

The Militia Movement (2020)



Ohio Valley Minutemen/PA Light Foot Militia webpage

Key Points

- The militia movement is a right-wing anti-government extremist movement that formed in 1993-1994, primarily in reaction to federal gun control measures and to deadly standoffs between civilians and federal agents. Much of the movement focuses on paramilitary activities.
- Militia movement adherents have traditionally believed that the federal government is collaborating with a shadowy conspiracy (the “New World Order”) to strip Americans of their rights, starting with their right to keep and bear arms. Once rendered defenseless, Americans would be absorbed into the tyrannical New World Order’s one-world government.

- The movement grew rapidly in the 1990s but suffered a serious decline in the early 2000s. However, beginning in 2008 the militia movement enjoyed a major resurgence that attracted thousands of new, often young, recruits. It has been quite active in the years since.
- The 2016 election of Donald Trump changed the emphasis of the militia movement, which strongly supported Trump's candidacy. After Trump's election, the movement was less interested in opposing the federal government and spent much of its energy looking for other perceived enemies, such as [antifa](#). In 2020, the movement focused on opposition to state-level gun control measures, state-level pandemic-related restrictions and Black Lives Matter protests.
- The militia movement has a long history of serious criminal activity, including murders, armed standoffs, terroristic threats against public officials, illegal weapons or explosives and terrorist plots or acts.

Origins

The militia movement in the United States is a right-wing extremist movement with an anti-government ideology and a strong emphasis on paramilitary activity. It emerged in 1993-1994, quickly engaging in criminal activity—often centered around illegal weapons and explosives—and violence, including some murders and numerous terrorist plots. After a significant slump in the early 2000s, the militia movement experienced a second major growth spurt starting in 2008 that has resulted in continuous activity since then, including more crime and violence.

The [origins of the militia movement](#) are rooted in longstanding traditions within the American far right as well as the reactions of anti-government extremists to certain specific events and controversies of the 1990s.

The militia movement is heir to a long tradition of far-right paramilitary activity, including pre-World War II extreme right-wing groups such as the Silver Shirt Legion and the Christian Front in 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. The militia movement was somewhat different, though, in that it was not an isolated paramilitary group but an entire movement consisting largely of paramilitary groups—thus representing something new for the American extreme right in the breadth and depth of its paramilitary emphasis.

The militia movement also inherited substantial portions of the anti-government ideology of its older sister movements, the [tax protest movement](#) (which started in the 1960s) and the [sovereign citizen movement](#) (originating in the 1970s).

Collectively, the three movements are often referred to as the “Patriot” movement. All three movements are anti-government in the sense that they believe that part, or all, of the government has been subverted by conspirators and replaced with an illegitimate government—leading many in these movements to seek to protect or “restore” the legitimate government.

Finally, the militia movement owes a debt to earlier Cold War-era conspiracy theories promoted by anti-communist extremists ranging from the John Birch Society to Cleon Skousen. Anti-communist conspiracy theorists postulated a global communist conspiracy that had deeply infiltrated American society and government—reaching even into the White House. Such sentiments became an article of faith for many in the far right. However, the late 1980s saw the collapse of the communist bloc, soon followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. In the wake of such world-changing events, the idea of a global communist conspiracy was quickly replaced by a similar but much more nebulous conspiracy theory centered on the “New World Order,” an ostensible conspiracy to establish a tyrannical, globalist and socialist one-world government. The militia movement emerged just as New World Order conspiracy theories were solidifying and imbibed them wholesale.

Specific events also played a key role in the formation of the militia movement. These included events such as the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the 1992 election of President Bill Clinton, but especially important were two pieces of gun control legislation and two deadly standoffs with law enforcement. One of the gun control measures was the so-called Brady Law (formally known as the Brady Handgun Violence Prevent Act), which passed in 1993. Among other things, it required people wishing to purchase handguns to pass a background check. The other was the 1994 Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act, which banned many military-style assault weapons and large-capacity magazines (the act expired in 2004 and was not renewed). These acts greatly angered anti-government extremists, who argued that they were the first steps towards mass gun confiscation by the government.

