniences like taxes, which they generally opposed because they do not like the idea of a welfare state being accessible to people who look unlike themselves. They are a growing and violent part of the white supremacist right, but their problematic nature is not derivative of their tactics in this stand-off.

To focus in on much of the milder protest actions, such as keeping guns on the premises or ranting and raving to the media, then labeling this behavior terrorism, it misses the point that it is their ideology and political role that should be exposed and challenged. There are very real and obvious impulses and disgusting elements that they represent, but we miss those entirely when we instead focus on the protest action that we cannot tie directly to what gives them political distinction.

Plainly put: we don’t declare this militia movement enemies because this standoff represents “terrorism,” we stand against them because they are racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, anti-working class, and violently reactionary. This should be the center of our discourse and narrative about the new Bundy standoff and not whether or not they broke specific laws in their protest actions.

3. The “Terrorism” Double Standard Itself Should Be the Discussion

Much of this use of the term “terrorism” when discussing the occupation came from the realization that the media failed to label this group as terrorists, while direct action occupations with people of color are commonly labeled as such. This is absolutely true and we need to continue to expose the way that white men in confrontational situations are allowed clear perceptible privilege. There needs to be an ongoing discussion for how the same behavior and actions are characterized for people of color to make them appear more frightening and less rational.

That does not, however, actually mean that anyone in this story are, in fact, terrorists. Instead, what it should act as is a prompt to see the absolute inequality in media narratives, and we should continue to use moments like these to expose the disparity. It is not useful to then try to reverse the dis-

Interview with Spencer Sunshine on the Oregon Militia Occupation

It’s Going Down

The current Patriot Movement grows out of white-power influenced militias of the 1970s. While the current crop has attempted to distance themselves from White nationalism, it is still made up of far-Right Islamophobes, conspiracy-theorists, anti-immigration activists, and others that straddle the fence between the Tea Party and White nationalism. Such groups often have a pull within the white working and middle classes, and represent an armed cadre of (largely) ex-service men and former police officers, willing to take action. With the ‘success’ of the Bundy Ranch standoff under their belts and now the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Burns, Oregon, we wanted to know more about the Patriot Movement and the current showdown. Sitting down with Spencer Sunshine, a longtime anti-fascist writer who has tracked and written about the far-Right, we asked him to explain what is happening and how the far-Right is mobilizing.

It’s Going Down: What is the relationship between the Bundys, the 3%ers, and other far-Right militia groups and formations? Why do you feel that the Oath Keepers have decided to stay out but others have come in?

Spencer: It’s hard to know exactly who is inside the armed camp—recently christened Citizens for Constitutional Freedom—especially since people can, astoundingly, come and go freely (some of the paramilitaries are actually staying in hotels in town). So here’s what I can make out.

In general, they are all part of the same political milieu, which is pretty disorganized and factional. Often it is not clear where the lines start and end between, say the right-wing of the Republican Party; more grassroots-oriented groups like the Tea Party, various Constitutionlists and conspiracy theorists, and Christian Rightists; and the what I consider to be the formal Patriot movement groups (Oath Keepers, 3%ers, militias, and Sovereign Citizens).

Since this question always comes up, I think that today the Patriot movement is self-consciously trying to police a line between themselves and the ideological white nationalists. This is ironic since the Patriot movement is essentially based on the template set up by the 1970s antisemitic, white supremacist group Posse Comitatus, which advocated many of the ideological and organizational forms used by the Patriot groups today. However, this

of capital. We also need to be respectfully and responsibly introspective about the small ways in which we perpetuate what Joel Olson called “white democracy” in everyday life. The racists, Islamophobes, and lunatics involved are clearly manipulating our rhetoric for the use of big business and private interests. Their hope—to bring down the government by enshrining the corporate state even further through the sacralization of the patriot movement and its would-be martyrdom—remains the enemy of all we stand for.

While we empathize with many people in Burns who distrust of the FBI, police, and federal government, we also agree with their higher levels of animosity toward the Bundys for bringing those forces to bear in their community. We believe that the far right is ultimately not the government’s responsibility to deal with. Antifascists must organize to stop the spread of the far right with local communities, because no one else will.

This is really true when it comes to the far-right across all cultural manifestations, and we can extend that call to counter as Islamophobia hits critical levels, the Men’s Rights movement only grows, and the internet-focused Alt Right attempts to re-frame the narratives about equality, democracy, and immigration. A strong counter-movement, one built on a developing anti-racist analysis, is how this type of false consciousness can be answered, and where many of the disaffected members of the white working class can be given an actual revolutionary alternative.

parity as, beyond what was mentioned earlier, it just distracts from the issue that people of color are almost always painted as violent extremists.

Anti-fascist writer Spencer Sunshine recently elaborated on this in his articles “Where the Oregon Militias Came From” for The Progressive.

Many of us who watch the far right have long believed that after Rudy Ridge and Waco, the federal government adopted an unspoken rule that it would treat armed (largely white) right-wing groups with kid gloves. While a domestic “war on terror” was unleashed on Muslims and radical leftwing activists, the far right has been spared. This was certainly true at the Bundy Ranch, when Patriot movement activists pointed guns at federal officials, but were never arrested. The federal government has held the door open for the Bundy militia, and they’ve walked through it.

