

## *Executive Summary*

# **UP IN ARMS: A GUIDE TO OREGON'S PATRIOT MOVEMENT**

**W**HILE THE NEWS MEDIA focuses on the prosecution of Patriot movement members who occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge outside of Burns, Oregon, in early 2016, Oregonians across the state continue to deal with the resurgence of armed and aggressive right-wing activists in their midst. Most of the Malheur occupiers were from out-of-state, but Oregon's own Patriot movement laid the groundwork for the occupation, and its leaders went to Burns to politically profit from the confrontation with government authorities and expand their power at home.

*Up In Arms: A Guide to Oregon's Patriot Movement* offers a short study of the Patriot movement and the economic challenges in which it thrives, along with practical examples of how groups of rural Oregonians have successfully challenged it. The guide was produced by the Rural Organizing Project, Oregon's statewide network of locally based human dignity groups, and the Massachusetts-based think tank Political Research Associates, as a resource for organizers, journalists, public officials, and community members in the state and across the country who seek to understand, expose, and contain the Patriot movement's threat to democracy.

As Spencer Sunshine, PhD and Associate Fellow at Political Research Associates, documents in the guide's opening study, the Oregon Patriot movement engages in the same political culture of violence as the national movement, including armed occupations, protests, camps, and marches—as well as threats against elected officials, community activists, employees of federal agencies handling public lands, and critics. Press conferences, demonstrations, and meetings critical of the movement have been disrupted. Those who speak out against the movement have had their home addresses distributed in Patriot movement circles, were threatened with assault and murder, and have had their vehicles vandalized.

This political culture of violence creates a chilling effect on political speech and democratic participation, particularly in situations where law enforcement fails to guarantee free expression, or even aligns itself with the paramilitaries. The Patriot movement further undermines democracy by creating its own private policing bodies and faux-judicial and executive government branches—all of which bypass existing government entities and attempt to create antidemocratic structures controlled by their political movement. In this guide, the Rural Organizing Project offers

concrete stories of how communities have safely responded to this threatening atmosphere, and debunks claims made by the movement in the easily accessible “Taking on the Patriot Movement’s Talking Points.”

## LOOKING AT THE PATRIOT MOVEMENT

Sunshine’s short study, “**Looking at the Patriot Movement,**” also offers these findings:

While no comprehensive nationwide study exists, **it appears that Oregon has one of the most developed, active Patriot movements in the country.** The movement has won new supporters since the 2008 election of the nation’s first Black President and again since the 2014 armed encampment by Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, who refused to pay fees to the Bureau of Land Management for grazing on public land. Dozens of Patriot movement groups have thousands of supporters in the state. Groups include local affiliates of the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, as well as members of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, all formed in 2008 and after.

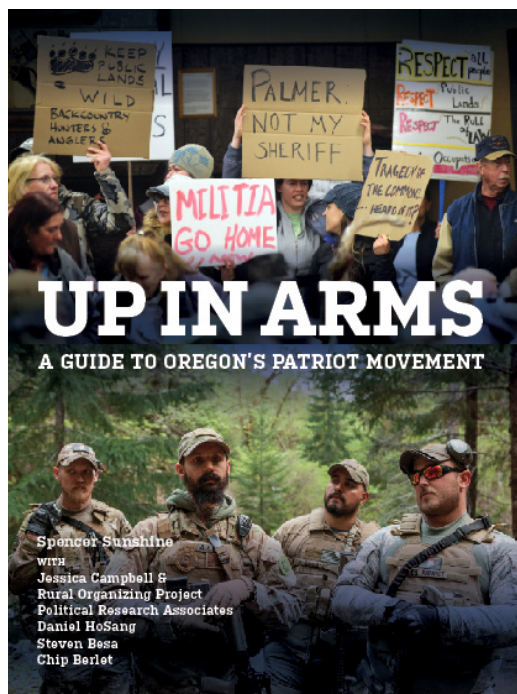
**Today’s Patriot movement is the successor to the 1990s militia movement,** which also swept the Pacific Northwest. Key activists from the 1990s have leadership roles in today’s national Patriot movement groups. Then as now, they are united by a common belief that the U.S. federal government is preparing to seize privately held firearms, impose martial law on the states, and put Americans in “concentration camps”—before allowing foreign armies to invade. The groups

deride federal power and regard any form of gun control as a step towards tyranny. They are hostile to environmentalism, hold a political worldview rooted in conspiracy theories, have a penchant for forming paramilitaries, and often set up their own “shadow” governmental structures. They frequently threaten to wage “civil war” against their governmental enemies.

**The Patriot movement is saturated with racism and xenophobia but distances itself from explicit declarations of White supremacy.** Some activists are skeptical or dismissive of amendments to the U.S. Constitution that followed the

Bill of Rights—including those ending slavery and granting equal protection under the law—but are generally cautious about publicly advertising such views. Islamophobia has largely replaced the coded (and sometimes open) antisemitism that was common in the 1990s militia movement. Jon Ritzheimer, one of the high-profile Malheur occupiers, is a well-known Islamophobic organizer. Occupier allies in the Harney County Committee of Safety released a document calling Native Americans “savages.”

