

Bundy peacefully protests West's legitimate grievance

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

Let's relax, shall we? The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge offices in eastern Oregon still qualifies as a peaceful demonstration. The occupiers, so far as we know, have done no damage and harmed no one, unlike the Occupy Wall Street mobs, who threw rocks through windows, defecated on police cars and, in a few cases, committed rape.

The American left wing, both its politicians and the press corps, embraced the Occupy Wall Street mobs. Until the mobs' behavior degenerated into savagery, President Barack Obama and U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren claimed paternity and maternity for Occupy Wall Street.

The refuge occupiers certainly are not terrorists, as the National Audubon Society and a number of other leftists have accused. Leftists who wonder why the National Guard has not been called in, as it was during the Ferguson, Mo., riots, ignore the fact that there has been no violence. And I certainly hope that daytime talk show host Montel Williams was not speaking for the majority of the left when he claimed that he was "totally fine with a massive use of deadly force in Oregon to take out Ammon Bundy."

And it's not as though the left experiences universal animus toward armed political movements. The left reveres the New Black Panthers, who cast themselves as armed revolutionaries.

In some ways, the libertarian in me has a hard time mustering sympathy for people whose livelihoods depend upon a form of corporate welfare. These ranchers own little of the land their business models require and cannot survive without low-cost grazing leases.

But on the other hand, the federal government has made it nearly impossible for anyone to own enough land to make a living as ranchers in the Western states. While, for a time, Western lands were available for homesteading, the Homestead Act limited private acquisition to economically unfeasible acreages. Western rangelands are so parched that often a hundred acres or more are required to support a single cow-calf unit. The 160 acres permitted under the Homestead Act would support only one bull, one cow and one calf per year. Because the Eastern statists objected to pragmatic modifications to the law, there arose the notion of lands that would be held by the federal government in perpetuity and leased out to ranchers, miners, oil drillers, loggers or whomever.

This wasn't too bad of a system. It wouldn't have been as good as divestiture of the property. And it did make the formerly romanticized cowboy just another corporate welfare petitioner. But at least the lands were available for economic activity.

On the other hand, this system kept much of the West trapped in an earlier century.

More than half of the land area of Oregon (53.1 percent) is owned by the federal government. And Oregon stands only in fifth place for the percentage of its land under federal ownership.

Approximately 84 percent of Nevada and 69 percent of Alaska are federally owned. The feds own nearly 62 percent of Idaho.

On the other hand, the Easterners who dictate to Westerners live in states where barely 1 percent or less of the land is federally owned.

What little rationality there existed in the systems used to administer Western lands has fallen by the wayside with the rise of radical environmentalism. And the most radical president in U.S. history has imposed rules and restrictions upon grazing leases that have made ranching nearly impossible.

So it's hardly surprising that men who see their family businesses threatened by the capricious extremists and cultural bigots who inhabit the Obama administration feel some frustration and desperation. The scuttlebutt around eastern Oregon is that Obama intends to declare much of the eastern half of Oregon a national monument.

The reaction to the federal government's treatment of the Hammond family in eastern Oregon certainly served to ignite passions. They were charged with terrorism after a controlled burn started on their own property spread onto federal lands.

How often have controlled burns on federal lands escaped to burn personal property? I know that I've read several such stories and the feds were never charged with terrorism.

A favorite quotation of feminists is "Well-behaved women rarely make history," taken from the title of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book of the same name. And while I don't see how the occupation of the wildlife refuge will change anything for the better, I do know that well-behaved men rarely make history either.

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