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Political Research Associates & Rural Organizing Project Release Major Investigation & Toolkit to Aid Oregon Communities Facing Militia Movements

Somerville, MA—Today Political Research Associates in partnership with Rural Organizing Project released Up in Arms: A Guide to Oregon’s Patriot Movement, a groundbreaking report and toolkit designed to support public officials and community activists under siege from armed militias and other Patriot movement groups.

In early 2016, Patriot movement paramilitaries stormed onto the national stage when they seized the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, and occupied it for 41 days. Seven occupiers now face federal charges in a Portland courtroom but Oregon remains a hotbed of Patriot movement activity. Across the state, heavily armed militias and self-anointed “judges and courts” vie for public support, while a handful of county sheriffs and other elected officials actually collude with them.

This guide was developed through extensive research on the right-wing movements and by pooling the local expertise of rural progressive community activists and scholars. It exposes, explains, and offers alternatives to this movement.

“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, and critics,” says Spencer Sunshine, a sociologist and associate fellow at Political Research Associates who wrote the study of the movement included in the guide.

“Making matters worse, some local sheriffs and elected officials actually support the movement,” says Sunshine. This includes Grants County’s Sheriff Glenn Palmer and former Josephine County Sheriff Gil Gilbertson. Sunshine’s investigation reveals how the movement recruits sheriffs to its beliefs, including ideas of county political supremacy over state and federal governments. He also documents the May 2015 Patriot movement rally against a newly passed gun law in Oregon, where elected officials listened as national Patriot leader Mike Vanderboegh called for the Oregon state government to be overthrown through a civil war.

“The Oregon militias are part of national Patriot movement networks. What currently looks like a rural western phenomenon could easily go national, as it did during the 1990s,” says Tarso Luís Ramos, executive director of Political Research Associates, adding, “The chances of that outcome increase if Hillary Clinton wins the presidency in November.”

New Patriot movement groups formed since 2008 include local affiliates of the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, as well as the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association. Researchers
estimate that dozens of groups have thousands of supporters in the state, including within the state Republican Party. That includes former state GOP treasurer Ken Taylor and Oregon State Representative Dallas Heard, who made a personal pilgrimage to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation. Josephine County Oath Keeper Joseph Rice attended the 2016 Republican Convention as a state party delegate.

“As Oregonians, we have a responsibility to support those who are resisting these movements and struggling for real democratic control of their communities,” says Jessica Campbell, Rural Organizing Project Co-Director and contributing author. “Rural Oregonians want healthy and vibrant communities where everyone can live their lives fully with safety and dignity, and that isn't possible when those who have the most guns get to intimidate their political opponents into silence.”

*Up In Arms* also documents how the Patriot movement takes advantage of the collapse of the rural Oregon economy and funding cuts. University of Oregon professors Dan HoSang and Steve Beda describe how local tax revolts cut vital county services such as 911 response and public libraries from rural areas as stable jobs in the logging, ranching, and mining industries—as well as federal subsidies—have evaporated. The Patriot movement steps in to provide its own alternative policing and emergency responses as a means to gain traction in these forgotten communities.

Providing alternatives for communities being targeted for Patriot movement recruitment is extremely important. Jessica Campbell of Rural Organizing Project offers strategies for how community members can break out of a sense of isolation, form a group, and speak out with their own vision of what the community should look like. The toolkit’s case studies of effective community resistance from five Oregon counties show how residents can successfully counter Patriot movement messaging and intimidation, and help build inclusive and egalitarian communities.


About Political Research Associates: Massachusetts-based Political Research Associates (PRA) is a 35-year-old think tank that researches and exposes movements, institutions, and ideologies that undermine human rights. PRA is devoted to supporting movements that are building a more just and inclusive democratic society.

About the Rural Organizing Project: The Rural Organizing Project (ROP) is a statewide organization of locally-based groups that work to create communities accountable to a standard of human dignity: the belief in the equal worth of all people, the need for equal access to justice and the right to self-determination. Founded in 1992, ROP’s challenges to the anti-democratic right have earned ROP a national reputation as an effective grassroots organization that takes on the hard issues.

Available for interview:

Spencer Sunshine, Ph.D, PRA associate fellow, is a researcher, writer, and activist who tracks the Patriot movement, fascist and white nationalist organizing, and left/right crossover movements.

Tarso Luís Ramos, executive director of PRA, has been researching the U.S. Right for 25 years. Throughout the 1990s, Ramos worked in multiple western states to counteract anti-environmental, militia, anti-LGBT and other organized threats to social justice.

Jessica Campbell and Cara Shufelt, Co-directors of Rural Organizing Project.

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