

A Mormon militia?

By [Kyle Beshears](#)

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The new year was rung in with the surprising news of a small militia occupying a federal building in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, deep in rural Oregon. Armed protestors, calling themselves Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, have called on the U.S. government to reverse policies dealing with public lands that they consider unconstitutional.

The group's leader, Ammon Bundy, a confessing Mormon, said they would remain there until they ["restore the land and resources to the people so people across the country can begin thriving again."](#) While most media outlets have covered the political and ideological aspects of the group's motivation, few have considered the issue historically.

One of the first clues came after a militia member identified himself to a reporter as "Captain Moroni." That name, of course, would most likely not match his birth certificate, but the captain is not just hiding behind a pseudonym. Instead, [as others have noted](#), his choice of nickname is a tip of the hat to the motivation behind his actions: an odd blend of patriotism and Mormonism.

"Captain Moroni" comes from a protagonist and hero in the Book of Mormon. Moroni takes command of his people, the Nephites, at age 25 to combat tyrannical powers working to ruin God's promised land (1 Nephi 2:20). Many join the brave young hero "to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land unto the laying down of their lives, [to never] give up their liberty" (Alma 53:7). It is not difficult to see where the militia member found his inspiration.

It must be said that the the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [does not approve](#) of Bundy's actions. In fact, it's safe to say that the vast majority of LDS Church members—let's call them "mainstream Mormons"—would love to see Capt. Moroni and company sheath their swords. What cannot be denied, however, is the oft-forgotten historical tension and conflict between Mormons and the government. Past tension is likely fueling the current conflict. This interplay is apparent in other

notable clashes between Mormons and the government:

- In 1838, Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs signed an [extermination order](#) against the Mormons after public unrest and a series of deadly skirmishes between Mormons and Missouri settlers.
- In 1844, Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, was killed by an angry mob while jailed in Carthage, Illinois. Governor Thomas Ford [allowed for Smith's arrest](#) on charges of treason.
- In 1849–50, the recently migrated Mormons of the West petitioned for statehood under the name Deseret, a territory that would have engulfed most of the U.S. land gained after the Mexican-American War. The federal government denied the proposal, opting instead to organize the land into the Utah Territory.
- In 1858, President James Buchanan replaced LDS Brigham Young with non-LDS Alfred Cumming as governor of the Utah Territory following the Utah War (1857–58).
- In 1862, the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act was passed, banning the practice of polygamy within the United States. At the time, plural marriage was practiced among some Mormon communities. The new federal law crushed any hope of Utah becoming a state as long as the LDS Church allowed the practice to continue.
- In 1890, LDS president Wilford Woodruff effectively ended the practice of polygamy within the LDS Church by releasing [Official Declaration 1](#), also known as the 1890 Manifesto. This paved the way for Utah statehood.
- In 1896, Utah was admitted as a state—after the federal government divided much of its mineral-rich territory among Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming. About [two-thirds](#) of Utah is still owned by the federal government.

It is not difficult to understand why Bundy's particular brand of anti-governmental Mormonism has spurred him to such action. It seems likely that Bundy and his Citizens believe more is at stake than constitutionalism and ranchers' rights to public land. By their own aggrandizement, they are now engaging in an age-old struggle between good and evil, oppression and corruption—Mormons and the U.S.

government. For Bundy and some in his militia, they are vying over the very will of God for this land.

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