

Bundy's fate awaits renegade river miners

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Nearly two years ago, Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy outmaneuvered federal land managers over his failure to pay about \$1.1 million in grazing fees.

For the feds, it was a perfect storm. Bundy's supporters were armed and ready to resist federal officers.

The optics presented Bundy as the local rancher being roughhoused by the feds. Plus the federal leadership was green. Both Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Bureau of Land Management Director Neil Kornze were weeks away from the Senate confirming their appointments.

By walking away, federal agents avoided violence - but they emboldened Bundy and others like him.

An apparent offshoot of that tactic played out last summer on the South Fork of the Clearwater River near Golden, Idaho. There, in defiance of the Clean Water Act, Shannon Poe and the American Mining Rights Association of Coulterville, Calif., engaged in suction dredge mining operations along a portion of the river critical to threatened steelhead and bull trout.

Until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service concluded the operations weren't harmful to fish, the river was off-limits.

Poe guessed right. He could flout the law with seeming impunity. Other than handing out a few letters of non-compliance, the Forest Service avoided a fight.

Somewhere there's a limit, and Bundy's sons, Ammon and Ryan Bundy, just crossed it.

With 20 followers, the Bundy boys sought to hijack local protests over the fate of two Burns, Ore., ranchers, Dwight Hammond and his son, Steven, who are facing prison terms for arson.

By occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, the Bundy-led group sought to spark a rebellion toward forcing the feds to relinquish public lands.

Instead, they found themselves isolated.

Burns residents branded them glory-seeking carpetbaggers.

Harney County Sheriff Dave Ward has told them to leave.

The Mormon church - which counts Bundy among its members - issued a statement disassociating itself from the insurrection.

The Oregon Cattlemen's Association said it "does not support illegal activity taken against the government."

The Malheur Indian Tribe has condemned the action, contending the Bundy group is desecrating sacred ground.

Likewise, people whose sympathies Bundy might expect are leaving him to twist in the wind. As the Associated Press reported, Oath Keepers say he's gone too far. The Idaho Statesman's Rocky Barker got the same message from the Three Percent of Idaho.

Back in the first Bundy standoff in 2014, "The feds were coming in there with guns to take a person's private property," Three Percent of Idaho spokesman Chris McIntire told Barker. "This time, the Bundy family took it upon themselves to occupy a federal building open to the public."

Clearly, the initiative has passed to a much more seasoned Jewell and Kornze, who have had almost two years to get ready. Time and the elements - if the government chooses to cut off electricity and water at the wildlife refuge - are on their side.

Bundy, on the other hand, is likely to face even more public scorn and ridicule. He will be no martyr on the way to the federal courthouse.

All of which might give Poe and his acolytes some pause as they contemplate a return engagement to north central Idaho this summer.

The parallels here are unmistakable.

Poe is an outsider - as were roughly half of the people who notified the state they intended to operate on the South Fork last summer.

He's occupying a public resource.

And this year, the game will be played differently. As the Idaho Conservation League's Jonathan Oppenheimer posted this week, the Forest Service is proposing to allow up to 15 suction dredge miners at any one time on the South Fork. Of course, that puts the onus on Poe to play by the rules - file an application, submit plans of operation, get a permit and comply with the regs.

Instigate another standoff on the South Fork and Poe risks enduring Bundy's fate. - M.T.