

Three Percenters



Key Points

- Three Percenters are part of the militia movement, which supports the idea of a small number of dedicated “patriots” protecting Americans from government tyranny, just as the patriots of the American Revolution protected early Americans from British tyranny.
- The Three Percenter concept, created in 2008, is based on an inaccurate historical claim that only three percent of Americans fought in the Revolutionary War against the British.
- Three Percenters may join or form traditional militia groups but often form non-paramilitary groups or online networks. Many are not associated with any particular groups.

- The Three Percenter concept both contributed to and benefited from the resurgence of the militia movement that began in 2008.
- Because many adherents to the militia movement strongly support President Trump, in recent years, Three Percenters have not been as active in opposing the federal government, directing their ire at other perceived foes, including leftists/antifa, Muslims and immigrants.
- Three Percenters have been active in 2019-2020 in reaction to a range of issues, including attempts to pass state level gun control measures, state-imposed restrictions and lockdowns to prevent spread of the coronavirus, and the protests that have taken place around the country over the May 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.
- Three Percenters have a track record of criminal activity ranging from weapons violations to terrorist plots and attacks.

Origins

Three Percenters (also known as 3%ers, III%ers, and Threepers) are anti-government extremists who are part of the militia movement. They compare their hostility to the federal government with the opposition of American patriots to the British during the American Revolution. The term itself is a reference to a false belief that the number of Americans who fought against the British during the Revolutionary War amounted to only three percent of the population at the time (historians say [that percentage was actually far higher](#)).

Three Percenters believe that, just as a small revolutionary vanguard overthrew the tyrannical British rule in America, a dedicated group of modern patriots could rid the United States of today's alleged tyranny.

Though the media often refer to Three Percenters as a movement or a group, they are neither. Rather, they constitute a major part of the broader anti-government militia movement, whose ideology they share. Some Three Percenters form

militia groups, while others form non-paramilitary groups or create online networks; even more are active as individual or unaffiliated Three Percenters.

The Three Percenter concept may be best understood as a way to simplify, popularize and spread the ideology and beliefs of the militia movement. The militia movement is a right-wing anti-government extremist movement that arose in 1993-94. Its core belief centered on the idea that the federal government is collaborating with a shadowy globalist and socialist conspiracy (often referred to as the “New World Order”) in order to strip Americans of their rights and freedoms, starting with their right to bear arms, so that Americans can be made slaves to the New World Order and its agenda. Militia activists view the federal government as tyrannical and illegitimate; some seek to defend Americans from its perceived ravages, while others occasionally plot to attack the government.

The Three Percenter concept originated in 2008 on a blog, the Sipse Street Irregulars, run by Mike Vanderboegh, an Alabama-based anti-government extremist who had been involved in the militia movement for many years. In the mid-1990s, Vanderboegh claimed to be commander of an Alabama militia group, the First Alabama Cavalry Regiment, though he appeared to be its sole member. After the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, Vanderboegh became better known for popularizing anti-government conspiracy theories about the bombing, particularly through an on-line newsletter known as the John Doe Times. The title is a reference to “John Doe #2,” the identifier given to a notional bombing co-conspirator by law enforcement in the early days of the investigation. The identity of John Doe #2—who seems to have never existed—became a focus of conspiracy theorists such as Vanderboegh.

In the 2000s, as the militia movement declined from its mid-1990s peak, Vanderboegh briefly became involved with the Minutemen, an anti-immigrant border vigilante group. Then, in 2008, he started the Sipse Street Irregulars blog designed in part to publicize a novel Vanderboegh decided to write—and for which he created the concept of the Three Percenters.

Vanderboegh [claimed](#) that the “Three Percenters” also stood for an alleged three percent of gun owners who “will not disarm, will not compromise and will no longer back up at the passage of the next gun control act.” He asserted that Three Percenters were committed to the “restoration of the Founders’ Republic” and were willing to fight and to kill “in the defense of ourselves and the Constitution.”

As other anti-government extremists read Vanderboegh’s popular blog entries, they became exposed to the Three Percenter concept and many began to declare that they, too, were Three Percenters. Vanderboegh died in 2016, but the Three Percenter concept survived him.