Also [fanning fury on the right](#) were the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff in Idaho, involving a white supremacist, Randy Weaver, who refused to appear in federal court to face a weapons charge, and the 1993 Waco standoff, which started after an abortive and deadly attempt by ATF agents to arrest members of the Branch Davidian religious sect on weapons charges. Federal authorities were widely criticized for handling both standoffs poorly, with their actions leading or helping to lead to the death of civilians, including children. To people on the extreme right, the standoffs were evidence that the government was willing to murder anybody who dared to stand in its way. Several pioneers of the militia movement, such as John Trochmann and Linda Thompson, had personal connections to one or the other of the standoffs.

By the end of 1993, numerous people on the far right were urging the formation of militia groups in order to prevent another Ruby Ridge or Waco. Proponents often specifically called such groups "militias" in order to assert (falsely) that they were legitimate groups derived from the so-called "Unorganized Militia" referenced in federal and state laws. The Militia of Montana and the Michigan Militia were among the first of scores of paramilitary groups that sprang up in 1994 calling

themselves by names such as unorganized militias, citizens' militias and constitutional militias.

Militia movement propaganda spread through a wide array of right-wing countercultural media, including shortwave radio programs, VHS tapes, presentations at survivalist expos and gun shows, fax chains, right-wing newsletters and pamphlets, and, by 1995, the Internet (through Usenet and a very young World Wide Web). In a remarkably short period of time, several hundred militia groups had emerged. This growth brought many newly-radicalized individuals—people with no prior association to right-wing extremism—into the militia movement.

In April 1995, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols [bombed the Murrah Federal Building](#) in Oklahoma City, an event that created tremendous negative attention for the militia movement due to the media's linkage of the bombers to the militia movement (in actuality, though McVeigh and Nichols shared the anti-government ideology of the militia movement, they had never joined any militia groups). Although negative publicity caused some people to drop out of the militia movement following the bombing, the news also allowed many other people who were previously unaware of the movement's existence to learn about—and join—militia groups.

The result was that the militia movement remained large and strong throughout the 1990s. During this period the movement developed its well-deserved reputation for criminal activity. In 1996 alone, major arrests involving multiple members of militia groups occurred in West Virginia, Georgia, Arizona, and Washington.

Ideology of the Militia Movement

The militia movement is an anti-government extremist movement with an ideology that strongly focuses on conspiracy theories and firearms. It portrays its

members as analogous to the American patriots who took up arms in 1775 to protect their fellow Americans from tyrannical British rule.

The core belief that has dominated the militia movement through most of its history has been the idea that most of the world has fallen under the sway of a conspiracy seeking to create a globalist, socialist one-world government—the so-called “New World Order.” Believers hold that the United States is one of the last bastions of freedom in the world, but its own government is actually secretly collaborating with the New World Order to slowly strip Americans of their rights and freedoms—starting with their right to bear arms, a right that ostensibly protects all other rights.

Once the federal government and the New World Order render Americans defenseless, militia advocates argue, Americans will be absorbed as slaves into the New World Order. The only thing that can prevent such enslavement is if patriotic Americans—like the Minutemen of the American Revolution—take up arms to prevent such a thing from happening. In another analogy often used by adherents, militia groups are like sheepdogs, protecting the flock (Americans) from wolves (such as the federal government and the New World Order).

This core conspiracy theory is typically accompanied by many subsidiary ones, of which three are perhaps most important and enduring:

- **Martial Law.** In order to enslave Americans, militia propagandists argue, the conspirators will likely need to suspend the Constitution and declare martial law. In order to get the American people to accept such a drastic step, the government will likely try to take advantage of a real or manufactured terrorist attack or pandemic—a crisis so great that Americans would be fearful enough to surrender liberty in exchange for security. One consequence of the popularity of this conspiracy theory is the militia movement has tended to react very strongly against measures to combat outbreaks of contagious diseases, including the H1N1 virus, the Ebola virus, and, most recently, the coronavirus.

