

The Origins of the Harney County Committee of Safety

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“I know there’s people in Harney County that are wondering, how a small group that come out of a meeting that Ammon Bundy put together could possibly represent them, and that’s not really what this is about. This is about a start. This is about bringing Harney County together, hearing every single voice and going forward.”

- Rick Habein, Jan. 8th, 2016 Committee of Safety Meeting



Introduction

A Committee of Safety can be briefly defined as a mutual self-defense association that also operates as a parallel government. Historically, they were known under a variety of names, yet, their function was exactly the same – to pool manpower for defense of the community and legitimize a self-organized populist government. From the English Civil War of the mid-17th century to the Revolutionary Wars of Independence for both America and Texas, Committees of Safety have historically demonstrated their efficacy in practically securing liberty.

Committees of Safety were legitimized by **general associations** composed of the individual citizens within a defined geographical area, whether that takes the form of a town, a county, or

even something “provincial.” These associations were comprised of the rank-and-file membership who received protection and who in turn gave their **individual** explicit consent to their particular *local* Committee of Safety.

As a truly bottom-up and grassroots organizing model, Committees of Safety are intended to coordinate the assemblage of men and materiel in preparation for a disaster. A key tenet of American classically liberal republicanism is that the military is subordinated to the civil authority. If the militia is the military, then what constitutes the civil authority? Well, the answer is their *local* Committee of Safety.

Also, Committees of Safety are invaluable even in the absence of emergencies, simply because they are a limited form of government, which is directly accountable to the people within a local community. The committeemen are susceptible to public shaming, and even ostracism, should they abuse their public office. This is what actually keeps their power limited.

Modern local Committees of Safety began their resurgence during the 1990s with the formation of the Central Florida Committee of Safety, as well as the St. Joseph County, Indiana Committee of Safety. In recent years, the formation of the Cherokee County, Georgia Committee of Safety and the Blue Ridge, North Carolina Mountaineers Committee for Constitutional Restoration might be indicative of the growing deeper appreciation for the principles of liberty. Only time, and further investigation, will tell if this be true, or not.

The Formation of the Harney County Committee of Safety (CoS)

During his field reporting on January 26th, [Gary Hunt met with Ryan Payne](#) in Harney County, Oregon, and described the following:

“After lunch, I located Ryan Payne. We had spent over a week together in November finishing a [PowerPoint Presentation for Committees of Safety](#). This presentation had been used to explain the concept of CoS to some of the residents of Harney County. They then formed their own [Harney County Committee of Safety](#).”

Remember, these two already knew each other as far back as the [Bundy Affair of 2014](#), since they were both members of [Operation Mutual Defense](#). Although there was an attempt to set up a Committee of Safety there in Clarke County, Nevada, this failed to materialize, so we assume that the pair assembled a slide show in order to better help form one somewhere else.

The first significant date was December 15th, 2015, when Ammon Bundy held a town hall meeting in Burns, Oregon to discuss the developing situation involving [the Hammonds](#). Ammon began by talking about the circumstances surrounding the Bundy Affair and informed the community about their failed efforts to get assistance (i.e. intervention) from the County and State governments, in regards to the Hammonds being forced to report back to prison to fulfill federal minimum sentencing requirements. Among those things discussed, was Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17 of the federal Constitution, which Ammon cited as evidence for some kind of

overreach, albeit quite vaguely. Ammon [concluded his speech by stating](#), “The time is now, this is the place, and I know you are the people.”

[Ammon then turned it over to Ryan Payne](#), who introduced the CoS concept to the local Oregonians. Near the end of his speech, the floor opened up for questions. [Jason Patrick talked for a few minutes](#), the most significant portion was when he said, “Form a Committee of Safety here, I’m pleading with you to form one.”

A few minutes following Patrick’s statements, an unidentified man in the back of the room [spoke up](#), “Let’s form one.”

Ryan Payne [provided the instructions](#): “The idea would be then, to nominate people from amongst yourselves who you think are the most qualified.” It was also mentioned that there would need to be a quorum (an odd number of representatives), so that there was no opportunity for gridlock in future decision-making.

