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Trump pardons far-right Oregon ranchers

President Donald Trump on Tuesday issued pardons to two far-right Oregon ranchers convicted of arson in 2012 for deliberately setting fire to a federal wildlife refuge in southeastern Oregon.

The case inspired the 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by dozens of right-wing extremist militia members associated with the so-called “sovereign citizens movement.” The occupation ended with the police killing of a militia member and the arrest of the group’s leaders.

Trump’s move is a further step in his efforts to mobilize support among violent, far-right elements in preparation for further assaults on the working class and stepped-up plundering of the nation’s natural resources for profit.

Seventy-three-year-old Dwight Hammond, Jr. and his 46-year-old son, Steven, are right-wing libertarian cattle ranchers who own roughly 13,000 acres of family land in Harney County, southeastern Oregon. They have long been involved in disputes with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which leases federal lands for livestock grazing, charging a nominal permitting fee.

Long-simmering tensions escalated in 1994 when Dwight Hammond’s special permit to grow hay and graze cattle in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge was revoked due to the Hammonds’ refusal to comply with restrictions on the times of day their cattle could be moved through the refuge.

The Hammonds defied the revocation and continued grazing in the area, prompting officials to begin construction of a fence to protect the wetlands and marsh from further

harm. The fence's destruction and further attempts by the Hammonds to disrupt construction prompted their arrest by federal agents. Refuge managers reported that Dwight Hammond had made a series of death threats against them in 1986, 1988, 1991 and 1994, promising to visit the most filthy and despicable violations of their corpses after killing them.

In 1999, Steven Hammond started a fire, ostensibly to clear out a juniper tree on the family's property. The fire quickly spread onto refuge lands, prompting a warning from the BLM that failure to abide by permitting requirements in the area would result in legal consequences.

In 2001, the Hammonds were seen illegally slaughtering a herd of deer in the wildlife refuge. Within two hours, the entire area had been set ablaze, burning 139 acres of the refuge and nearly causing the deaths of four firefighters working to put out the fire.

The Hammonds claimed the fire was caused by a controlled burn started on their property that got out of control. However, this was contradicted in court testimony by friends and relatives present, who told jurors that after being discovered, Steven Hammond passed out "Strike Anywhere" matches and told them to "light up the whole country on fire."

In a separate incident in 2006, the duo started a series of fires directly downhill from a BLM firefighter camp in an attempt to shield their grain supplies from the Krumbo Butte wildfire, necessitating an emergency rescue effort to save the firefighters, who barely escaped with their lives. Two days later, the younger Hammond threatened to frame a BLM investigator for arson if the investigation was not immediately dropped.

Dwight and Steven Hammond were convicted in October 2012 of several felony offenses in relation to the 2001 and 2006 fires. Dwight was ultimately convicted of one count of using fire to damage federal property for the 2001 incident and sentenced to three months in prison. His son was convicted of one count each for the 2001 and 2006 fires and sentenced to one year and a day in prison. Other charges against the men were dropped in exchange for an agreement not to appeal should they be convicted. Both men served out their sentences and were released.

These sentences, handed down just one day before the judge's retirement, were well below the minimum sentence of five years for arson on federal property mandated by the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, passed in response to the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building by right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh.

Federal prosecutors appealed the sentencing decision and in 2015, a three-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit ruled that the sentence was illegal,

returning the case to District Court for resentencing. In October 2015, the Hammonds were sentenced to five years, including time served, and returned to prison soon thereafter. The Hammonds' case drew the attention of a right-wing militia in Nevada led by ranchers Ammon and Ryan Bundy, sons of Cliven Bundy, who gained notoriety in 2014 for leading an armed standoff with BLM officers to assert his belief that the federal government has no right to own property in states and his own self-proclaimed right to graze his cattle anywhere and at any time without interference by the government.

On January 2, 2016, Ammon and Ryan Bundy led roughly two dozen armed militia members calling themselves Citizens for Constitutional Freedom to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. They occupied the empty federal buildings on the premises to demand the release of the Hammonds and privatization of all federal lands in the western United States. This triggered a 41-day standoff pitting a few dozen heavily-armed right-wing fanatics against a massive mobilization of agents from a vast array of local and federal law enforcement agencies, under Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) leadership.

Just over three weeks later, on January 26, a convoy of cars transporting the Bundys and others involved in the occupation was intercepted by FBI and Oregon State Patrol vehicles, resulting in several arrests and the police killing of rancher Lavoy Finicum under circumstances that remain unclear.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, the Socialist Equality Party opposes the use of state violence against these right-wing elements, not because socialists sympathize with their political demands, but because long experience has demonstrated that repressive measures used against the right are employed with redoubled force against the left.

The pardons of the Hammonds follow Trump's August 2017 pardon of the anti-immigrant and racist former Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio. In June of 2017, Arpaio was found guilty of criminal contempt for defying a judge's 2011 court order to refrain from racially profiling Latinos during patrols and turning them over to federal immigration authorities. He faced up to six months in prison.

Billionaire Trump supporter Robert Mercer supplied his private jet to fly the Hammonds back to Oregon following their release from prison.