



Violent Words, Violent Crimes

Anti-Government Extremism and Gun Violence in Nevada

By Chelsea Parsons, Annette Magnus, and Jordan Jones September 2016

Preface

In March 2014, after decades of illegally grazing his livestock on restricted public lands in the Gold Butte area of Nevada, years of litigation, and refusing to pay more than \$1 million in fines, the Bureau of Land Management, or BLM, notified Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy that they were planning to begin impounding and auctioning any cattle still illegally grazing on the land.¹ In the weeks that followed, Bundy and his supporters put out a call for anti-government sympathizers across the country to come aid his efforts to resist this enforcement action. More than 1,000 people heeded this call and joined Bundy at his ranch, many of whom were armed with assault weapons and other firearms.²

Tensions between federal agents and armed Bundy supporters continued to build, culminating in an armed standoff on April 12, 2014, during which a number of anti-government extremists took sniper positions and trained assault rifles on BLM agents.³ Deciding that the risks to its agents and civilians were too great in light of the number of armed individuals enabling Bundy's obstruction, the BLM ended the operation.⁴

Bundy and his supporters claimed victory and boasted of the violent tactics used to fend off federal agents. One participant, Ryan Payne, a member of a militia unit in Montana who was a leader of the standoff, credited his plan to place snipers in strategic positions aimed at BLM agents as a crucial element in their success that amounted to “overwhelming tactical superiority.”⁵ Another participant in the standoff, Richard Mack, head of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, told reporters that he had planned to use women as human shields if the incident turned violent so that, if the BLM started shooting, people around the world would see women “getting shot by these rogue federal officers.”⁶

This incident drew national attention to a small but growing movement of anti-government extremists who use threats of violence—primarily over the barrel of a gun—to interfere with federal law enforcement's management of federally owned public lands in the West. This extreme movement gained national attention for the

second time in January 2016, when members of the Bundy family and their supporters illegally occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge outside of Burns, Oregon, and engaged in a 41 day armed standoff with federal law enforcement.⁷

The standoff at the Bundy ranch also served as inspiration for another act of violence against law enforcement. Just two months after visiting the ranch and participating in the 2014 standoff, Jerad and Amanda Miller, a married Las Vegas couple who had a history of extreme anti-government views and had expressed a willingness to commit violence against law enforcement officers while on the ranch, ambushed two police officers while they were eating lunch, fatally shooting both and killing a third person before they were killed in a stand-off with police.⁸

Introduction and summary

The United States has been undergoing a dramatic demographic shift over the past 30 years, with exponential growth in communities of color, particularly in African American and Latino communities.⁹ One state that exemplifies this demographic shift is Nevada, which has seen a huge expansion of the Hispanic population and, as a result, an increase in progressive policymaking on some issues, including increasing access to bilingual education in the state.¹⁰ However, this view of Nevada as an example of increased diversity's promise has been marred in recent years by the rise of violent, anti-government extremism that has been incubated in the state.

With its roots in a movement to seize the country's public lands and dramatically distort the U.S. government's role in protecting western lands for public use, this growing anti-government extremism in Nevada and other western states is characterized by unlawful attempts to take control over nationally owned or controlled lands and terroristic threats against law enforcement officers. This movement has been personified by Cliven Bundy, the cattle rancher who led an armed standoff with federal agents in April 2014 and who is currently facing federal charges for his role in that incident. But this violent extremism has not been limited to Bundy: While he and his supporters may be credited with the genesis of the most recent bout of violent anti-government extremism at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge outside of Burns, Oregon, this activity has spread beyond just Bundy and his supporters and has had an impact in states outside of Nevada, inspiring other adherents to and sympathizers of these extreme anti-government sentiments to take violent action against government targets. And a common thread connecting all of these incidents is the prolific use of guns as a tool of threats and intimidation.