Three Percenters and the Militia Resurgence

Vanderboegh’s creation of the Three Percenter concept occurred at a propitious time for the militia movement, which began to see a significant increase in numbers in 2008-09, spurred by anger and anxiety over the recession and mortgage crisis as well as by the election of Barack Obama as president. These developments gave right-wing anti-government activists in both mainstream America and on its far right fringes a new focus for their anger.

In mainstream circles, the anxiety and anger manifested itself primarily in the creation of the Tea Party movement. On the far right, it took the form of a [significant resurgence of anti-government extremist movements](#) such as the militia movement and its sister cause, the sovereign citizen movement. In 2007, there were around 50 active militia groups in the United States—by late 2009, there were upwards of 200. The increasing power and reach of social media sites—first Myspace, then soon Facebook and YouTube—allowed the militia movement to spread its ideas to thousands of new adherents, including many young people.



The Three Percenter concept both benefited from and contributed to the militia movement's comeback. Less complicated than New World Order conspiracy theories, the Three Percenter concept could be communicated quickly from person to person, and easily grasped. For many, it served as their entrée to the world of anti-government extremism.

Moreover, the only requirement to become a Three Percenter was to consider oneself a Three Percenter. In its early years, the militia movement heavily focused on paramilitary activities, which left much less of a role to play for people who found it physically, geographically or otherwise difficult or uninviting to be involved in paramilitary trainings or exercises. The Three Percenter concept, however, required no paramilitary involvements. Three Percenters could, and did, form paramilitary militia groups if they so chose, but could also participate in other ways. This helped increase the reach of the militia movement.

Finally, Three Percenters also brought to the militia movement its first important symbol: the Three Percenter logo. Three Percenters use a Roman numeral III as their logo, often surrounded by a field of thirteen stars. The logo is immediately identifiable and simple to replicate, including on social media, where Three Percenter adherents often add a “III” to their names on social media profiles, such as “James Doe III” or “Roberta Smith III.”

The Three Percenter logo was quickly commodified in the form of clothing, patches, stickers, t-shirts and even gun accessories. Soon one could purchase literally hundreds of products featuring the Three Percenter logo, sold on a myriad of small websites as well as through major online retailers like Amazon.

As the Three Percenter idea spread, individual Three Percenters started to come together, especially online. Many created Facebook pages or Facebook groups; by the mid-2010s, some of the latter had thousands and even tens of thousands of members. The largest groups were umbrella groups that had chapters in many states, with names such as The 3%ers, American Patriot The III%, Continental Tactical Response Units, III% Security Force, and III% United Patriots, among others. Some collapsed after a few years while a few have exhibited more stability.

Many local or regional Three Percenters chose to create groups that operated in the real world as well as online, including organizations such as 3% of Idaho, Washington State Three Percenters, and Georgia Security Force III%. Some of these were basically traditional militia groups using the Three Percenter label, while others did not get involved in paramilitary activities. All, however, had the same ideological orientation of the militia movement.

Within only a handful of years, the Three Percenter concept, spreading across the Internet, helped rejuvenate the militia movement and led to the creation of hundreds of real world and online Three Percenter groups and networks.

Three Percenters During the Trump Administration

In keeping with militia movement ideology, Three Percenters have typically focused most of their anger on the federal government. Their anti-government ire usually centers on gun control or on perceived “victims of government” militia and Three Percenters seek to protect. [Eric Parker](#), for example, a Three Percenter leader in Idaho, traveled to Nevada in 2014 to participate in an armed standoff between the federal government and Cliven Bundy, a rancher who refused to pay federal grazing fees. There Parker became notorious for being [photographed aiming a rifle](#) at federal agents in the distance. In 2015, Parker was involved in additional armed encounters with federal authorities in Oregon and Montana over disputes involving mining companies. In early 2016, Parker [participated in protests](#) in Oregon in support of two ranchers who had been ordered back to prison by the federal government (however, he declined to take part in the subsequent armed takeover of the Malheur Federal Wildlife Refuge led by sons of Cliven Bundy and other extremists). Many other Three Percenters engaged in similar anti-government rhetoric or actions in the early-to-mid 2010s.

