



Bundy brothers found not guilty of conspiracy in Oregon militia standoff

High-profile trial over the armed occupation of the Malheur wildlife refuge sparked a national debate about the rights of ranchers in the American west

Sam Levin in San Francisco and Lauren Dake in Portland, Oregon

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A jury has found that brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy were not guilty of conspiring against the government, a surprising end to the high-profile Oregon standoff trial that sparked national debates about public lands and the rights of ranchers in the American west.

The decision, unveiled in federal court in Portland on Thursday, is a blow to the US government, which had aggressively prosecuted the rightwing activists who led an armed takeover of public property to protest American land-use regulations.

The Bundy brothers, who orchestrated a 2 January takeover of the Malheur national wildlife refuge, were acquitted on a number of serious charges, along with five other defendants. Only a day earlier the court dismissed a juror over fears of bias, raising concerns that the trial would drag on for weeks.

“We are just so excited,” Angie Bundy, Ryan’s wife, told the Guardian after the verdict was announced. “We’ve been praying hard, and we knew they hadn’t done anything wrong.”

In a statement, federal officials said they accepted the decision. “Although we are extremely disappointed in the verdict, we respect the court and the role of the jury in the American judicial system,” said Greg Bretzing, special agent in charge of the FBI in Oregon.

The Bundy family’s public fight with the government began in 2014 when the patriarch Cliven, now 70, led an armed standoff with hundreds of supporters against law enforcement officials at his desert ranch in Nevada, over his refusal to pay grazing taxes. For decades, Cliven claimed that the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had no authority to restrict his use of public lands by his property.

The dispute and lack of prosecution galvanized ultra-conservative activists and militia groups across the west, and the Bundys launched a second fight with the BLM in January 2016 - in a remote part of eastern Oregon.

In response to the imprisonment of two Harney County ranchers, who were prosecuted for arson, Ammon and Ryan led a group of activists in an occupation of the Malheur national wildlife refuge, an obscure sanctuary for birds.

Ammon declared that he and other protesters, some who openly carried firearms and took over government buildings and equipment, would stay until the ranchers were freed and the refuge land was given to locals to control.

The tense standoff dragged on for 41 days, and police eventually carried out mass arrests and killed one of the leaders, LaVoy Finicum, in a roadside confrontation.

Prosecutors charged the Bundy brothers and 24 other defendants with conspiracy to impede officers through use of force, intimidation or threats, and some also faced additional charges of firearm possession and theft of public property.

Some of the defendants signed plea deals in hopes of getting shorter prison sentences, and a total of seven defendants have been on trial since September.

The defendants were acquitted on the conspiracy and firearm charges, though the jury could not come to an agreement on a property theft offense that faces Ryan.

The court proceedings drew packed crowds of rightwing supporters, who see the Bundy family as a symbol of the American west and the fight against government overreach, as well liberal environmentalists, who have called for harsh prison sentences to send a message that the government will protect public lands and promote conservation.

During the trial, federal prosecutors argued that the protesters organized a “dangerous” invasion and conspired to stop refuge workers from doing their job.

Ammon’s attorney and other defense lawyers argued that the defendants were leading a peaceful demonstration and were lawfully speaking out against federal actions and policies.

Prosecutors also revealed during the court proceedings that US authorities relied on more than a dozen confidential informants during the occupation, and defendants’ lawyers have raised

concerns about how the government has used that information and how those individuals shaped the actions at the refuge.

Neil Wampler, one of the acquitted defendants, appeared joyful outside of court, telling reporters: “This is a stunning victory for rural America and an extremely humiliating defeat for a corrupt and predatory agency.”

Late on Thursday night, David Fry, another acquitted occupier and the last holdout at the refuge, was released from jail and greeted by a crowd of supporters and a Domino’s pizza.

Asked about the Standing Rock protesters in North Dakota, he said that others should be encouraged by the court victory.

“They need to take a look at this and realize battles can be won,” Fry said. “They need to stay strong and not let the federal government push them around.”

Now a free man, Fry said he might do some traveling, adding, “there are more federal buildings to occupy.”

Matthew Schindler, lawyer for defendant Kenneth Medenbach, the first protester arrested in January, said the case brought attention to grievances in parts of America that are often overlooked.

“Their way of life is going away, and unless all of us here in the cities care about that, that’s exactly what’s going to happen,” he said outside of the courthouse. “It was a very powerful thing for individuals with nothing,” he added, to “fight the federal government”.

After the verdict, Ammon Bundy’s lawyer, Marcus Mumford, reportedly got into a confrontation with the judge, Anna Brown, when he requested his client’s immediate release.

A separate trial, involving Ammon, Ryan, Cliven and two other Bundy men, is planned for next year in Nevada on charges stemming from the 2014 standoff. Given the pending case, authorities refused to release Ammon in Oregon. When Mumford argued, he allegedly ended up in a scuffle with US marshals, resulting in his arrest.



Ryan Bundy, 43, one of the occupation leaders, at the Multnomah County detention center in Portland. Photograph: Leah Nash for the Guardian

Mumford was released soon after, telling reporters that officers shocked him with a Taser.

“Marshals surrounded me, told me not to resist.”

Rick Koerber, another member of the legal team, added: “This is what this case is about. It’s okay to say no to the federal government.”

Asked about Mumford’s arrest, Lisa Bundy, Ammon’s wife, told the Guardian that officials had reacted poorly to the decision. “I feel like they are sore losers,” she said. “What is the matter with them? It’s so inhumane.”

The Bundys are devout Mormons, and Angie, who has taken care of their eight children during her husband’s detention, cited her family’s faith when celebrating the decision on Thursday night.

“This means that God answers prayers, that God cares about man’s freedom. This is huge.”

While Bundy supporters celebrated outside the courtroom - with prayer circles, chants of hallelujah and trumpets from a ram’s horn - environmental groups criticized the decision, saying it sent a dangerous message about public lands.

“We are deeply disappointed in today’s verdict, which puts our park rangers and scientists at further risk just for doing their jobs,” Jennifer Rokala, executive director of the Center for Western Priorities, said in a statement. “The outcome of today’s trial will undoubtedly embolden extremist groups.”

Jason Liss, a Bundy supporter wearing a “Hillary for Prison 2016” shirt, said the court win could help promote the idea that federal agencies aren’t allowed to control public lands - an argument that legal experts and courts have rejected.

“It’s great a group of people still believe the constitution is the foundation of our country.”

The Oregon decision could have significant implications for the Nevada case, where the Bundys and a group of activists still face a range of similar accusations, including charges of conspiracy.

Ryan’s wife said she hoped the jury’s decision would pave the way for a clear win next year. “Ranchers have been oppressed long enough.”

Lisa said prosecutors should end the case against Ammon in Nevada.

“I hope they realize they don’t have anything and drop the charges,” she said, adding, “He would just love nothing more than to come home to his babies even though he knows he has to go to Nevada.”

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