This report examines the rise of violent anti-government extremism in the United States, its connection to efforts to seize public lands, and the growing use of guns as the weapon of choice for violent extremists and domestic terrorists. It also discusses how support for these efforts and violent tactics has emboldened the most extreme adherents of anti-government ideologies to commit egregious acts of violence, often targeting law enforcement. The report will consider how Nevada has

served as an incubator for anti-government extremism around public land seizure efforts, as well as the role of guns as a tool in those efforts. Finally, it addresses how weak gun laws allow some violent extremists who are prohibited from possessing guns to continue to have easy access to deadly weapons. It also highlights a number of policy proposals that would help alleviate the risks posed by violent extremists with guns, chief among them closing the private sale loophole and requiring a background check for every gun sale.

Glossary of terms

Anti-Defamation League, or ADL: One of the nation's leading organizations fighting bigotry and anti-Semitism in the United States, the ADL engages in education, advocacy, and awareness-raising efforts to protect the civil rights of all Americans.¹¹

Center for Western Priorities, or CWP: The CWP is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to conservation of the American West by advocating for responsible and sustainable policies to protect the unique Western ecosystem.¹²

Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, or CSPOA: Founded by former Arizona Sheriff Richard Mack, the CSPOA is an extremist group of law enforcement and public service officials who believe that local sheriffs are the highest governing authority in the land. Members of the CSPOA take a pledge to “uphold, defend, protect, and serve” the U.S. Constitution and are encouraged to resist any regulation imposed by the federal government that undermines their interpretation of the constitution.¹³

Council of Conservative Citizens, or CCC: Founded by attorney and activist Gordon Baum, the CCC has been determined by the Southern Poverty Law Center to be a white supremacy organization dedicated to the separation of whites from all other races. Espousing theological and supposed scientific evidence for their racist doctrines, this organization hopes to stem nonwhite immigration to the United States.¹⁴

Gadsden flag: The Gadsden flag is the Revolutionary War flag used to represent freedom in the United States. It is bright yellow with the image of a coiled snake and the words “Don’t Tread on Me” written across the bottom. Today, the flag is often displayed with anti-government memorabilia, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has recently deliberated whether the flag is a racist symbol.¹⁵

Oath Keepers: An association of current and former members of the military, police officers, and first responders who “pledge to fulfill the oath all military and police take to ‘defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.’” One of the reasons that the Oath Keepers are considered to be an extreme anti-government group by the Southern Poverty Law Center is their fervently held belief that the government is trying to disarm the American people and impose martial law.¹⁶

Southern Poverty Law Center, or SPLC: The SPLC is a civil rights organization founded by Morris Dees and Joseph Levin Jr. in 1971 that “is dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society.” The SPLC uses a combination of advocacy, communication, awareness, and legal action to work toward an equal opportunity society. The SPLC monitors and publishes information about various hate and extremist groups across the United States.¹⁷

Sovereign citizens: The sovereign citizens movement is described by the SPLC as an extreme anti-government movement that believes that no agency of the state—including judges, juries, or elected officials—can determine which laws must be obeyed. The sovereign citizens believe that individuals have the power to decide which laws to adhere to and which to ignore. The movement has roots in racist and anti-Semitic sentiments.¹⁸

Three Percenters: Also known as the Ill%ers, this group of anti-government extremists call themselves members of the patriot movement. In the words of Three Percenters co-founder Mike Vanderboegh: “There will be no more free Wacos and no more free Katrinas. For we are the Three Percent. We will not disarm. You cannot convince us. You cannot intimidate us. You can try to kill us, if you think you can. But remember, we’ll shoot back. We are not going away. We are not backing up another inch. And there are THREE MILLION OF US. Your move, Mr. Wannabe Tyrant. Your move.”¹⁹ The Three Percenters Club, founded by Michael Graham III, is a branch of the Three Percenters organization. The club espouses anti-government ideology and threatens a second Revolutionary War if the government tries to regulate their firearms.²⁰

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

