

# Standoff sheds light on conservative sheriffs group

Lawmen call themselves 'last line of defense' against federal government

By NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS  
Associated Press

**S**POKANE, Wash. — The actions of two rural Oregon sheriffs during an armed standoff at a national wildlife refuge were striking: one worked with federal officials to end the siege while the other questioned the FBI's authority and offered words of support for the occupiers.

Sheriff Dave Ward of Harney County, where the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is located, cooperated with federal and state police, urging standoff leader Ammon Bundy and his followers to stand down and respect the law. Meanwhile in Grant County, immediately to the north, Sheriff Glenn Palmer called the occupiers "patriots." When Bundy and others were arrested during a January traffic stop, they were on their way to his county. An Arizona rancher who police fatally shot when they say he reached for a gun shouted he was on his way to meet Palmer.

Palmer is a member of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, a group that bills itself as "the last line of defense" against a federal government they contend overreaches on gun control and other issues. They see sheriffs as the ultimate law enforcement authority in their dispute with the federal government over control of federal lands.

The group's founder said they are recruiting people to run against sheriff's that don't support their cause and that the group's website includes lists of county sheriffs and whether they need to be "recalled or replaced."

## Outside the mainstream

Critics say the group's views are far outside the mainstream. Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which for decades has advocated against groups it considers extremist, called the association "a remarkably radical organization, considering who their members are."

"Many constitutional sheriffs believe they can pass a local law and forbid federal authorities from coming into a county," he said. "That is patently false."

Richard Mack, a former Arizona sheriff and association founder, said he didn't support the occupation of the wildlife refuge, "but I understand the complete frustration people have in this country towards this government." Mack said the group will work to defeat Ward in the November election.

Mack's group, founded in 2011, claims more than 400 of the nation's more than 3,000 county sheriffs support its positions, which hold that elected county sheriffs should oppose federal agents whose conduct appears to violate the U.S. Constitution.

## Unequivocal on gun rights

The association is unequivocal about gun rights. It supports the right of criminals and the mentally ill to carry firearms and opposes gun registration or background checks.

In conservative Kootenai County, Idaho, popular sheriff Ben Wolfinger has drawn two opponents who support the concept of constitutional sheriffs. Tina Kunishige, one of the candidates, said sheriffs need to decide which laws are constitutional.

"I'm very comfortable with that," said Kunishige, who has no law enforcement experience. "I've studied the Constitution for a number of years."



Rick Bowmer/AP Photo

Harney County Sheriff Dave Ward arrived at a community meeting at the Harney County fairgrounds in Burns. The contrasting actions of two rural Oregon sheriffs during the recent armed standoff at a national wildlife refuge were striking: one worked with federal officials to end the siege while another questioned the FBI's authority and offered words of support for the ragtag group that seized property in the state's high desert country. Ward, whose jurisdiction includes the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, cooperated with federal and state police and became one of the public faces of the standoff. He urged standoff leader Ammon Bundy and his followers to stand down and respect the law.



Thomas Boyd/The Oregonian

Gov. Kate Brown hugs Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer in August as they enter a meeting with homeowners in Canyon City.

Wolfinger said he doesn't need an outside group like the association to approve how he does his job. "I believe that the people I serve in Kootenai County will hold me accountable to do the job that they elected me for," Wolfinger said.

Sheriffs who support the association have faced backlash.

Palmer, the sheriff who sided with the Oregon occupiers, has drawn an opponent in the November elections who criticized him for making his own interpretations of the Constitution.

And Palmer, who did not respond to interview requests from The Associated Press, is being investigated by the state for his actions

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Mark Potok  
Southern Poverty Law Center

during the Oregon standoff. If Palmer is found to have violated standards, he could lose his police certification.

## Occupation fallout

The Oregon occupation started on Jan. 2 and ended Feb. 11 when the last holdouts surrendered to authorities. It began as a protest amid mounting tension over the case of local ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond.

The Hammonds lit fires on federal land in 2001 and 2006 to protect their property from wildfires and invasive plants. The two were convicted three years ago and served time — the father three months, the son one year. But an appeals court ruled the sentences were too short under federal law, and a federal judge ordered them back to prison for about four years each.

Mack backs Palmer in the ongoing investigation into his actions.

"He's an honorable man who has done nothing wrong," Mack said.



**9-1-WHAT?**  
THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

## Dog sees spot

Everyone knows that dogs and other animals are like early warning signs for trouble.

So when that Astoria woman called 911 because her dog was staring at a spot near her house, we totally get her concern. Nothing screams 'emergency' like strange behavior from your pup ...

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at [www.twitter.com/9\\_1\\_WHAT](http://www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT).

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{4/3 @ 7:39 p.m.} Neighbor let caller's cows out. #Astoria

8:15 AM - 8 Apr 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{3/30 @ 1:12 p.m.} Caller reports people are staying in their crawl space. #Seaside

8:13 AM - 8 Apr 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{4/1 @ 9:11 p.m.} 911 call from an intoxicated man who does not have an emergency. #Astoria

8:19 AM - 8 Apr 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{4/9 @ 8:55 p.m.} Case of beer reported in the middle of U.S. Highway 101. No case found, just some road struck cans. #Warrenton

8:12 AM - 11 Apr 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{4/6 @ 3:14 p.m.} Caller's dog is staring at a spot near her house. Caller sees nothing, but it's strange behavior for her dog. #Astoria

8:10 AM - 11 Apr 2016

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