Seven were initially nominated and voted in to become committeemen, and this was how the Harney County CoS was thus formed. They also drafted a few documents, namely the [Founding Principles](#) (1/4/16), the [By-Laws](#) (2/3/16), and the [Statement of Intention](#) (1/14/16).

Future CoS Events and Interviews: January 2nd – March 10th

The first significant event was the creation of the Harney County CoS, but there are also a number of other important ones, including two more town hall meetings, Chris Briels’ resignation, and a couple of interviews with Tim Smith and Briels. In this section, I will provide not only overviews of each of those, but also an analysis on the importance of each.

January 2nd, 2016: Town Hall Meeting

Immediately following [Operation Hammond Freedom](#), as well as Ammon and his Citizens for Constitutional Freedom’s (C4CF) departure to the refuge, the Idaho III% led a town hall meeting with over 50 people in attendance; this included local Oregonians, [Peter Santilli](#), and members of the Idaho III%, but it was unclear if the leadership from the Harney County CoS was there.

The atmosphere at this meeting was tense and emotional, as can be [evidenced by the footage](#). The locals were concerned about the rapid escalation of the situation and were worried about bloodshed in their town. The beginning of the meeting mostly consisted of the demonization of C4CF by Curtiss and other members of the Idaho III%, as well as by some of the locals; the derisive term most predominantly used was “bad apples.”

After the demonization (or “public relations” damage control in the spirit of the [Free State Project Board of Trustees?](#)), it was time to discuss a solution, which came [from none other than Brandon Curtiss himself](#):

“So, of all the people here in Harney County, Burns, or close surrounding areas, who’s still here? Is anybody interested in coming together in a Safety Committee and taking this further? Who would be interested in doing that? Come on, you guys got to get involved. Those that are interested, let’s meet back here and we’ll get you with the organized Safety Committee.”

It’s first worth mentioning the lack of an explanation of what a “Safety Committee” actually is, at least according to Curtiss. We would hedge our bets that quite a few of the folks at this meeting were not at the earlier December 15th meeting when the concept was explained in any real length. We don’t know about you, but [we don’t join organizations without knowing anything about them](#).

The final thing to mention here is that Curtiss began by calling the members of C4CF “bad apples” (especially Ammon), but then promoted the type of organization that whose setup was directly facilitated by Ammon and Ryan Payne as the solution.

January 8th, 2016: Harney County CoS Meeting

After being blackballed from most every other community building [cited below], the Harney County CoS was finally able to secure a meeting location. There were a lot of people in attendance and also a significant media presence.

Rick Habein introduced himself and [addressed one potential concern](#):

“I know there’s people in Harney County that are wondering, how a small group that come out of a meeting that Ammon Bundy put together could possibly represent them, and that’s not really what this is about. This is about a start. This is about bringing Harney County together, hearing every single voice and going forward.”

We then learn more about the activities of the CoS and some logistical details from Tim Smith:

“We ended up with a website that was put together by Ammon Bundy, at his cost. We inherited that site. A lot of people have asked about why that site was still in Ammon Bundy’s name.” [15:10]

“We did participate in the rally in support of the Hammonds, however we were not involved in the planning of that. We were, at the last minute, decided we were going to participate.” [24:27]

We can now verify that the CoS was, in fact, present at the Operation Hammond Freedom rally. We also gain additional insight into the fact that Ammon was essential in setting up the CoS itself, by gifting them their website, in addition to all of his other assistance.

Later on during the meeting, the subject of the occupiers was brought up. What did they do to assist? The [CoS drafted a letter](#) with the intent of getting Ammon and the occupiers to leave, a portion of which reads:

*“We were very upset that you chose to take the aggressive action of occupying the refuge, and did it without our knowledge, or any other local approval, and in a fashion that **created huge distrust and loss of credibility of, and for, us as a group of residents within the community.**” [Emphasis added]*

Without a doubt, Ammon’s actions brought the Committee’s credibility into question, especially considering that, without him, the CoS probably would have never come into fruition. This lack of support for C4CF’s sit-in at the refuge by the Harney County CoS is the most damning opposition to date.

