

## The Militia Movement

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The Militia Movement (historical background 2001)

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The militia movement is a relatively new right-wing extremist movement consisting of armed paramilitary groups, both formal and informal, with an anti-government, conspiracy-oriented ideology. Militia groups began to form not long after the deadly standoff at Waco, Texas, in 1993; by the spring of 1995, they had spread to almost every state. Many members of militia groups have been arrested since then, usually on weapons, explosives and conspiracy charges. Although the militia movement has declined in strength from its peak in early 1996, it remains an active movement, especially in the Midwest, and continues to cause a number of problems for law enforcement and the communities in which militia groups are active.

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- **Origins:** Mid-to-late 1993
- **Prominent leaders:** John Trochmann (Montana), Ron Gaydosh (Michigan), Randy Miller (Texas), Charlie Puckett (Kentucky), Mark Koernke (Michigan), Carl Worden (Oregon), Gib Ingwer (Ohio)
- **Prominent groups:** Kentucky State Militia, Ohio Unorganized Militia Assistance and Advisory Committee, Southeastern Ohio Defense Force, Michigan Militia (two factions using the same name), Southern Indiana Regional Militia, Southern California High Desert Militia-and many others

- **Outreach:** Gun shows, shortwave radio, newsletters, the Internet
  - **Ideology:** Anti-government and conspiracy-oriented in nature; prominent focus on firearms
  - **Prominent militia arrests:** Multiple members of the following groups have been arrested and convicted, usually on weapons, explosives, or conspiracy charges: Oklahoma Constitutional Militia, Georgia Republic Militia, Arizona Viper Militia, Washington State Militia, West Virginia Mountaineer Militia, Twin Cities Free Militia, North American Militia, San Joaquin County Militia.
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### **The Militia Movement Today**

The militia movement is the youngest of the major right-wing anti-government movements in the United States (the sovereign citizen movement and the tax protest movement are the two others) yet it has seared itself into the American consciousness as virtually no other fringe movement has. The publicity given to militia groups in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, when the militia movement was erroneously linked to that tragedy, made them into a household name. Even comedian David Letterman frequently joked about the militia; in 1999, for instance, his list, "Top Ten Signs You're Watching a Bad Disney Movie," included "It's called 'The Little Right-Wing Militia That Could.'" Indeed, reporters, pundits and politicians alike have used the term so frequently that it is often tossed about carelessly as a synonym for virtually any right-wing extremist group.

Yet the militia movement is neither generic nor dismissible as a comic subject. If militia groups were not, in fact, involved with the Oklahoma City bombing, they have nevertheless embroiled themselves since 1994 in a variety of other bombing plots, conspiracies and serious violations of law. Their extreme anti-government ideology, along with their elaborate conspiracy theories and fascination with weaponry and paramilitary organization, lead many members of militia groups to act out in ways that justify the concerns expressed about them by public officials, law enforcement and the general public.

## Origins and Ideology: Seventeen Little Children

In a sense, the militia movement is both old and new. On the one hand, militia groups are the latest in a series of periodic flings the extreme right has had with paramilitary organizations. On the other hand, however, the militia movement formed under a unique set of circumstances that gave the movement a character, orientation and purpose distinct from its predecessors.

The extreme right in the United States has long had a fascination with paramilitary groups. Before World War II, right-wing and fascist groups such as the Silver Shirt Legion and the Christian Front marched across America. Later, the Cold War ushered in a new wave of paramilitary organizations like the California Rangers and the Minutemen. In the 1980s, survivalists and white supremacists formed a variety of paramilitary groups ranging from the Christian Patriot-Defense League to the Texas Emergency Reserve to the White Patriot Party.

The militia movement is heir to the right-wing paramilitary tradition, but it is heir, too, to another tradition, the anti-government ideology of groups like the Posse Comitatus. The Posse developed an elaborate conspiratorial view of American history and government, one that claimed the legitimate government had been subverted by conspirators and replaced with an illegitimate, tyrannical government. Posse members believed that the people had the power and responsibility to "take back" the government, through force of arms if necessary. As a result, many Posse figures engaged in paramilitary training. Most notable among these was William Potter Gale, a Christian Identity minister who was one of the founders of the Posse. In the 1980s, he appointed himself "chief of staff" to the "Unorganized Militia" of a group known as the Committee of the States. Gale's appropriation of the term "unorganized militia" is significant; it is a statutory term in federal and state law that refers to the nominal manpower pool created a century ago when federal law formally abandoned compulsory militia service. In using the term, Gale implied that his organization was not only legal but that it was, in fact, a constitutional arm of the government. This argument would be

amplified by later militia proponents (Gale himself died in the late 1980s) who claimed that militia groups were: (a) equivalent to the statutory militia; (b) not, however, controlled by the government; and (c) in fact, designed to oppose the government should it become tyrannical.