**The Oregon Patriot movement includes elected officials,** so-called “Sovereign Citizens,” and fake judges and courts. Malheur occupiers were arrested while en route to a third meeting with Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer, a nationally recognized so-called Constitutional Sheriff. State representatives and a state senator spoke at a May 2015 Patriot movement rally against SB 941, a newly passed gun law in Oregon. This rally featured national Patriot movement leader Mike Vanderboegh calling for



*Up in Arms: A Guide to Oregon’s Patriot Movement is a co-published report by Rural Organizing Project and Political Research Associates.*

the Oregon state government to be overthrown through a civil war.

Of particular concern is the influence of the Oath Keepers and the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers' Association (CSPOA) on law enforcement officers, especially county sheriffs. The Oath Keepers and CSPOA encourage sheriffs and police to practice a form of "nullification," refusing to enforce new gun-control laws in the state. Twenty-one of Oregon's sheriffs appeared on a CSPOA list of county sheriffs who said they would follow their oath to "uphold the Constitution" and "support the constitutional second amendment rights of citizens." In Roseburg, Oregon, site of the October 2015 Umpqua Community College mass shooting, Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin had signed a CSPOA-inspired letter and publicly criticized gun regulation as a response to mass shootings. He also promoted conspiracy theories on social media, including that the Sandy Hook elementary school massacre was a hoax perpetrated in order to seize U.S. citizens' guns.

**Many Patriot movement activists engage in community service work, cultivating a public image similar to the Elks Club or a veterans' organization,** and less like a semi-underground paramilitary that makes death threats against its opponents. In Josephine County, for instance, the Oath Keepers (recently renamed the Citizen Patriots of Josephine County) participated in playground and river cleanups while it established disaster response teams, formed and groomed community watches and militias as usable alternatives to police, and worked with a variety of other Patriot movement groups.

**The Patriot movement worldview builds on tactics of county political supremacy forged in a decades-old racist rural insurgency called Posse Comitatus.** Patriot movement groups argue that local sheriffs have the power to ignore federal law; they seek to promote the political dominance of county governments; and like Posse Comitatus they set up their own "grand juries," "judges," and "marshals" to meet out their idea of

justice. Under the banner of "coordination," they peddle the fiction that county governments can control how federal lands are used. In Oregon, several county commissions, two CSPOA sheriffs, and even a mining district have invoked the movement's version of "coordination" to challenge federal authority to manage public lands.

**Patriot movement activists are part of a larger trend of right-wing populists who feel that, as a group, they are losing power, and offer right-wing solutions to economic problems.** Most movement activists embrace a "producerist" worldview that decries political elites while deriding others—such as immigrants and refugees—as lazy or immoral. Their simple solution to the economic problems rural areas face is to transfer federally owned land to states or counties, with the ultimate goal of privatization or deregulation for commercial use by the "producers" they claim to support: ranchers, loggers, and miners.

**Some movement members peddle conspiratorial, apocalyptic tales,** preparing for the collapse of governmental and business structures by learning subsistence farming and survivalist tactics, and by creating their alternative faux-governmental structures, which they hope will take the place of existing ones after a natural disaster or economic meltdown. They peddle climate denial and conspiracy theories, for instance that the United Nations' sustainability program Agenda 21 (now Agenda 2030) is actually a covert campaign to seize land and facilitate a foreign invasion.

**The movement operates with an "inside/outside" strategy: some parts of the movement work inside of established government structures to change them, while others work outside the system to undermine it.** As "outsiders," these groups are often armed and openly advocate defying those federal laws they deem unconstitutional. As insiders, they are embedded in the political life of rural areas, including the six Oregon counties at the heart of this report—Baker, Grant, Josephine, Harney, Crook,

and Deschutes—and find a home within the state Republican Party. Oregon State Representative Dallas Heard made a pilgrimage to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation. Josephine County Oath Keeper Joseph Rice, leader of the April 2015 armed encampment at the Sugar Pine Mine in rural southwestern Oregon, attended the 2016 Republican Convention as an Oregon state party delegate. Former Harney County Republican Party chair Tim Smith was the head of the Ammon Bundy-formed shadow government, the Committee of Safety, during the occupation. Ken Taylor—treasurer of the state-level Republican Party and chair of the Crook County GOP, at least until mid-2016—recorded the founding of this Committee of Safety and promoted the group, even as Ammon Bundy and his colleagues were threatening the Harney County sheriff.

You can also find Patriot movement priorities reflected in the national Republican Party—even if the movement’s tactics are still on the fringe. For instance, the 2016 national GOP platform advocates the transfer of federal lands to the states and denounces Agenda 21.

