

# The Washington, D.C. Seige Has Western Roots and Consequences *continued from front page*

the federal government.

**THE WESTERN** U.S. isn't the only place where anti-government sentiment festers, but here the wounds are open, frequently endured and historically recent. Violence and the threat of violence in the region occur within the context of a nation founded on the genocide of Indigenous people. Leaders of anti-federal movements lean into this violent history and include factions that are specifically anti-Indigenous. In defending his right to graze cattle on federal land in Nevada — a claim he successfully defended at Bunkerville in 2014, when federal authorities withdrew after being outgunned by militiamen — Bundy argued that his claim to the land was more legitimate than the Southern Paiutes' because "they lost the war."

This white-plus-might-makes-right sentiment is a pervasive feature of Western mythology and cowboy culture. Over the last half-century, anti-government leaders have rallied to that image as the West's population swelled and control over its natural resources became more contested and regulated. The original Sagebrush Rebellion of the mid-to-late-1970s — which inspired the modern Bundy-led standoffs but were not nearly as paramilitary — came in response to federal public-land laws like the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Wilderness Act and Endangered Species Act, which increasingly restricted how natural resources could be used.

Those restrictions were seen as unconscionable overreach by rural Westerners who were accustomed to using public-land resources as they wished. "The hardest thing to do in American politics is to withdraw a right," said Daniel McCool, a political science professor at the University of Utah. Even though those rights were privileges in the legal sense, the perception that they were rights, and that they were being taken away, fueled the original Sagebrush Rebels, McCool said. "The roots of the Sagebrush Rebellion were when they no longer got what they wanted," he said. "There's a direct line from there to the Bundy groups active



*Pro-Trump protesters gather in front of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021 in Washington, D.C. A pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol, breaking windows and clashing with police officers. Image credit: Jon Cherry/Getty Images*

today."

Entitlement isn't the only feature today's anti-government protesters — who snapped selfies and strolled casually through the Capitol after overcoming police barricades, sauntering off with trophies taken from the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. — have in common with the original Sagebrush Rebels. They also share an alliance with the Republican Party and a lack of accountability for breaking the law. None of the original rebels were prosecuted, and their movement faded with the election of Ronald Reagan, who publicly backed their anti-regulatory ideology. Reagan showed his support by installing Interior Secretary James Watt, who weakened many of the federal regulations they chafed against.

**FAR-RIGHT TERRORISM** is the most prevalent form of terrorism in the U.S., according to the FBI. Reporting by *Reveal News* and Type Investigations found that right-wing extremism during the Trump administration has become more common and far more deadly. But that uptick comes with a caveat when it comes to Western extremism. During the Trump era, right-wing extremism and the militia movement shifted its focus from the federal government to other targets, like anti-fascist activists and state and local governments, according to the Anti-Defama-

tion League.

The explanation for this shift in target is simple: Anti-federal extremists found common cause with Trump's presidency as he promised to "drain the swamp," catered to racist ideologies and flirted with QAnon conspiracy theorists. He and his administration acted directly in the interest of Western factions within the right-wing extremist movement, including the Bundys. In 2018, Trump pardoned Dwight and Steven Hammond, whose imprisonment for felony arson on public lands helped spark the Oregon standoff in 2016. No attempts were made during his administration to enforce federal law by rounding up Cliven Bundy's cattle, which continue to illegally graze on federal public lands in Nevada. Just a week before the siege of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) restored the Hammonds' public-land grazing rights in Oregon, despite their record of endangering federal employees and committing arson.

Those actions — and the inability of federal prosecutors to secure convictions for leaders of the Bunkerville and Malheur occupations, who clearly threatened federal agents and held federal land at gunpoint — emboldened anti-government extremists. After the acquittals, the movement felt vindicated and victorious. "It's a very

heady thing to be involved in," said Betsy Gaines Quammen, the author of *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God and Public Lands in the West*. "It was pivotal in empowering this movement and laid the groundwork for what we saw (on January 6 in the Capitol)," she said.

A former BLM staffer from Southern Utah echoed that conclusion. "There is a clear link with the Bunkerville showdown and Malheur Refuge occupation and what happened yesterday at our nation's Capitol," Richard Spotts wrote to *High Country News*. In dodging accountability for their actions the Bundys "have been aided by weak and incompetent federal law enforcement officials," wrote the former BLM employee who was based in St. George, Utah from 2002-2017. "I hope that the incoming Biden administration won't make Obama's mistakes nor allow meek federal land managers and law enforcement officials to continue hiding under their desks," Spotts wrote.

While the Trump era has empowered anti-government extremists in new and dangerous ways, it has offered some relief to the public-land employees in the West who often bear the brunt of extremist ideologies. Data collected by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), a group that supports public-land reforms and agency employees, found that threats against federal employees and facilities dropped precipitously following Trump's election. In 2017, the BLM recorded a 25% reduction in such incidents, the lowest number since 1995. The Bundys didn't see the federal government under the Trump administration as the enemy, said Jeff Ruch, the former executive director and current Pacific director of PEER. "The administration acted in concert with the violent movement's demands," he said.

**WITH THE TARGET** no longer on the federal government's back, anti-government extremists in the West have aimed their tactics at left-wing protesters and at state and local governments. Throughout the Trump administration, the president's supporters went

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