What turned the concept into reality in the early 1990s was a series of catalysts that angered people on the extreme right sufficiently to start a new movement. Although some militia movement pioneers had been active in other anti-government or hate groups earlier, most militia leaders were in fact new leaders, people who only recently had been so motivated that they were willing to take action. The events that angered them ranged from the election of Bill Clinton to the Rodney King riots to the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. More than any other issue, though, the deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and Waco, Texas, in 1993 ignited widespread passion. To most Americans, these events were tragedies, but to the extreme right, they were examples of a government willing to stop at nothing to stamp out people who refused to conform. Right-wing folk singers like Carl Klang memorialized the children who died at Waco with songs like "Seventeen Little Children." These events provided new life to a number of extremist movements, from Christian Identity activists to sovereign citizens, but they also propelled the creation of an entirely new movement consisting of armed militia groups formed to prevent another Ruby Ridge or Waco.

The fact that both the Ruby Ridge and Waco incidents involved illegal firearms added considerable fuel to the fire that formed the militia movement. Many militia members and leaders were radical gun-rights advocates, people who believed that, in fact, there could be no such things as illegal firearms and whose anti-government ire was formed in large part because of fear and suspicion of imminent gun confiscation. In the early 1990s, several prototype militias had emerged in Connecticut and Florida on the basis that members of the "militia" were exempt from federal gun laws. In 1992, Larry Pratt, leader of a radical gun-rights group and an advocate of the formation of militias, issued a statement in

the wake of the Rodney King riots urging the Los Angeles Police Department to "take advantage of what the Founding Fathers called the unorganized militia" in order to forestall further unrest. Many people initially joined the fledgling militia movement largely as a way to protect more aggressively their right to bear arms; even today, gun-related issues dominate many of the newsletters published by militia groups.

The final element forming the militia movement was a vast fascination with conspiracies. Conspiracies were easy to accept for people who believed that the federal government deliberately murdered people at Ruby Ridge and Waco and that door-to-door gun confiscation could begin any day. But the militia movement not only accepted the traditional conspiracy theories, it created a host of new ones; combined, they described a shadowy movement intent on creating a one-world socialist government no matter what the cost. This "New World Order," using the United Nations as its primary tool, had already taken over most of the planet. The United States was still a bastion of freedom, but its own government was collaborating with New World Order forces to strip Americans slowly of their freedoms in preparation for the final takeover. The government was erecting large numbers of concentration camps in which to place American dissenters; meanwhile, the number of United Nations troops secretly encamped in national parks grew by the month. Stickers on the backs of street signs would guide the New World Order to strategic points, while the authorities enlisted urban street gangs to help enforce gun confiscation. "The Federal government and the press is [sic] fighting a war against independent thinking Christian patriots," wrote Christian Identity adherent and militia supporter George Eaton in 1993. "The reason they have targeted patriots is simple; they will not conform or submit to the New World Order."

The combination of anger at the government, fear of gun confiscation and susceptibility to elaborate conspiracy theories is what formed the core of the militia movement's ideology. Although there were white supremacists in the movement, and although groups and individuals within the movement often made

common cause with or at least tolerated hate groups, the orientation of the militia movement remained primarily anti-government and conspiratorial. The militia movement appealed to many radical libertarians just as it appealed to traditional proponents of extreme right-wing causes. There was room even for African American militia leaders like J. J. Johnson of Ohio and Leroy Crenshaw of Massachusetts, whose shared anti-government views allowed them to break bread with racist and anti-Semitic adherents of Christian Identity.

### **History and Activities: Private Armies, Public Wars**

Not surprisingly, some of the earliest leaders of the militia movement had personal associations with the standoffs at Ruby Ridge and Waco. Linda Thompson, an Indianapolis lawyer who decided unilaterally to represent the Branch Davidians during their standoff, went on to appoint herself "acting adjutant general" of the Unorganized Militia of the United States in 1993. Until her call for an armed march on Washington, D.C., fizzled in 1994, she was quite influential, particularly through the videotapes she produced alleging government complicity at Waco. More lasting in influence was a friend of Randy Weaver, John Trochmann, who with his brother and nephew formed the Militia of Montana in January 1994.