However, the election of Donald Trump caused a shift in Three Percenter activity. In 2015-2016, members of the militia movement strongly supported Trump’s candidacy—the first major party nominee the movement had ever supported. When he won, people in the movement were elated. With Trump as president, however, it became more difficult for Trump-supporting militia and Three Percenters to sustain their hostility to the federal government.

In the past several years, the number of organized Three Percenter groups—both online and in the real world—has decreased, in part due to the collapse of several previously prominent Three Percenter umbrella groups with chapters in many states. It is hard to know how much of this may be attributed to a lack of momentum during the Trump administration, but it is reasonable to conclude that it may have been a contributing factor.



Although there are still Three Percenters who exhibit hostility towards the federal government, especially on the issue of gun control, many Three Percenters and militia members have shifted much of their focus from their traditional federal enemy to other perceived foes.

Opposing the Left

Since President Trump's election, some militia and Three Percenters have focused on opposing left-wing activists and protesters, including anti-racist antifa activists. In August 2017, for example, members of the Three Percent United Patriots [showed up at two left-leaning events](#) in Kansas City, Missouri, ostensibly to "monitor" the proceedings. In late 2019, when left-wing protesters had a rally in Louisville, Kentucky to demand that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

support the impeachment of Donald Trump, local [Three Percenters showed up](#) as counter-protesters.

Three Percenters have also appeared at Trump and pro-Trump rallies around the country to provide armed “security” against anti-Trump protesters. In a typical instance, members of the Three Percent United Patriots [showed up with assault-style weapons](#) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to “guard” an entrance to a March 2017 pro-Trump rally.

Three Percenters have offered protection for other right-wing causes or individuals, as well. In October 2018, at least some Idaho Three Percenters [provided security for Janice McGeach](#), at the time a candidate for lieutenant governor (McGeach has had [other ties](#) to Three Percenters as well, including [speaking at a Three Percenter event](#) while lieutenant governor). In Oregon in June 2019, Three Percenters [offered to “protect” Republican state legislators](#) who had fled the state capitol in an attempt to thwart the passage of a climate change bill.

In 2017, Three Percenters even appeared at a few white supremacist events, not out of support for the white supremacists, but in anticipation of left-wing protesters showing up. There were even Three Percenters among the militia contingent in Charlottesville during the violent white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in August 2017, though they [subsequently tried to distance themselves](#) from the day’s events. Other Three Percenter groups [condemned their appearance](#). One [former member of a Three Percenter militia group](#), Alex Ramos, actually participated with several white supremacists in an assault on an African-American man in a parking garage at Charlottesville, subsequently receiving a six-year prison sentence for his role in the attack

After Charlottesville, Three Percenters largely abandoned the idea of showing up at white supremacist events, though they have cooperated with other extremist groups, such as Patriot Prayer and the [Proud Boys](#), seeking to confront or clash with left-wing activists.

Targeting Muslims and Immigrants

Some Three Percenters have focused attention on other perceived enemies, including Muslims and immigrants. Though the militia movement is not a white supremacist movement, since the early 2000s it has displayed considerable hostility (and occasional violence) towards these two communities. This hostility was exacerbated in 2015 following shooting attacks in Tennessee and California by domestic Islamist extremists, resulting in [a wave of Three Percenter anti-Muslim activities](#).

One outspoken anti-Muslim Three Percenter, Chris Hill, the leader of the Georgia-headquartered III% Security Force, [claimed recently](#) that Muslims “want to fucking destroy us and our way of life.” Hill has often spewed anti-Muslim rhetoric and has also led [armed anti-Muslim protests](#) in Georgia. Other Three Percenters have participated in protests against mosques and [marched against sharia law conspiracy theories](#). Canadian Three Percenters are [also anti-Muslim](#).

Some Three Percenters, meanwhile, have turned their attention to the border, cooperating with anti-immigrant extremists in conducting vigilante border patrols along the U.S.-Mexico border. The militia movement has long cooperated (and overlapped with) the anti-immigrant border vigilante movement. One Three Percenter and militia member, [Kevin Massey](#), conducted frequent patrols along the border with Mexico in South Texas in the mid-2010s, claiming to have detained immigrants at gunpoint on occasion, until he was arrested on weapons charges. After spending time in federal prison, Massey was released but became a fugitive in 2019 after violating the terms of his probation supervision. He promised violence against the federal government and vowed that he would never allow himself to be captured. He was true to his word, [killing himself in January 2020](#) while still on the run.