That said, the importance of having a quorum cannot be understated, as in the instance of a gridlock, whatever decision comes out from the lack of said quorum is arbitrary at best.

Earlier on in the meeting, [Tim Smith admitted that](#), “We started being nominated, there were seven of us...one decided that it wasn’t for him,” and this was [further verified by Habein](#), who provided a real-life example of the importance of a quorum:

“...there was three of us that didn’t sign it, and three of us that did. The point was the iron is hot and we can do something. The fear of three of us was that Ammon would leave because we asked him to, and we all go back to the way it was.” [Emphasis added]

With at 3-3 tie, they went ahead and sent the letter anyway, with absolutely no force behind it, no majority decision; quite literally, a divided non-decision by the Harney County CoS. When one member up and quit the Committee, they should have either nominated someone else, or one of the current Committeemen should have quit; but, they are [still without a quorum, to this day](#). That is a rather significant problem, one that even a governmental body such as the United States Supreme Court does not have to contend with, simply because they have an odd number of judges.

January 13th, 2016: Chris Briels Press Conference

Chris Briels [moved to Harney County in 1978](#) and became the Burns Fire Chief in 1984. After he retired from that position, he became the Harney County Fire Chief in 2010.

That said, on January 13th, Briels held a press conference at the refuge, with Ammon by his side. Briels explained one interesting event he was party to, where he claimed to have identified suspicious behavior by whom he speculated were undercover FBI agents. He also stated that he felt betrayed by the Harney County government, especially Judge Steve Grasty.

One of those “betrayals” was cited previously before, [but in Briels’ own words](#):

“We have been told that we couldn’t have a meeting at the Elk’s Club. We have been told we couldn’t have a meeting at the Senior Center. That nothing having to do with the occupation of the refuge or Ammon Bundy or anything else would be in any county buildings.”

With Briels' resignation, his only (professional) commitment, from that point onward was to the Harney County CoS.

February 4th, 2016: Chris Briels Interview with Truth Traveler Radio

The next event involving the Harney County CoS, was an interview Erin Dakins conducted with Briels. Herein, more information about their activities is revealed, specifically in regards to the January 2nd rally, their efforts in deescalating the situation, and more.

To begin with, Briels admitted that their intention during Operation Hammond Freedom was simply to provide information to the public about the CoS; it wasn't to "throw coins", or be disrespectful in any manner. In regards to the escalation after the rally, [Briels states](#):

"That's when Ammon went out and occupied the refuge. We didn't have any idea at all that he was headed for the refuge. I'm certain that we would not have condoned it. It caught us off guard and immediately it kind of discredited our group." [31:35]
[Emphasis added]

Additionally, we also find out that members of the CoS went out to the refuge on multiple occasions to meet with Ammon and the occupiers, in hopes of finding a solution.

Notice an odd use of rhetoric here. Briels and the other members of the CoS in their non-decisive letter to Ammon were fully aware that the actions taken at the refuge were bound to discredit them; yet, almost in the same breath, it seemed as if Briels defended Ammon, to some extent, perhaps out of some sense of comradeship in light of the December 15th meeting. In short, if Ammon hadn't taken over the refuge, almost no one outside of Oregon would know about the plight of the Hammonds.

That doesn't make a whole lot of sense, though. Due to the fact that the CoS concept is already a controversial idea to most, the goal should be the pursuance of *positive* press; you'd think that *not* siding with the occupiers, who received almost worldwide negative attention, as evidenced by the derision in the form of #YallQaeda and Bundyrotica would be the wisest decision, but that would be to imply that the Harney County CoS was decisive about anything in the first place. It doesn't seem like the best public relations move, at least in our not-so-humble opinion.

Furthermore, we hear about Judge Grasty's vindictiveness towards Briels and the CoS concept in general; in short, it would seem to indicate that the government is fearful of the resurgence of this populist concept:

"Judge Grasty called me and says, 'You need to distance yourself as far as you can from that Committee of Safety. That's not a legal group, you guys don't know what you're doing. You're being used like puppets,' and all kinds of stuff." [47:45] [Emphasis added]

To summate this interview, the second part essentially discussed Briels' interactions with Grasty and also his defense of Sheriff Ward (mainly, his lack of experience, considering he didn't know

how to resolve the situation in any realistically peaceful manner, hence the inevitable murder of LaVoy Finicum).