Thompson and Trochmann, along with other militia pioneers and supporters, helped other groups to form. Active militia groups arose in Ohio, Idaho, California, Florida and many other states. None grew so fast as those in Michigan, loosely formed into an umbrella group known as the "Michigan Militia," headed by a pastor and gun shop owner, Norm Olson. Militia activists recruited at gun shows, held public meetings in libraries and schools, and broadcast on shortwave radio, where talk-show hosts such as Michigan militia leader Mark Koernke were particularly popular.

The militia movement grew rapidly throughout 1994, drawing little attention until that fall, when civil rights groups such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center released reports and articles on the new movement. By the following spring, the militia movement had finally begun to receive



scrutiny by law enforcement, the media and the public. Then the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, created an entirely new environment. Several suspected links between the bombing and militia groups in Michigan -- later proved to be unfounded -- unleashed a storm of publicity about the militia movement around the country. The militia for the first time faced the harsh glare of the spotlight. Overall, it did not fare particularly well. Some groups disbanded in the wake of the bombing, while other groups splintered. Norm Olson was kicked out by his own followers after he told reporters that the Japanese government had been involved in the Oklahoma City bombing.

However, the overall result of the bombing and its attendant publicity was actually a rise in the militia movement, because the media attention informed many potential supporters that such a movement actually existed. As a result, the militia movement grew in numbers and activity all through 1995 and into 1996. The militia even managed to "strike back" at times, as when, in the summer of 1995, several militia leaders drew publicity to the Good Ol' Boys Roundup, a yearly festivity in Tennessee for federal and local law enforcement officers at which various racist and off-color activities had taken place. Two federal agencies were forced to launch investigations of the event as a result, while militia leaders claimed that the media had been wrong all along -- it wasn't the militia movement that was racist but, rather, the federal government. (The investigations ended up revealing that the racist activity was committed by local Tennessee law enforcement officers.)

By early 1996, virtually every state had at least one group, and most states had several. The movement had attracted the attention not only of the media but also of law enforcement, however, which had begun to discover signs of significant criminal activity. As early as 1994, members of the Blue Ridge Hunt Club, a nascent Virginia militia group, had been arrested on a variety of weapons charges. The following year an Oklahoma Christian Identity minister and militia leader, Ray Lampley, was arrested along with several followers for conspiring to blow up targets ranging from government buildings to the offices of civil rights

organizations. But in 1996, a series of investigations resulted in a number of major militia-related arrests, generally on illegal weapons, explosives and conspiracy charges. In April 1996, several members of the Georgia Republic Militia were arrested, followed in July by a dozen members of the Arizona Viper Militia. Later that same month, members of the Washington State Militia found themselves in custody, while in October members of the West Virginia Mountaineer Militia were arrested on weapons charges and in connection with plans to blow up an F.B.I. fingerprinting facility. These arrests, not surprisingly, had a depressing effect on the movement.

Other events in 1996 and 1997 also served to weaken the movement. The most ambitious attempt to network militia groups together, the Tri-States Militia, collapsed in 1996 when it was revealed that its leader had been accepting money from the F.B.I. In March 1996, the F.B.I. surrounded the Montana Freeman, a sovereign citizen group, in remote eastern Montana, then arrested them following an 81-day standoff. Although a few militia members traveled to Montana to support (or aid) the Freeman, by and large the movement failed to respond, a fact that embittered some of the more radical members. (This scenario would be repeated the following spring when the militia failed to come to the rescue of the besieged Republic of Texas near Fort Davis, Texas.) Lack of response on the part of the militia movement caused a number of radical members to splinter away at the same time that some of the less hard-core members were leaving because of the increased arrests. By the fall of 1996, the movement had clearly faltered, and several prominent early leaders dropped out, including Idaho militia leader Samuel Sherwood; he disbanded his group in September, complaining that "the whole movement is being distorted on one side by the press and the media and taken over by the nuts and the crazies on the other."

