



GORILLA THEATER

Fear and birding at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge

I had to see this *thing*, this *occupation*, in person. Another 1970s Sagebrush Rebellion being staged at Oregon's bird sanctuary, this sacred site? Really? Our oldest American refuge, so precious it was designated as such before America even had a National Park Service? Why? Who are these guys? Why Malheur of all places? WTF?

I called my former colleague, Senate Republican leader Ted Ferrioli, who represents Harney County, to get his take. And I called Cliff Bentz, the current state rep from Ontario.

I didn't expect a call back from either of them. Republicans dodge the Malheur occupation like kryptonite because, if they personally would ever weigh in and oppose armed militia action against the state of Oregon or the federal government before a primary in their district, they could draw a Tea Party opponent in the primary.

To my surprise, Ferrioli called me back. I chided him about the Oregon Republicans' total silence on the occupation. He actually praised the Hammond family for their neighborly generosity. The ostensible trigger for this event was the re-sentencing of the Hammonds by Federal Judge Ann Aiken.

Then he mentioned that the Hammonds' prolonged, intensified and escalated battle with the BLM over the years was a two-way street, with each side poking each other in the eye. Ferrioli did not dispute the arson convictions and evidence that one arson was set up, at least in part, to cover up the slaughter of a deer herd. But he also didn't defend the Bundys. He had no answer or rational explanation for the Bundy resolution to return all Western federal lands to pre-Columbian, pre-1492 Native Americans, in this case the Burns Paiute Tribe.

Ferrioli told me, "If God told these guys to go somewhere to commit suicide by cop — then go back to Utah or Nevada or wherever you came from — we're not going to do that here." But, as he pointed out, Oregon is not the chief decision-maker here, it's the FBI.

It was 14 degrees in Burns on Jan. 9, and I went out to the Harney County Fairgrounds in search of a media meeting point. Turns out it didn't exist. Back in town I found two newly arrived *Oregonian* "back up" reporters coming in to relieve the two reporters who had been here since last Sunday. It seems everyone just shows up at 11 am at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters 30 miles south of town.

I went armed with my *EW* press pass, camera, pen, notebook and a tape recorder with an actual dadgummed tape in it.

When 11 am rolled around, four armed men came walking up from the headquarters, but brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy didn't attend as they had in the days before. The two previous nights featured raucous community meetings in Burns with scared-shitless residents telling the brothers they wanted no part of the Bundy militia action. So the brothers, sophisticated press manipulators

that they are, tried a different strategy — at least at the presser I attended.

There were probably 20-25 media types there, four or five TV cameras set up at the armed barricade 1,000 feet from the headquarters compound. The occupiers sent this soft-spoken, skinny, bespeckled elderly guy in a cowboy hat with one of those classic long-barreled six-shooters in his holster as their first spokesman for the presser.

The purpose of today's news conference was to let everyone know that the Bundy brothers received a letter from a local outfit — the Harney County Committee of Safety — offering to take this mess off the Bundys' hands, take over the stand-off and let the Bundys go back home. We were told the Bundys were taking the letter into consideration, and hadn't come to a decision yet on when to take up the sheriff on his offer of an armed escort to the state line.

Any questions? The rabid media replied — all at once. If you're a clever spokesman, you can take advantage of this by selecting only the question to which you've rehearsed a response. Question: When is the standoff gonna end? Answer: There are two standoffs actually, because the FBI has also taken over the middle school by use of armed force. That's why the kids aren't going to school. It's not *our* fault; golly, gee, we're just here to help. There are three parties to blame for this fiasco: the FBI, the sheriff and you, the media. That was it for the squinting cowboy!

The next speaker lectured the media on how *their* use of terms like "armed takeover" and "militia" caused our current problem. We're not violent or threatening, you're making this stuff up. You never talk about all the support we get from local ranchers. It's all your fault, liberal media people. And, by the way, the occupiers called 911 Thursday night because of a "scuffle," and the sheriff's office refused to respond. For "security" purposes, he could provide no further details of the "scuffle."