March 10th, 2016: Tim Smith on Trent Loos Podcast

For the most part, the information in this interview has already been covered by the aforementioned events. Although, Tim Smith does cover some future projects for the CoS, which include getting back to education; namely, blogging and finishing up their newspaper for release. Additionally, he mentioned a symposium in May in Ogden, Utah with people from various Western states to discuss various land management issues.

Naturally, that symposium has not occurred yet as this article goes to press; yet, it would behoove those within the alternative media to try and encourage filming of that symposium, and especially the Harney County CoS' role in it.

An Analysis on the Harney County CoS' Activities

In light of all this sensationalism going on in their own backyard, what was the Harney County CoS actually *doing*? More importantly, what did they *fail* to do? Admittedly, it's nearly always easier to Monday Night quarterback after the fact, but the truth of the matter is that neglecting to address these two uncomfortable questions invites future counterproductive activity.

The connection between C4CF and the Harney County CoS as not just fellow patriot groups, but more significantly, *directly involved* in the founding of the latter by the former, is cause for concern. Surely, Ammon and his group must have weighed the risk of their sit-in as a discrediting or distracting mechanism against the Committee of Safety, but for whatever reason, he chose to go squatting at the birdcage, thereby causing the now infamous [Statist Turf War of 2016](#). That whole fiasco did not bring people together or encourage solidarity; if anything, it created a firestorm of animosity, relentless conflict, and outright derision. This was just about the worst set of circumstances imaginable by which to introduce the Harney County CoS, which ended up being faded into the corner as a mere backdrop to the soap opera at the refuge.

Chances are, had C4CF not conducted their sit-in, the Harney County CoS would've likely had no problem holding their next meeting. The website domain would've been transferred without any controversy, and Judge Grasty couldn't interfere anywhere as easily. Also, the entire spectacle of the committeemen failing to reach a quorum on requesting C4CF to depart the refuge would just as simply been avoided, thereby dodging the imagery of the CoS acting indecisively.

On January 15th, Lavoy Finicum and a few C4CF members [removed the federal government's surveillance cameras](#). He didn't live much longer, for on January 26th, [Finicum died at the roadblock on US 395](#). Now, either **during** or **after** each of these two events, what was the Harney County Committee of Safety *doing*, exactly? They could've tracked down the manufacturer's address code (MAC) on at least one of those cameras, but they did not; they

could've brought in support for the physical defense of the Final Four *before* [they surrendered on February 11th](#), but they did not.

So, what *did* the Harney County CoS actually *do* when all hell was breaking loose right in their own backyard, following the death of Finicum? Well, Chris Briels and Duane Schrock signed off on [a document that was dated January 31st](#), which requested the provost marshal to assist them by stopping the FBI. This document was then used as the basis for Gary Darby's phone call to the provost marshal, which was [rightfully mocked](#) by a [satirist](#). Given the fact that not only is Darby a [fake judge](#), but also that [he outright lied about the committeemen being in hiding from the government](#), this does beg the question regarding the competency of (at least) Briels and Schrock in trusting individuals whom they clearly did not vet, as evidenced by Darby's [fake oath of "judgeship"](#) being dated a mere **six months** prior to his phone call to the provost marshal.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the actions of C4CF to conduct a sit-in protest at the wildlife refuge, *without* explicit authorization from the Harney County Committee of Safety, is a grave breach of the republican form of government they claim to value. C4CF *ignored* the authority of the Harney County Committee of Safety, which enticed the federal government to act (in its typically heavy-handed police state manner) by murdering Lavoy, injuring Ryan Bundy, and [arresting the surviving core membership of C4CF](#), thereby making them political prisoners. Gary Hunt should not have been alone in issuing a call-out as part of [Operation Mutual Defense](#), because that's what the Harney County CoS should've done themselves, given the plight of the Final Four between January 26th and February 11th.