Some militia activists attempted to buck the tide by establishing militia umbrella groups, most of which lasted only a few years. More radical members eschewed elaborate militia organizations and attempted to go it on their own. In Michigan, a group of militia members, allegedly kicked out of the Michigan Militia for being



too radical, formed a group first called the "Goof Troop," then, with more dignity, the North American Militia. Members planned to bomb a large number of targets in Michigan, including a federal building and an I.R.S. building; they constructed a variety of pipe bombs and even discussed assassinating various government officials. By 1998, five members of the group had been arrested and convicted on multiple charges; leaders Brad Metcalf and Randy Graham received 40- and 55-year sentences, respectively. In Missouri, a group of extremists from several different states, led by Bradley Glover of Kansas, met at a gathering of the "Third Continental Congress," but decided that this umbrella group was not radical enough for them. They struck out on their own, planning to attack United States military bases that they suspected were training New World Order troops. Members were so committed that they sold their businesses and homes in order to have plenty of money and be completely mobile. The first planned attack would occur against Fort Hood, Texas, on July 4, 1997 -- the day that the military base hosts an annual "Freedom Festival" attended by 50,000 men, women and children. Luckily, good police work on the part of the Missouri State Highway Patrol and the F.B.I. detected the plans and prevented a tragedy; Glover and a companion were arrested on July 4 at a campground near Fort Hood. Eventually seven people were arrested in connection with the group.

Among those unwilling to go as far as to launch attacks against the government, one of the most popular tactics was the "militia confrontation," whereby groups would identify some perceived "victim of government" and come to their rescue. "Victims" might range from barricaded criminals to people about to be evicted from their homes. Militia members saw in these interventions a chance to fulfill the roles they had defined for themselves after Ruby Ridge and Waco: intervening between a "tyrannical" government and the citizenry. Prominent militia confrontations included interventions in Coushatta, Louisiana, in 1996, involving a "sovereign citizen" physician wanted for nonpayment of child support; in Hamilton, Massachusetts, in 1998, in support of a husband and wife about to lose their mansion to the F.D.I.C. for nonpayment of a loan; and in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 2000, where militia members and others camped out at an extremist-connected

church, the Indianapolis Baptist Temple, whose property was in danger of being seized (until church leaders themselves, fearing violence, asked the militia to leave). And, in fact, though no confrontation has yet been violent, the threat of violence is implicit every time armed paramilitary groups confront the government -- it would take only an accident or error of judgment to cause a tragedy.

### **Beyond Y2K: Camouflage and Conspiracy**

The number of militia groups declined after 1996, as did militia activity. Patterns of criminal activity, however, remained more or less constant: militia members continued to get themselves in trouble with the law on a regular basis. As the millennium wound to a close, federal agents arrested Florida militia leader Donald Beauregard, charging that he and others had plotted to destroy a nuclear power plant and other utilities as well as law enforcement offices (Beauregard eventually struck a plea deal). And in one of the only Y2K-related criminal acts in the United States, two San Joaquin County Militia members were arrested in Sacramento, California, on weapons charges; they had allegedly plotted to blow up a propane storage facility. More recently, in December 2000, Western Illinois Militia leader Dan Shoemaker received a four-year sentence on counts of aggravated intimidation, threatening a public official and unlawful use of weapons, following an incident in which he threatened law enforcement officers who tried to talk him out of plans to march through two Illinois towns carrying a rifle. Shoemaker had earlier promised to shoot anybody who tried to stop him. Other militia groups have made veiled threats related to current and future firearms legislation.

Perhaps recognizing the decline that has taken place in the past several years, a number of militia leaders have taken steps to rejuvenate the movement. They have been aided by the fact that, though the number of militia groups has declined, they have not declined evenly. In many areas of the country, the militia movement remains as strong, or nearly as strong, as it was at its height. In particular, the Midwest remains a source of active and fairly large militia groups. In Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Kentucky, active militia regularly meet and train. Perhaps the most active militia group in the country recently is the

Kentucky State Militia, led by Charlie Puckett. The KSM has benefited from hosting twice-annual militia gatherings during the Knob Creek, Kentucky, machine-gun shoots. At the April 2001 event, the KSM even managed to attract two Kentucky state legislators to address the attendees, despite the fact that the KSM Web site had urged readers to "track down" a fellow legislator and "bring plenty of ammo." In a letter to followers after the weekend event, Puckett told supporters that the recent meeting "was a fantastic success, and in many ways marked a critical turning point for the efforts of the militia movement in resecuring for ourselves and our descendants the ideals of liberty...bequeathed to us as our birthright."

The Kentucky State Militia has also held trainings out of state in an effort to help rejuvenate the movement. In states like Pennsylvania and Texas, militia leaders have held gatherings designed to reorganize and re-energize the movement in those regions as well. Whether or not such efforts will be successful is uncertain - it is possible that only another high-profile incident like Ruby Ridge or Waco could raise the militia movement to its earlier height--but it appears to be in no danger of disappearing. New militia groups continue to form, and in some states, like Georgia and West Virginia, where groups virtually disappeared following the major arrests in 1996, the movement has become active again. As long as it is active in any substantial way, criminal activity seems likely to continue.