- **Concentration Camps.** Another strongly held belief within the militia movement is that the federal government has constructed literally hundreds of concentration camps (up to 800 of them in one version of this theory) run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in order to house dissidents and political prisoners. These FEMA camps are fully manned and just waiting for prisoners to arrive, argue proponents of this theory—something they have continued to argue year after year for more than a quarter century. “The camps all have railroad facilities as well as roads leading to and from the detention facilities,” claimed one conspiracy website in July 2020. “Many also have an airport nearby. The majority of the camps can house a population of 20,000 prisoners.”
- **Mass Gun Confiscation.** To prevent armed resistance to the New World Order, claim militia propagandists, the government will have to engage in mass (“door to door”) confiscation of firearms, possibly using the police or military (or even foreign police or military) to do so.

For most of its history, most of the militia movement’s anti-government ire has been directed against the federal government—as have been many of its terrorist plots. The movement also opposes state or local government from time to time.

This is usually the case when gun control measures are being considered, but many militia groups have been antagonistic towards certain government agencies as well, including child protective services and departments of natural resources.

The militia movement doesn’t focus its antipathy exclusively on the government, however. In the early 2000s, the militia movement adopted many of the ideas of anti-immigrant extremists, giving the movement a nativist cast as well as an anti-government one. By the 2010s at the latest, the militia movement also acquired a venomous hostility towards Muslims—one that has resulted in several militia-related terror plots being directed against Muslim targets.

More recently, the militia movement has evinced hostility towards several left-wing movements, particularly [antifa](#) and Black Lives Matter (BLM), often arguing

that both are under the direct or indirect control of [George Soros](#), the liberal philanthropist who has become a favorite bogeyman for much of the American far right. While sometimes sympathizing with individual Black Americans who have been victims of police violence, militia movement activists today are largely convinced that the Black Lives Movement is controlled by Marxists with a sinister agenda.

One charge that has often been leveled against the militia movement for many years is the accusation that the movement is white supremacist in nature. While this is not an accurate characterization of the movement, there has been a limited amount of overlap between the militia movement and the white supremacist movement.

The militia movement, as has been noted, is part of the larger anti-government “Patriot” movement. In the 1970s and 80s, there was considerable overlap between the “Patriot” movement and the white supremacist movement—almost all of it through one particular segment of the white supremacist movement, the racist and anti-Semitic religious sect [Christian Identity](#), which is also quite anti-government in nature. Many pioneers of the sovereign citizen movement, for example, were Christian Identity adherents.

When the militia movement first formed, a number of Christian Identity adherents were attracted to it. John and David Trochmann, the founders of one of the first militia groups, the Militia of Montana, were Christian Identity adherents. In the 1990s, a couple of small militia groups formed, such as the 91st Brigade and the Oklahoma Constitutional Militia, that were composed largely of Christian Identity adherents. In the summer of 1995, several members of the latter were arrested for plotting to set off a series of bombs against government and civil rights targets. In the late 1990s, the Michigan Militia split into two factions, one of which accused the other of permitting Christian Identity adherents in its ranks.

However, even in the 1990s, Christian Identity adherents were never more than a small minority within the militia movement—and a minority that decreased over time, as well. In the 2000s, the Christian Identity movement itself began to shrink as many longtime leaders died; it has to date not recovered. Moreover, the surge of the militia movement that started in 2008 brought in another large mass of newly radicalized adherents, decreasing the percentage of militia adherents who were also Christian Identity to a negligible amount.

The militia movement has also always had a small number of people of color as members, and occasionally as leaders. One of the most prominent leaders of the early militia movement, for example, was J. J. Johnson, the Black leader of the Ohio Unorganized Militia.

These facts do not absolve the militia movement of racism or prejudice—especially anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim bigotry—but it does mean that the militia movement is quite distinct from white supremacist movements such as neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan groups, or the alt right.

The anti-government ideology of the militia movement affects which other extreme right movement and groups to which it has the closest ties. The movements closest to the militia movement are the sovereign citizen and tax protest movements, with considerable overlap existing between all three.

