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## **White Privilege: An American Reality**

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*“Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of man; will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraint.”*

Alexander Hamilton

The term privilege is defined as a special right, advantage or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people. The takeover of a government building in Burns, Oregon on January 2, 2016, led by Ammon Dunn is another stark indication of white privilege personified. The failure of our justice system to view all Americans through the same lens of justice, continues to rip at the very core of our nation’s spirit. I felt compelled to write this article based on the countless private conversations I have had within our community on this very critical issue. It generally begins like this: *Wendell, can you imagine if these were black people in Oregon, how quickly the law would have come down on them? Can you imagine if there were a group of brothers or Muslims or Mexicans even threatening to take over a federal building, how the government and its agencies would respond? Can you imagine if there were a group of armed black folks talking about they were going to go downtown and takeover the Federal building, how quickly the Man, would have come in and attempted to bust the whole situation wide open?* These are the questions which I am certain that many of those who read this article have had and are having with others.

The proof of the matter is that these are law breakers, not patriots. They are not upholding the Constitution. They are breaking the law. The Bundys have a history of breaking the law. Nevada Rancher, Cliven Bundy, provided a clear example of domestic terrorism when he refused to pay grazing fees for his cattle’s use of public lands in April of 2014. He stood down the Federal Bureau of Land Management. He still owes the federal government 1.1 million dollars for fees that have not been paid. These individuals threatened violence and incited national protests which included armed militia, pointing rifles at U.S. Marshals, prepared to shoot first then ask questions later. They were called “law-abiding American citizens, patriots and just, hardworking Americans”. Fox News and other media outlets lifted them up as if they were American folk heroes. Now we find that Ammon Bundy is following the lead of his father in taking over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, indicating that *“they are prepared to stay forever and to defend themselves against anyone who attempts to dislodge them from their location.”*

It must be pointed out that the law does not permit private individuals to just take over Federal property. When taking over property that is not yours, it makes you a criminal. All of our law enforcement agencies have demonstrated an unusual degree of patience, tolerance, sensitivity, and understanding for these law breakers. It should also be pointed out that Ammon Bundy says he is following directions from God and invokes his family's faith tradition (which happens to be Mormon, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) while engaged in this act of terrorism. The Church of Latter-day Saints has gone on record as not condoning or supporting the activities of Ammon Bundy. Have we not heard this before, that the majority of those in the Muslim, African American, and Latina communities, do not support the negative and criminal activity of those who often invoke the name of their religion or their God, when it comes to their misdeeds? Why is it acceptable and believable for Mr. Bundy and his cohorts, but unacceptable and unbelievable for those in communities outside of their circle of privilege?

It is amazing that Mr. Bundy who disdains the Government on one hand, has benefited from the federal government on the other. In 2010, he borrowed \$530,000 through the Small Business Administration for his company Valet Fleet Service LLC. This is indeed a most remarkable contradiction. For those who ask what does this have to do with white privilege? 30 years ago in Philadelphia a group called **MOVE** had relocated itself into a row house in West Philadelphia. This group faced complaints from neighbors for its political views and messages just like those in Oregon are facing today. In 1985, a number of MOVE members faced arrest warrants for parole violations and illegal possessions of firearms. The Philadelphia Police attempted to evict the group from their building and arrest their members. MOVE refused to leave their row house. Philadelphia Police Commissioner Gregore Sambor, ordered a helicopter to drop an explosive device on top of the building. This bomb set off a fire that eventually burned down 61 homes, leaving 250 people homeless, 11 people in the MOVE row house died, which included five children.

49 years ago a group of 30 Black Panthers walked into the California State Capitol Building carrying shot guns, rifles, and immediately the national headlines began to erupt calling them criminals, terrorists, and disrupters of the federal government. No this is not to compare the objectives of the Black Panthers with those of Ammon Bundy. They fought for different causes and garnered different reactions. On the one hand the one group was fighting to keep the government out of its business (Bundy). The other group fought to make certain that the government would take care of its business (Panthers). Yet the response has been vastly different. As a result of the Black Panthers' protest at the federal building in California, Don Mulford, a GOP assemblyman representing Oakland, California at the time, responded to this protest by introducing a bill to strip Californians of the right to openly carry firearms. It was known as the "Panthers Bill" and it passed with the support of the National Rifle Association. Then California Governor Ronald Reagan, later campaigning for President, as a steadfast defender of the Second Amendment, signed the bill into law. From that point on, the Black Panther Party was noted simply as a group of terrorists, radicals, and disrupters of our system of government. Very little discussion was ever made of their breakfast programs, educational programs, and health care assistance to poor communities which helped propel them as an organization. No I am not a Black Panther. I simply believe in justice for all.

It must be pointed out that the demonstrations by the Panthers in 1967, were lawful. They made their complaints against a specific piece of legislation which had a most negative racial overtone. They left the building without incident. Even more recent than these two incidents, was the May 17, 2015 shootout in Waco, Texas at the Twin Peaks restaurant involving members of the Bandidos, Cossacks, and Allies motorcycle gangs. It resulted in 9 bikers being killed, 18 others were injured all suffering from gunshot wounds. Weapons seized during this melee included chains, brass knuckles, knives, clubs and batons. At least 140 individuals were arrested, yet while they were being herded in the middle of the street, many were allowed to use their cell phones. They were not handcuffed or beat down, while accused of resisting arrest. Again patience, tolerance, and understanding, was extended to people who had just engaged in the slaughter of nine individuals.

One has to ask the question, how much longer will the takeover in Oregon go on? When will the application of justice regardless of color or status, finally be applied? 12 year old Tamir Rice was killed in less than 2 seconds after an encounter with the police. Eric Garner was killed after being choked to death on the sidewalks (while he cried out I can't breathe), with no weapon at all. Sandra Bland killed herself (so they say) in a Texas jail cell after being stopped for changing a lane. Dylan Roof was taken to a Burger King to get a whopper after complaining to the police that he was hungry. This was after this domestic terrorist had just killed nine innocent church goers in the basement of a Charleston, South Carolina church. Flint, Michigan, which is not an affluent community, made of majority African Americans and blue collar workers, is now forced to drink poisoned water. There seems to be no sense of urgency or accountability by the state of Michigan to prosecute or to address this issue which may ultimately lead to the physical and mental death of children and adults in this community.

I remember back in the day, we could not even assemble on a street corner without the Big Four (four white police officers in a black vehicle) stopping their car and telling us to "disassemble" and "get off the street" in terminology that was not as politically correct. As long as our nation continues to define legitimate, peaceful protesters, whether in Ferguson, Baltimore, or Chicago, as thugs, anarchists, radicals, who are not entitled to the protection of the First Amendment, while defining everyone else as upholders of the Constitution, America has a problem! This kind of application of justice is known as "Complexion Protection".

No, I do not write this in the hopes that a bomb will be dropped on those in Oregon for taking over a Federal building. What I do hope and pray is that we will drop a bomb on the attitude and the belief that some in America have privileges because of their color, while others in America are disadvantaged because of theirs. Our nation and our system of justice must be better than this. I am reminded of the words uttered by Henry David Thoreau:

***"Justice is sweet and musical; but injustice is harsh and discordant."***

Isn't it about time that we all experienced the sweet music of our judicial system?