

Nevada standoff highlights role of the ultra-right in US politics

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The month-long confrontation between a Nevada rancher, Cliven Bundy, and the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has put the spotlight on the noxious state of American politics.

The 76-year-old Bundy has long refused to pay fees to the BLM, the lone holdout among Nevada ranchers whose cattle graze on land owned by the federal government and managed by the BLM. He has run up a bill of more than \$1 million in unpaid fees, while engaging in protracted litigation.

Last month, as Bundy learned that BLM agents were preparing to round up his cattle grazing on federal land, the rancher issued a public call for support that rallied several hundred armed members of right-wing groups such as the Oath Keepers and militia groups and neo-fascists from all over the United States.

Bundy supporters first blocked a convoy of federal vehicles on April 10 and then engaged in an armed confrontation April 12, at which Bundy addressed a crowd saying he did not recognize the authority of the BLM. He declared, “We’re about ready to take the country over by force!”

When armed right-wingers escalated the confrontation by blocking part of Interstate 15, the BLM rangers and sheriff’s deputies dropped threats to use teargas and withdrew, leaving Bundy’s supporters in control of the disputed land.

As the standoff continued, Republican Party politicians hailed Bundy as a popular hero, standing up to an overbearing federal government. Nevada’s Republican senator, Dean Heller, declared him a “patriot.” Statements of support rolled in from Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, who currently leads polls for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, and a host of other party officials and office holders. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas said the federal government was “using the jackboot of authoritarianism to come against the citizens.”

Fox News and other right-wing media outlets provided Bundy and his supporters non-stop favorable coverage.

In the face of the intransigence of Bundy and his supporters, and with the media spotlight on, the director of the BLM, Neil Kornze, announced a pullback. A major factor in the decision of the Obama administration was likely the timing of the confrontation. Kornze announced the calling off of the cattle roundup on April 19, the 21st anniversary of the massacre of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, under the Clinton administration, and the 19th anniversary of the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by right-wing ex-soldier Timothy McVeigh.

Some leading Democrats, most notably Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who represents the state of Nevada, seemed anxious to provoke another Waco-style bloodbath. Reid was widely quoted denouncing Bundy and his supporters as “domestic terrorists.”

The same day that the BLM announced it was calling off the roundup, the *New York Times* conducted an interview with the rancher, which it held for several days and then published with a fanfare of publicity.

Bundy voiced racist views, suggesting that black people were better off under slavery than in today’s America. “They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never learned how to pick cotton. And I’ve often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn’t get no more freedom. They got less freedom.”

The effect of the publication of Bundy’s racist comments was immediate, as one prominent right-wing politician after another performed an embarrassing rhetorical somersault. Yesterday’s yeoman rancher standing up for “liberty” became today’s despicable bigot.

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus issued a statement saying, “Bundy’s comments are completely beyond the pale. Both highly offensive and 100 percent wrong on race.” Senator Paul said Bundy’s comments “are offensive and I wholeheartedly disagree with him.” Senator Cruz’s office called Bundy’s racism “completely unacceptable.”

The episode reveals much about the degraded state of American politics. The beneficiary of a million-dollar federal subsidy condemns impoverished blacks as freeloaders dependent on welfare. While encouraging armed resistance to the law by his own supporters, he sneers at the high rate of incarceration for young black men. While shouting his defiance of Washington, he basks in the support of Washington officeholders, politicians and media pundits.

No one who listened to Cliven Bundy for five minutes could have been surprised by the opinions he expressed to the *New York Times*. Bundy espouses political views similar to those of the Posse Comitatus movement of the 1970s and various “patriot” and militia groups descendant from it, including semi-fascists like the Oath Keepers. These groups claim to reject federal law in favor of state sovereignty, which they profess to defend with arms in hand.

This milieu overlaps considerably with white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, from the Ku Klux Klan to the Aryan Nations. At the height of the armed standoff at the Bundy ranch, Frazier Glenn Miller, a longtime activist in white supremacist circles, was arrested April 13 after gunning down three people at a Jewish community center and retirement home in Overland Park, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City. There is little doubt that many of those who traveled to rural Nevada this month to support Bundy were personally acquainted with Miller and share his views.

Politicians like Rand Paul and multi-millionaire Fox pundits like Sean Hannity are well aware of these connections, but they choose to cultivate this noxious social milieu for their own purposes. This has a long and sordid history in the Republican Party, going back to the wholesale shift of segregationist politicians from the Democrats to the Republicans in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Under Reagan and the Bushes, father and son, the South became the bastion of the Republican Party, with the wholesale incorporation of racists and Christian fundamentalists. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott openly voiced regret that segregationists failed to win

their battle against the civil rights movement. Other Republican politicians curried favor with the ultra-right, defending militia groups after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and “right-to-life” fanatics after terrorist attacks on abortion clinics.

The Bundy phenomenon is of a piece with the systematic promotion of the “Tea Party,” the fraudulent “grass roots” movement financed by the Koch brothers and other ultra-right billionaires to push the Republican Party and bourgeois politics as a whole further to the right.

They take advantage of the fact that the Democrats, just as much as the Republicans, are in the pockets of Wall Street, to promote right-wing populism as the sole “opposition” to big business within the framework of capitalist politics.

Ultra-right figures like Bundy can gain credence with disoriented sections of the middle class, crushed by the big financial interests and fearful of being entirely dispossessed, under conditions where the working class is blocked from advancing its own independent solution to the crisis because of its political subordination, reinforced by the trade unions, to the Democrats and the corporate elite.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has embraced and expanded the repressive methods employed under George W. Bush in the name of the “war on terror.”

Obama personally oversees drone missile assassinations and asserts the right of the president to kill anyone, including American citizens, without trial. Mass surveillance of the American population has never been more intensive or systematic. More people have been seized and deported by the federal government in the past five years than in any similar period in US history. In Boston last year, for the first time in US history, large parts of a major metropolitan area were placed under effective martial law and constitutional rights suspended.

In such an atmosphere, right-wing elements claiming to stand up against federal “tyranny” can win a hearing.



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