### **THE ROOTS OF RURAL OREGON'S ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISIS**

**The Patriot movement is extending its roots in rural Oregon communities, capitalizing on the sense of abandonment by the federal government,** as documented by Sunshine and Professors Daniel HoSang and Steven Beda in their chapter, **“We Need to Understand Our History! The Roots of Rural Oregon’s Economic and Political Crisis.”** These stagnant economies—whose wealth, based on logging and other natural resource extraction industries, dried up in the 1980s and 1990s—are prime areas for resentment. This is especially true in counties where the federal government owns much of the land; it controls 53 percent of Oregon as a whole, including more than half of nine counties. Harney County, where the Malheur Refuge is located, is 75 percent federal land, while southwestern Ore-

gon’s Josephine County is 68 percent.

**The movement’s libertarian-style anti-tax, anti-federal government positions will only intensify the problems of unemployment and lack of services that plague rural communities,** HoSang and Beda show. It also builds off a fantasy of the past that ignores the expropriation of land from Native Americans, and previous alliances of timber workers and environmentalists to defend public forests. Federal government payments to prop up rural economies after the collapse of the timber economy—which occurred partly because of changes in demand and advances in technology—are now decreasing significantly, severely undercutting county services and infrastructure. In Josephine County, voters defeated taxes that would fund basic government functions, including police. Now, in many cases 911 calls go unanswered and crimes are simply not investigated. HoSang and Beda argue for more planning and government support—not less—revolving around conservation-based logging, domestic production, clean energy, and restoring the forests and waterways that everyone depends on, including city people.

### **ORGANIZING FOR AN OREGON WHERE EVERYONE COUNTS**

Despite the intimidation and threats, **groups of neighbors are organizing to ensure that their communities determine their futures civilly and democratically.** The Rural Organizing Project, building on almost 25 years’ work supporting rural activists who stand up for the dignity of all people, has learned that “when communities organize to challenge the Patriot movement, they win.” In **“Organizing for an Oregon Where Everyone Counts,”** the Rural Organizing Project says a few strategies are key:

- **Break isolation and build a group.** Bring people together to share concerns, information, and ideas, including those who are on the fence about taking action.
- **Put small town and rural values front and**

**center.** We do not need outside groups to dictate what we want most for our communities. Clearly naming our priorities and how we want to interact with our neighbors is key. What we value most should be the center of our work and our message.

- **Silence is complicity.** Paramilitaries thrive in communities that remain silent. Without opposition, they claim to speak and act on the behalf of the entire community, and the loudest and most persistent narrative wins. We must speak out and change the story being told to our neighbors.

Along with sharing **practical guides for forming a group, holding meetings, and operating in a way that protects the safety of members**, the Rural Organizing Project offers lessons from five counties:

- In **Josephine County**, the press was buying the idea that the Oath Keepers' April 2015 armed camp at Sugar Pine Mine had broad local support. That changed when concerned citizens spoke out publicly on the courthouse steps, and Oath Keepers tailed and harassed them in view of the media. Through this and other actions, the new group Together for Josephine showed that locals were not welcoming the paramilitaries as heroes, which hurt the Patriot movement groups' ability to recruit locally and sustain their actions.
- In **Harney County**, home of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, a new group organized actions against the armed Patriot movement activists during the occupation. Hundreds of locals spoke out against the intruders and asked them to leave the county, led by the local county judge and sheriff, as well as the Burns Paiute Tribe. Once again, locals undercut the paramilitaries' claim that they were acting for "the people." To help break isolation and demonstrate that local folks on the frontlines are not alone, the Rural Organizing Project held a day of action where communities across the state

demonstrated their opposition to the politics of fear and exclusion.

- In **Grant County**, the home of "constitutional sheriff" Glenn Palmer, more than 50 residents with signs attended a meeting called to form a "Committee of Safety," a Patriot movement shadow government. The protesters formed a new group, Grant County Positive Action. Their immediate, public, and locally based opposition to the Patriot movement groups dispelled any belief that their community would be easy to dominate. Like other new groups, they built support and credibility by engaging with the county government as well as in public demonstrations.
- When an Oath Keeper ran for county commission, the Panhandle Community Alliance in **Baker County** stepped into the electoral arena. Their members and allies communicated with 200 voters, including engaging 45 people in one-on-one conversations. When the votes came in, the Oath Keepers' candidate lost the election by 38 votes.
- When a neighborhood in the city of **Eugene** also found itself touched by Patriot movement organizing, the Rural Organizing Project and the Community Alliance of Lane County worked fast. They called a meeting with community members and neighborhood organizations, prominently positioning security personnel to deter opponents from coming in and disrupting it. Then they went door-to-door with flyers to send a simple and clear message: militia organizing in this neighborhood is not welcome.

Together, these resources provide a roadmap of how to respond to the Patriot movement's threatening attempts to take over the community's dialogue and governance. ■

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