

Opinion

Verdict on Malheur Wildlife Refuge no win for rural malcontents

By Tim Palmer | November 1, 2016 | Updated: November 1, 2016 4:29pm

Astounding to many, a jury in Portland, Ore., on Thursday found the gun-toting occupiers of public facilities at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge not guilty as charged.

And with a commentary that I find every bit as astonishing, newscasts ranging from blogs to NPR report that the jury's outcome signals a triumph for right-wing rural malcontents to wrest public land from government agencies now charged with administering it across the West.

Nonsense.

While the illegal occupation has raised concerns for the security of other federal land, employees and visitors throughout the Western states, the jury's decision recognized only that the federal prosecutor's narrow case — the wildlife refuge's invaders had deliberately prevented federal employees from doing their jobs — was not convincing to that particular jury. It had nothing to do with the legitimacy of armed men to illegally occupy government facilities. Further, it had nothing to do with claims that the federal government should not own and take care of wildlife refuges, national forests, national parks or Bureau of Land Management acreage.

But the fact that the Ammon Bundy crowd got "off" for reasons that might be explained entirely as federal prosecutors blowing their case has little real value to a

band of vigilantes seeking to trash an extensive body of law regarding stewardship of public land.

Does the verdict or its bizarre aftermath of commentary lend credence to the occupiers' thoroughly debunked claim that the Constitution bars federal ownership of property? No. The Supreme Court has ruled repeatedly on this topic since the nation was founded. Does it mean that the Bundys can evade paying grazing fees, unlike all the other ranchers who elect to run their cattle on federal land? No. Does this gang going free now mean that anybody anywhere can pull a gun on government officials and not suffer consequences? I don't think so.

Gun-bearing militants with disdain for federal law might feel buoyed by the Bundys getting off. So would faceless multinational corporations that want to drill and strip-mine without restraint on the land belonging to us all. But most Americans, I venture to say, are outraged that the Malheur trespassers walked into a public facility and took it over. What's the difference between their occupation and what would be clearly be termed "domestic terrorism" if they had commandeered a public library because they didn't think the government should be providing books?

News commentaries shine a spotlight on the privatizing goals of those who would take public land away from the American public that owns it. But the most important story here is that the motives of these people to take what is not theirs are unfounded and terroristic. Because of what they have done, it's easier to see that their methods have no place in a civil society.

The take-home message here is that public land belongs to the public, and that the federal stewards of this property must be better prepared to guard it, and that all of us who own this vast and valuable estate need to reject outrageous claims by those who want our land all for themselves.

Tim Palmer is the photographer of "America's Great National Forests, Wildernesses, and Grasslands" and the author of "Rivers of California" and "California Glaciers" and other books. See his work at www.timpalmer.org.