Gun Control, COVID-19, and George Floyd

The recent history of the militia/Three Percenter movement has been dominated by its reaction to several major controversies and crises, including attempts by state governments to enact gun control legislation, measures taken by state governments to deal with the coronavirus, and the nationwide protests by Americans angry over the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020.

In 2019-2020, many Three Percenters and militia members substituted antagonism towards state governments for hostility towards the federal government as governors and legislators in many states proposed, strengthened or passed so-called "red flag" laws (efforts to keep weapons out of the hands of potentially high-risk people) and discussed other gun control measures.

Red Flag laws (their formal names vary from state to state) typically allow a judge to order the temporary confiscation of firearms from individuals deemed to be a danger to themselves or others. The premise behind such laws is to protect the community from possible violence while providing an opportunity to evaluate, treat or otherwise help the individual in question. High-profile shootings in 2018 and 2019, such as [the El Paso shooting by white supremacist Patrick Crusius](#), prompted revived interest in such laws.

Though considered only mild gun control measures by most, Red Flag laws prompted a hostile backlash from people on the right, especially from gun rights activists and the militia movement--as did other state-level gun control measures advocated or enacted during the same period. People in some states proposed so-called "gun sanctuaries," in which firearms laws would not be enforced, while others called for the formation of "county militias." Many organized protests at state capitols. Three Percenters were involved with all of these activities.

In Washington State, for example, Matt Marshall and his Washington Three Percent [held a so-called "United Against Hate" rally](#) in January 2020, at which a number of speakers railed against gun control measures, such as a 2018 state

initiative that raised the minimum age for purchasing a semi-automatic rifle from 18 to 21. Marshall led another rally in February opposing the initiative as well as other gun control measures then under consideration. One speaker at the event [urged people to train](#), telling the crowd, “If we have to fight, you guys need to actually be ready to fight.”

In Virginia, militia, Three Percenters and gun rights activists flocked to a [large pro-gun rally in Richmond](#) on January 20, 2020, to protest the state’s proposed red flag law. Three Percenters similarly took part in numerous other protests and rallies around the country in late 2019 and early 2020.

By February 2020, however, the emerging crisis over COVID-19 had captured the attention of Three Percenters, as well as other far right extremists and conspiracy theorists. For many years, the militia movement has been paranoid about epidemics and pandemics, believing that the federal government might use a real or fabricated pandemic as an excuse to suspend the Constitution and declare martial law. Each major outbreak of a dangerous disease, from H1N1 to Ebola, has caused suspicious reactions among anti-government extremists. The coronavirus caused an even greater reaction because its effects, and the impact of measures implemented to combat the spread of the disease, were so significant and widespread.

Most Americans willingly complied with lockdowns and other measures designed to deal with the coronavirus. As lockdown measures started, the leader of one active Three Percenter group, The Real 3%ers of Idaho, initially [urged people to take precautions](#) and follow stay-at-home orders. However, most Three Percenters reacted very negatively to pandemic response measures, urging defiance and opposition to stay-at-home orders, business closings, and other directives—and even the Real 3%ers of Idaho eventually changed their tune and switched their position to one of opposition.

Anti-government extremists opposed lockdown measures with essentially a three-part argument: 1) the coronavirus was not actually very dangerous, which meant that 2) measures to combat it were significantly more severe than warranted, and 3) this is because there were ulterior motives behind the measures. Many extremists [referred to the measures as “medical martial law.”](#) A number of Three Percenter and militia activists [even spoke, in general terms, about possible violence.](#)

In April and May 2020, Three Percenters became a frequent armed presence at public protests against lockdown measures and restrictions, [organizing some protests while taking part in many others.](#) Washington State Three Percenters, for example, organized protests in [Seattle](#) and [Olympia](#). The fact that, like recent gun control measures, the pandemic lockdowns were largely state measures rather than federal initiatives, made it easier for Three Percenters to oppose them, because they could do so without opposing President Trump.

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers killed an African-American man, George Floyd, while he was immobilized and in their custody, allegedly for passing a counterfeit \$20 bill, setting off a weeks-long series of protests in cities and towns across the United States by Black Lives Matter activists and their many allies. Although most protests were peaceful and many leaders of Black Lives Matter protests condemned violence and looting, vandalism or violence erupted at a number of protests, with rioting and looting, particularly in the first few days.