There was no "[buffer zone](#)," as promised by [Brandon Curtiss](#), once the Final Four were left to hold the fort all by themselves. [Sean Anderson issued his own call-out](#) for everyone to get where he and the other three were at the refuge, because (according to him) there were no more laws anymore, and that if the FBI prevented reinforcements from arriving, they ought be killed. Again, what was the Harney County Committee of Safety doing amongst this chaos, besides filling out paperwork being promoted by a [fake judge](#)?

From what we can tell, the Harney County Committee of Safety was not prepared to handle the chaos from the wildlife refuge, which is understandable given that they formed only two weeks prior to the Operation Hammond Freedom rally. Unfortunately, their lack of purposeful behavior is not limited to the Statist Turf War – before, during, or after. For the most part, **they did nothing**, and what little they actually did do, was (at best) ineffectual; namely, holding a meeting where nothing decisive was done, and begging the provost marshal for assistance following the ambush on US 395. If the Harney County Committee of Safety was to be accused of being anything, it would be that they are **lame ducks**, plain and simple.

Lessons Learned

The most significant lesson to be learned, in our opinion, is the importance of vetting. Similar to the [kerfuffle that took place in Costilla County](#), the local Oregonians in Harney County took the advice of outsiders namely Ammon Bundy, Ryan Payne, and Jason Patrick to form a Committee

of Safety. Though, unlike the “Meet the Judge” event on October 16th, 2015, the outsiders didn’t bust up a pre-existing Patriot group; instead, they facilitated in forming one, which is noticeably more positive. However, it would appear to be the case that Ammon Bundy made the decision to run roughshod over the “authority” of the Harney County CoS, by conducting the sit-in at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge on January 2nd. His stubborn refusal to leave upon request by the Harney County CoS demonstrated that he did not care about the concept as part of the [American Tradition](#).

Secondly, as was mentioned previously, you can’t place the burden of handling a situation of this magnitude, such as the sit-in at the refuge, to a newly created Patriot group. They simply do not have the experience or wisdom to gauge the proper course of action to deescalate the crisis. Notice also that even afterwards, the Harney County CoS did not rally support for the membership of C4CF, especially the Final Four; for that was left to other Patriots, [such as those in Portland, Oregon](#). Finally, on this point, their handling of the press was sub-par at best; they would have been better off with a solid stance on the situation, rather than sending mixed signals in public forums and interviews, which gave the public a hard time understanding their position.

Thirdly, this would seem to reinforce the thesis that [leaderless resistance is preferable to formal organizations](#). There is a long, mostly undocumented history, of the negative ramifications that come from these “activist” organizations, such as loss of privacy, doxing, or losing your job. The more these facts become documented and made publicly available, the better informed people will be in making their decisions on whether or not to join these organizations.

Fourthly, this is the first time, to our knowledge, of a flesh-and-blood CoS having a run-in with the established government. As was previously mentioned, Judge Grasty denigrated the concept by saying that they “are not a legal group.” Though, arguably, there might be some merit to this, but not in the way that Grasty meant, for Gary Hunt wrote about this in his article, [Are Committees of Safety Illegal?](#)

Conclusion

The CoS concept is, in fact, an American Tradition and also one method of direct action. That said, their efficacy has been proven historically, but from this examination of the Harney County CoS, the concept may need to be drastically modernized. Please keep in mind, this is only one case study, so it would be unwise for us to come any firm conclusion regarding the efficacy of modern CoS. That being said, it does provide a real-world example for us to learn from, and quite possibly emulate.

Originally the CoS concept came from the American Patriots (constitutionalists). The fact that most of them, even to this day, still don’t know what a CoS is, but rather, are well-versed in [Patriot Mythology](#), is disconcerting and further proves that they don’t even understand the history of their “own people” who hold a similar ideology. The value of any CoS now would not just be as a lynchpin for [The Plan for Restoration of Constitutional Government](#), but more importantly, as a litmus test of sorts for whether Constitutionalists truly care about restoring their

American republics. Should the Constitutionals neglect to setup CoS from this point onward, they will have demonstrated by their very inaction that they quite simply don't have the courage of their convictions. If, in the fullness of time, a future history proves that to be the case, then they should set aside their advocacy for limited government and instead [help to build the agora](#).