The militia movement also has close ties to another anti-government movement, the anti-public lands movement, which exists primarily in western states and whose adherents oppose federal stewardship of the vast public lands in the west. Here too there is considerable overlap, as illustrated by militia participation in and support for the armed standoff against the Bureau of Land Management organized by rancher Cliven Bundy in Nevada in 2014 and the [subsequent armed takeover of the Malheur Federal Wildlife Refuge](#) by Cliven's son Ammon Bundy in 2016.

The militia movement also has ties to a newer anti-government extremist movement, [the so-called “boogaloo” movement](#), named after a slang term for a

future civil war. Though there are areas where the two movements differ, the anti-authoritarian beliefs of the boogaloo movement have significant parallels to the beliefs of the early militia movement. However, unlike the recent militia movement, the boogaloo movement has not embraced Donald Trump. Although there is overlap between the boogaloo and militia movements, some boogalooers view people in the militia movement as lapdogs for authority because of their support for Trump and, in some instances, for law enforcement.

The militia movement also has many ties to anti-immigrant extremists in the United States, especially [border vigilante groups](#) (sometimes called “border militia” groups by the media). Indeed, in some states, such as Arizona, the militia movement and the border vigilante groups overlap so much it is difficult to separate the two. Similarly, the militia movement has ties to [anti-Muslim extremist groups](#) in the United States. Members of militia groups have taken part in so-called “anti-Sharia law” protests around the country and some have engaged in armed protests in front of mosques.

Finally, in some parts of the country, militia groups have ties to other right-wing extremist groups, especially [“at lite” groups](#). The alt lite is a loosely connected movement of far right-wing activists who reject the overtly white supremacist ideology of the alt right—and who may even have people of color as leaders or members—but who embrace other hateful elements of the alt right, including misogyny, xenophobia, and hatred of the left. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, some militia groups have cooperated with alt lite groups such as the [Proud Boys](#) and [Patriot Prayer](#).

Decline and Resurgence

The militia movement remained active throughout the 1990s but experienced a sharp decline of popularity starting in 2000. The arrest of so many militia members and leaders may have had a demoralizing effect; the fact that Y2K “Millennium Bug” conspiracy theories (which the militia movement had

embraced) never came to pass certainly did. Moreover, surges of right-wing extremism often naturally die down after five or six years of increased activity. The replacement of the Clinton presidency with the Bush presidency may have also played a role—though the militia movement disliked George W. Bush, they did not hate him with the intensity with which they despised his predecessor.

The number of active militia groups in the United States dropped from several hundred in the 1990s to only 30 or so by 2003. The [rise of the anti-immigrant border vigilante movement](#), which spawned nativist groups such as the Minutemen Project, competed with the militia movement for members in some areas.

Indeed, it looked for a while as if the militia movement might die out altogether. However, in 2004 [the militia movement experienced a modest uptick in activity](#) and increased recruiting—enough to stave off extinction, at least. Still, through most of the Bush administration, the militia movement was far less numerous or active than it had been previously.

Beginning in 2008, however, the militia movement experienced a sharp uptick in its fortunes, ballooning in size and activity just as it had in the mid-1990s. Several factors were responsible for this significant resurgence, but perhaps none so important as the increasing dominance of social media platforms on the Internet. Militia groups flocked to social media sites—first to Myspace, then to Facebook and YouTube, using those platforms as networking and recruiting materials, sharing militia propaganda as well as training videos.

The result was that many people—especially younger people in their 20s—encountered the militia movement for the first time. Militia groups that started after 2008 tended to have a noticeably younger membership than the largely middle-aged militia groups of the 1990s. Social media allowed the militia movement to spread widely and quickly.

This spread was aided by the election of Barack Obama later that same year, presenting the militia movement once more with a Democratic president on whom they could focus their anger. Obama's election actually sparked a [general wave of anti-government hostility on the right](#) in the United States, something that manifested itself in mainstream conservatism with the rise of the Tea Party and on the far right fringes with major surges of popularity for anti-government extremist movements such as the militia movement and the sovereign citizen movement.