Anti-government extremists reacted in a variety of different ways to the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed. Activists from the [nascent Boogaloo movement](#), for example, which is very anti-government and anti-police, joined the protests in a number of cities, making common cause with protesters angry at the police.

Militia and Three Percenter activists, however, tended to have a very different reaction, even though they are also anti-government and anti-law enforcement,

and even though there is overlap between them and boogalooers. Though many in the militia movement sympathized to some degree with George Floyd himself, far fewer endorsed the protests, especially after violence and looting occurred at some. Militia activists and Three Percenters [tended to view the protests](#) through a conspiratorial lens, seeing them as organized by militants and leftists (whom some alleged may be funded by financier and philanthropist [George Soros](#)) to damage or take down the Trump administration.

From the very beginning, many Three Percenters were hostile to the protests and advocated showing up to counter them or to protect businesses or monuments. On May 30, for example, Three Percenters [showed up to “protect” the courthouse](#) in Wake County, North Carolina.

As violent incidents decreased, more Three Percenters showed up to counter George Floyd-related protests and events. Some claimed to be [protecting businesses](#), some seemed to want to stare down Black Lives Matter protesters, while still others, like Robert Viergutz, head of a Montana Three Percenter group, [asserted that they wanted to “keep the peace.”](#) In some places, Three Percenters and militia turned up because they believed false rumors that busloads of antifa would [be descending on their city](#).

Criminal Activity

The militia movement, of which Three Percenters are a part, has a long history of criminal activity and violence dating back to 1994. Since 2008, militia movement adherents who have also explicitly identified themselves as Three Percenter, or who have been part of Three Percenter groups or networks, have engaged in significant criminal activity, including terrorist plots and acts.

Selected Three Percenter-related criminal incidents in recent years include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Cleveland, Ohio, May 2020:** FBI agents arrested Christian Stanley Ferguson on charges related to [an alleged plot](#) to ambush police officers, kidnap or kill them and take their weapons, and spark a militia uprising. As part of these plans, Ferguson reportedly tried to start his own militia group, which he dubbed the 75th Spartans, and designed a logo for the group featuring a Spartan helmet, two guns, and the Three Percenter logo.
- **Clarence, Illinois, July 2018:** Michael Hari and several other members of a small militia group [dubbed](#) the "White Rabbit Three Percent Illinois Patriot Freedom Fighters Militia" were arrested on a variety of charges in connection to the bombing of a mosque in Minnesota in August 2017, and the failed bombing of an abortion clinic in Illinois in November 2017. Most of those arrested have pleaded guilty; as of this writing, Hari still awaits trial, which [has been postponed](#) due to the coronavirus.



- **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 2017:** Jerry Drake Varnell, a Three Percenter from Sayre, Oklahoma, was arrested for [trying to detonate a truck bomb](#) in front of a bank in downtown Oklahoma City as part of a general plan to form militia groups and launch attacks against the government. Luckily, the explosives were fake, and supplied by an undercover officer. Varnell was convicted on multiple charges and sentenced in 2020 to 25 years in prison.

- **Garden City, Kansas, October 2016:** Three members of a tiny Kansas militia group dubbed The Crusaders, an offshoot of the Kansas III% Security Force militia, were [arrested in connection with a plot](#) to use truck bombs to destroy an apartment complex housing Muslim immigrants from Somalia. In January 2019, following their conviction, the men [received sentences](#) ranging from 25 to 30 years in prison.
- **Middlesex Township, Pennsylvania, July 2016:** Local police [arrested Three Percenter Michael Filaroski](#) for illegal possession of a weapon and for threatening to shoot them while they were trying to arrest his son on drug charges. At his trial, the jury deadlocked on the threat charges but convicted him on the weapons charge; he received a two to four year sentence.
- **Western Oklahoma, December 2015:** Three Percenter Jeremy Doss Hardy went on a [shooting spree](#) along I-40 in western Oklahoma, firing at multiple drivers and killing two. Hardy [pleaded guilty](#) in 2018 to avoid the death penalty and received a life sentence.