There is certainly a racially charged double-standard in the use of the “terrorism” label; however, the federal terrorism enhancement has been used so wantonly that it is hard to argue in favor of expanding it. Instead of applying it to the paramilitaries, it would be more productive to reevaluate those sentences affected by the 1996 law. While using arson to hide poaching is illegal—as is setting fire to logging machinery—neither one amounts to terrorism.

For a lot organizing on the radical left, we need to consistently consider how tactics used today may be reinterpreted later for broader anti-racist struggle. This is critical in how we employ terms like “terrorism,” and why it should often be reserved for outright wanton civilian violence.



Much of what we think of as the militia movement was started with Posse Comitatus in the 1960s, which was built on radicalizing much of the anti-semitic conspiracy theories that were found in places like the John Birch society. Right from the start it was closely allied with the Christian Identity movement, which was one of the most virulently violent racist versions of Christianity. In this interpretation, people of color were considered the “beasts of the field” and not actually humans with souls, Jews were literally the spawns of Satan out to destroy the white race, and the ancient Israelites of the Old Testament are actually European descended people who they now think are in diaspora. Posse Comitatus organizational charters actually came from Portland, Oregon in 1969 by Henry Lamont Beach, who was formally a member of the Nazi-allied Silver Shirts. Throughout the existence of the militia movement they kept close allegiances with the more militant rural wings of the neo-Nazi revolutionary movements, most specif-

ically the Christian Identity churches under the banner of Aryan Nations and the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. It is exactly this connection that fueled the standoff at Ruby Ridge as well as the radicalization seen with Timothy McVeigh. At all levels, the militia movement is built on the foundation of conspiratorial fear of a state built on leftist values, ones that have a secret cabal of “outsiders” and out to benefit people who are not of their insular in-groups.

The newest incarnation of the militia movement has again followed suit by coding racial fears in vague economic and totalitarian terms, which is seen in the creation of the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters. The Oath Keepers, made up of former police, military, and first-responders who are making an oath to defend the “people” against perceived government authoritarianism. What this has meant in practice is actually patrolling in places like Ferguson, Missouri to defend against Black Lives Matter protesters as well as supporting just about every open white nationalist in times of social struggle. The Three Percenters, named for the unverified theory that only three percent of early American colonists actually rose up and fought the British, have taken all of the “black helicopter” rhetoric even further and often ally with almost explicitly racist language as they defend “white rights.” Both groups have made the various Bundy standoffs their pet cause, even though now leadership in the Oath Keepers are now calling for a pull out from Oregon. This standoff is seeing a strong support from the newer Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, which feels like a direct inheritor of the racist revolutionary program of Posee Comitatus.

Oregon itself is not just a surprise target in this occupation, which many seem to argue because of the perception of Portland as a liberal homeland. Instead, this has been a consistent feature of Oregon’s history. This was the home of the “skinhead wars” of the 1980s and 90s when East Side White Pride skinheads associated with the White Aryan Resistance attacked Ethiopian student Mulegata Seraw. The KKK has seen a long history heading all the way back to the state’s founding as a “white homeland,” even up until recent efforts to organize in white working class areas of the city. Recently, after the shooting at Umqua Community College in Roseburg, militia organized embarrassing “gun rights” rallies to intimidate Obama on his visit. The Sugar Pine mine fiasco last year, where “patriots” including the Oath Keepers came to defend a mine from BLM intervention, bolstered the idea that these types of militia occupations could be successful. In that case, a judge finally ordered the BLM to walk away from enforcing normal regulations on the mine. The logic may be to push local authorities to back down just as

they did there and with the Cliven Bundy blunder, and, unfortunately, they could be right. Without a strong counter-movement, which fights to both counter the reactionaries and the rights of rich property owners, it is hard to see how authorities will not buckle under ongoing pressure from increasingly volatile ideologues.



While moving away from the terrorism rhetoric, we may be able to more clearly create an opposition that can really counter them politically, and identify them as the racists they are. Their occupation of both the environmental land and Paiute tribal areas calls for the intersection of the environmental and First Nations movement, as well as highlights the illogical and offensive way that propertied militia members continue to victimize tribal peoples as part of their role in the global land grab. The Paiute Tribe of the Burns areas has unequivocally called for the militia member to leave, which is not to mention the Hammonds themselves, who have distanced themselves while reporting to prison to serve their sentences.

The growth of the militia movement is not just a problem for Oregon, but for areas across the country as they make up a more rural wing of a larger reactionary political thrust. Empowered by Donald Trump, given intellectual pedigree by the Alt Right and Neoreaction, and given a voice through trolling and “headline jacking,” militias are only a part of the larger backlash of a growing white nationalist movement. While the militia in Oregon avoids racialized language, it is those anxieties that hits directly at their root. For anti-racists and anti-fascists organizers, this means building an intersectional movement that can mobilize beyond the radical sphere is critical to both fighting back when they arrive and eroding their disaffected white working class base. The Bundy standoff will end soon, and the pundit talking points will fade just as they did after the Nevada sideshow, but it is the reactionary white masculinity that is going to continue to drive confrontations like this.

The impulse to support those going after the government, no matter what their motivations are, is often strong in a disparate radical left without strong political foundations. In Alexander Reid Ross’s recent article from inside the Bundy occupation, “Toward an Anti-Fascist Analysis of the Malheur Rebellion,” he calls for the need for ongoing counter-organizing since we cannot rely on the state to effectively counter such movements.

We need the Cascadians, moderates, and anti-statists of every variety to come out directly against the Malheur Wildlife Refuge occupation and all other occupations motivated by colonial narratives lodged in racism and the interests