Leveraging the land or loving its people?

By Scott Culpepper
February 2, 2016

Ammon Bundy's militia has occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon since January 2. The standoff with authorities continues despite the arrest of Bundy and 11 of his followers and the shooting death of LaVoy Finicum during a traffic stop last week, and despite Bundy's pleas that the four remaining militia members leave the refuge. They insist that they will not leave until their comrades are released and everyone is pardoned.

These conservative Mormons have claimed that God told them to seize the land in defense of ranchers sentenced to jail time for setting fires on federal land. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has officially denounced Bundy's claim to divine sanction, as well as his interpretations of the *Book of Mormon*. Though the territory this militia seized is an unoccupied wildlife refuge, its actions have caused much frustration for people living nearby. Oregon governor Kate Brown has demanded federal intervention.

Maybe the Malheur occupiers are truly motivated by their stated doctrinal rationale; maybe this is simply a pretext for more material aims. Either way they exemplify a problematic American tradition. American history is filled with examples of people who interpreted scripture, particularly the Old Testament covenantal history of Israel, to justify the seizure of land to promote freedom and flourishing.

William Walker wrote one chapter of that history in the late 1850s, when he led an expedition to Nicaragua. Walker, largely unknown to Americans today, achieved great acclaim and notoriety in his day. He worked as a lawyer in New Orleans before moving to San Francisco in 1849 to pursue a career in journalism. He was a fervent evangelical Christian, molded by the fires of 19th-century revivalism. And he was convinced that the social order of the antebellum South, including slavery, represented the purist expression of a biblical social model. Walker's career was marked by a complex interplay of spiritual and material motivations.

By 1853, Walker conceived a plan to appropriate Mexican territory by force so that it could be annexed by the U.S., a practice known as filibustering. He hoped to add to the number of slave states and tip the balance of power toward the South. After an unsuccessful attempt to capture Baja California and Sonora State, Walker escaped prosecution for violating the Neutrality Act of 1794 by dazzling a California jury. His stirring defense was couched in religious imagery and the celebration of Manifest Destiny. The jury took eight minutes to acquit him.

Walker's moment arrived in 1854 in the form of overtures from railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt and his fellow investors hoped to build a railroad across Lake Nicaragua to connect the two oceans. Their plans were complicated by a civil war raging in Nicaragua. Walker and his force of 60 men—made up of American conscripts, Latin American insurgents, and European adventurers—landed in Nicaragua in 1855. They eventually seized control, proclaimed Walker president, and revoked emancipation statutes to reinstitute slavery.

Walker's regime violently suppressed Nicaraguan dissidents and engaged in armed conflict with neighboring countries. These conflicts greatly destabilized the region, culminating in an invasion of Nicaragua by Costa Rican and Honduran forces. To escape them, Walker was forced to surrender to the U.S. Navy and return to the United States.

Although a controversial figure, Walker was viewed as a hero by those who shared his view that the United States was divinely preordained to dominate the Americas. Walker wrote an account of his exploits and then returned to Nicaragua in 1860. After a series of misadventures, he was captured by British naval officers—who turned him over to not the Americans but the Hondurans. A firing squad brought a tragic end to Walker's filibustering career.

It may seem a narrow thread that connects a 19th-century evangelical filibuster and a 21st-century LDS militia leader. But both men represent the tendency to associate being chosen by God with being appointed by extension to occupy specific physical space. For centuries, possession of physical space has symbolized security, sustenance, and social standing. Fear that our survival or freedom might be threatened, or that we might fail to do the will of God by neglecting to "occupy the land," can lead to a lack of empathy for those who stand in the way.

Bundy and his followers seem to have been motivated by just this kind of fear. But the story of William Walker reminds us that acting on such fears can result in other people's suffering. From the vicious battles over Jerusalem to the dispossession of Native people in the name of Manifest Destiny, leveraging physical space in the name of God often ends not in freedom and security, but in lawlessness and tragedy.

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