Then a new announcement: "Further, as a result of that lack of response by the sheriff's office, we don't know if it was fear or what, the occupiers are now taking over as 'security' for the local citizenry until this fiasco is resolved!" Interesting comment, given that one definition of "militia" is a military force that engages in rebel or terrorist activities, typically in opposition to a regular army or, in this case, the FBI and the sheriff. Let's just say there was no palpable sign of relief with this new announcement. Another escalation.

Two women, a TV news reporter and an *Oregonian* reporter, took the speaker on. This was one of the few parts of the news conference that was real. "How can you claim this is public land, when you have armed men preventing us from going down to the headquarters?" And "Why are you lying about the fact that we're not reporting how some ranchers have brought you supplies and feel the same way you do about the BLM?" When these women spoke, the media all jumped to their defense. No response. No more questions, none answered anyway.

The next speaker informed us importantly that he had been self-appointed as the "mediator" for this fracas, and

he had spoken at length with the Bundys and understood the letter offered by the Harney County Committee of Safety. And furthermore, he was more than willing to work with the FBI and the sheriff to get some communication going. After all, he reminded us sternly, you know how important communication is to prevent another Ruby Ridge or Waco showdown, don't you?

He then admitted, only after being asked specifically, that nobody — not the FBI, not the sheriff's office — that no one was returning his calls because apparently he and the Bundys were the only ones who thought he was the mediator.

Really? During all this de-escalation talk, we need to be reminded of Waco: a 1993 botched re-run of the Sagebrush Rebellion movement from the 1970s and 1980s that sought outright transfer of federal lands to state and local authorities and privatization? Crazy then, crazy now.

I'm old. I've been involved in many press conferences given my grizzled years, but what happened next was like something out of a Quentin Tarantino movie gone bad. Twenty minutes into the press conference, with Mr. Mediator summing up his lack of credentials, suddenly all the TV cameras and photographers pull up stakes and start running back down the road. A convoy of a dozen vehicles had just pulled up, mostly pick-ups, license plates from Iowa, Arizona, Montana, Texas.

Fifteen or so armed folks, including two women, were led up the road to the press conference site by two guys with semi-automatic rifles at arms rest, upraised. As we all walk towards each other, one of the riflemen suddenly yells at a rapidly advancing camera guy to back off. The whole crowd stops. The TV gal challenges the rifleman: "Look at what you're doing. You don't have any right to talk to us like that! This is public land!"

She stared him down. A short silence ensued, then the media and the Bundy Bunch started walking back to where the microphones were. Then, another Tarantino moment occurred when the news conference resumed. Five leaders of the new visitors marched up to the podium, but the occupier's leaders were frantically chasing the other new visitors away.

Ultimately, the new visitors stood by themselves at the road's fork. It was friggin' cold out, and the whole scene made very little sense.

Meanwhile, Bespeckled Cowboy was back as our spokesman at the presser, and he introduced and welcomed these fine folks. Then he immediately denied that any of the new visitors were going to stay at the headquarters compound. They were just gonna hang around Burns in support of the occupiers. He then went on this de-escalation rant about everyone putting down their "long guns," this just moments after this dadgummed armed posse arrived!

The new Bundy Bunch "security" guy was now walking through the media repeating: "Wow, this is the *safest* I've felt in days." The visitors were introduced as members of the Pacific Patriot Network (PPN). Their spokesman was Mr. Curtiss, a "three percenter" from Idaho. He described his group as a Western states coalition of five organizations representing militias, without naming the other members. He reiterated their support of Dwight and Steven Hammond, who have distanced themselves from the Bundys, and their support of the Bundy takeover.

Curtiss also reiterated his support of the Bundy's mistrust, and described the general mistrust of local ranchers toward BLM. He spoke about Congressman Greg Walden's recent speech and vote against reauthorization of the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement.

The press conference ended with the five PPN leaders walking back down to the headquarters to meet with the Bundys. Unlike previous days, we were not allowed to follow them down the road.

As I made my way back to Bend Saturday evening, Jan. 9, I wondered whether this whole PPN-Tarantino scene helped move us toward a face-saving move for the Bundy brothers and the occupiers to have a peaceful exit. Or whether it moves toward escalation by simply turning up the heat. Hope for the best. Remember: 82 people died at Waco. ■

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