

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Pardoned ranchers don't deserve praise

President Donald Trump's pardon this week of Oregon ranchers Dwight and Steve Hammond touched off celebrations among the extremist factions and militia movements that supported them.

After leaving a federal prison in California on Tuesday, the Hammonds were flown Wednesday to Burns Municipal Airport on the private jet of Forrest Lucas, a multimillionaire oil magnate and good friend of Vice President Mike Pence.

The Hammonds were met by an enthusiastic crowd of well-wishers, who included Jason Patrick, one of the perpetrators of the 41-day armed occupation in 2016 of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

"The whole world knows the name Hammond because of the refuge takeover," Patrick told *The Oregonian* newspaper.

His sentiment was echoed by Ryan Bundy, one of the family members who led the armed occupation.

"Today shows we were right, we went there for a good reason and our efforts have finally come to fruition," Bundy told Oregon Public Broadcasting on Tuesday. "All of those who went with us and supported the Hammonds, they should be pardoned also."

Hogwash.

The occupation was a tragic, bizarre event that will live in infamy in the modern-day history of Oregon and the West, and it bears remembering exactly what the Hammonds did to land in prison in the first place.

They were responsible for a series of fires starting in 2001 on U.S. Bureau of Land Management land on which they leased grazing rights. The first burned 139 acres and destroyed evidence of several deer Steve Hammond and his hunting party illegally slaughtered. They told one of their relatives to keep his mouth shut and that nobody needed to know about it. Then, in 2006, they torched more property in the midst of a burn ban imposed due to severe wildfire danger.

The Hammonds received a fair trial and were found guilty by a jury of their peers. They were given extremely lenient sentences that ignored the



Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Rancher Dwight Hammond Jr. deplanes after arriving by private jet in Burns.

mandatory minimum five years prescribed by federal law. The government appealed, the trial court ordered them back to prison and the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the ranchers' appeal.

Their supporters used the case as a rallying cry, and mobilized — the Bundys by taking up arms against the government.

To be fair, the Hammonds did not participate in the refuge standoff and have sought to distance themselves from it. They do, however, have a history of conflict with federal agents. They are leading figures in the movement that treats public lands as private entitlements, casts the government as tyrannical, and considers itself above the laws that apply to the rest of us. They are not altar boys.

As we've said before, responsible ranchers don't behave the way the Hammonds did, and should want nothing to do with these reckless men. Their arsons could have caused death or injury to firefighters or others. They

burned property that belongs to all Americans. They tried hard to avoid taking responsibility for their crimes.

A broad swath of America believes that what the Hammonds and Bundys did amounts to domestic terrorism. In what alternate universe is it OK to set fires and point guns at law enforcement officers, then claim federal persecution? If they were black, or Latino, the voices clamoring to pardon them would be nonexistent. Witness the overwhelming force brought to bear against the Black Panthers in the 1960s, none of which was evident in the Bundy standoffs in Nevada and Oregon.

There is a double standard based on race in America, which President Trump has cynically pandered to. The Hammonds check many of the boxes that sell to his base — a narrative of vengeful, overwrought government justice brought to bear on a white, resourceful family. Understanding that, it's no surprise he took notice of their case. This pardon serves his political

needs, not justice or jurisprudence.

The decision was rightfully slammed by Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, and even some in Eastern Oregon who confronted and chased out the Bundys.

"The federal court ... followed the Rule of Law in overturning the Hammonds' reduced sentences for committing arson on Oregon federal lands," Rosenblum tweeted. "POTUS, who has not set foot here since being elected, has pardoned them. We can only wonder why."

In closing, we applaud the wise words of our sister newspaper, the East Oregonian in Pendleton ...

"We hope this is a narrow victory for two men and one family," the newspaper wrote. "If it is twisted into a triumph for an extremist element who believes they have been called by God and the Constitution to threaten, fight and war against the government, then the decision to pardon will have a long-term, damaging effect."

WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

In historic moment, Senate committee rebukes Trump

House and Senate seem to have vanished as checks on the president

The U.S. Senate woke up last week. At a time when Congress has largely been mute to a would-be despot in the White House, the Senate Intelligence Committee delivered a landmark moment.

In a nutshell, the committee's Republican majority and Democratic minority agreed that Russians had meddled in the 2016 presidential election to boost the campaign of Donald Trump.

That clear voice was in marked contrast to the circus that the House Intelligence Committee has become.

House Speaker Paul Ryan has been painfully passive in the face of the malfeasance of Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes of California. Ryan effectively abdicated the House's obligation to be a co-equal branch of American government.

Reading last week's news, I pulled out a book titled "200 Notable Days: Senate Stories, 1787 to 2002." The book grew out of a series of brief lectures delivered over 12 years by the Senate's historian, Richard Baker. I had the good fortune to know Dick Baker during my 10 years as a Capitol Hill correspondent.

Baker's talks were called "Senate minutes." At the request of then-Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, Baker began this exer-



AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., speaks at a recent Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

cise in 1997. The idea was to give senators a sense of their heritage. Baker did that until his retirement. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has continued the tradition.

Many of the 200 moments in Baker's book are about the arcane curiosities of the Senate. And some are about those moments when the Senate stood up to the president, Democrat and Republican alike.

It is not partisan overstatement to say that the House and Senate seem to have vanished as checks on the president over the past 19

months. It is not unique to the Republican party — as Donald Trump has debased it — to forget the check and balance role that Congress, and especially the Senate, are designed to play.

The U.S. Constitution is a profoundly conservative document. The founding document sets up a system that purposely was to be a bulwark against mob rule or sweeping change. Thus moments of profound change are rare — such as a number of progressive laws that established the land grant colleges

during the Civil War and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But in all eras, each senator has the ability to embody the crisis of the moment. U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon did that recently when he went alone to a facility that housed children who were separated from their parents who had sought entry to America. When federal officials barred Sen. Merkley from entering the building, we saw a moment that was emblematic of a heartless scheme that President Trump launched with no detailed plan. Merkley's boldness set in motion a series of other lawmakers who made similar treks to lonely places where children, including babies, were incarcerated.

Congressional oversight was what Merkley was exercising, and his expedition helped Americans awaken to a desperate moment that is a stain on our nation's claim to higher moral purpose.

Similarly, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon has been a dogged interrogator in the Senate Intelligence Committee. Wyden's pattern of questioning began during President Barack Obama's administration, and it has grown more urgent with a president who has weakened the intelligence establishment on which American security and foreign policy depends.

I don't know that last week's Senate Intelligence Committee report would rise to the level of what's in Dick Baker's book. But for those of us who are waiting for the sleeping giant to awaken, this was a heartening statement.

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of *The Daily Astorian*, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.