The final key component for the resurgence of the militia movement during this period was the invention of the ["Three Percenter"](#) concept by militia activist Mike Vanderboegh in 2008, which turned out to be the most powerful marketing tool for the militia movement in its history and helped bring thousands of new adherents to the movement.

The term "Three Percent" 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.

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.

The only requirement to become a Three Percenter was to declare oneself one. The militia movement of the 1990s and 2000s was heavily paramilitary oriented but being a Three Percenter required no paramilitary activities. Three Percenters

could, and often did, form paramilitary militia groups, 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.

The Three Percenter concept, like the concept of the militia movement itself, spread rapidly thanks to social media, helping to bring a new wave of recruits to the ideology of the militia movement. Some Three Percenter Facebook groups accumulated more than 10,000 members each.

The combined effect of all these developments was a major resurgence of the militia movement, which went from some 50 active militia groups in 2007 to over 200 by late 2009 (not even counting non-paramilitary Three Percenter groups that were also beginning to form). Thanks in large part to the Three Percenter concept, the number of people in the militia movement who weren't members of any group also swelled considerably. Though it is always difficult to estimate the size of extremist movements, it is clear that by 2010 or 2011 the resurgent militia movement had grown to over 100,000 adherents, with an unknown additional number of people sympathetic to some degree.

As the militia movement surged during the period 2008-2014, so too did militia-related criminal activity, ranging from weapons violations to terrorist plots (see below).

The Militia Movement during the Trump Administration

By 2015, the growth in the militia movement caused by the 2008 surge had leveled off, though the movement's activity level remained fairly high. However, the nature of a lot of militia activity would soon change, thanks to Donald Trump's June 2015 announcement that he was seeking the Republican nomination for president.

Prior to the 2016 election, the militia movement had eschewed supporting any major party candidates for president, all of whom were too tied to the establishment or too liberal to suit them. Instead, militia adherents tended to support fringe Republican candidates (such as Pat Buchanan, Ron Paul or Alan Keyes), third party candidates from parties such as the Libertarian Party or the Constitution Party or independent candidates from within the "Patriot" movement itself.

However, during the 2015-2016 campaign, the greater part of the militia movement became Trump supporters, viewing Trump as an anti-establishment outsider candidate who, like them, was anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim, and who believed in conspiracy theories such as "birther" theories. When Trump won, the militia movement was happy, [exuding a cautious optimism](#) that his actions would align with their desires.

Trump's victory, though, did pose a dilemma for the militia movement, because until Trump took office, the movement had largely sustained and energized itself through its opposition to the federal government, something that it couldn't easily maintain while still supporting Donald Trump. The history of the militia movement during the Trump administration, then, largely became one of finding enemies to focus on other than the federal government.

The first substitute enemy to emerge were the left-wing protesters who took to the streets immediately following Trump's election. Militia adherents reacted to such protests [with considerable hostility](#)—one Three Percenter writing on Facebook the

day after the election that “We are going to have to go 1776 on their asses. You don’t threaten the president-elect with death.”

As anti-Trump protests continued through Inauguration Day and afterwards, militia sentiment against the protesters solidified even further. The [militia movement became aware of antifa](#) and, like many others on the right, attributed to them a size, significance and dangerousness far beyond the reality, with some claiming that antifa were being trained at terrorist training camps in Syria and others asserting they were being funded by [George Soros](#) in order to unseat Donald Trump.

Increasingly during 2017 militia groups showed up at public events in the anticipating of countering or confronting left-wing activists. This even included showing up at several events organized by white supremacists. In April 2017, for example, members of the West Virginia [Oath Keepers](#) showed up at a white supremacist event in Pikeville, Kentucky. They did not march with the white supremacists but presented themselves rather as a neutral third force. However, they seemed to be primarily motivated by the desire to stare down left-wing counter-protesters.

A similar situation happened in August 2017 at Charlottesville, Virginia, when at least 22 people associated with the militia movement ([by ADL count](#)) showed up at the large white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally. The militia activists were once more separate from the white supremacists, showing up primarily to confront expected antifa counter-protesters. However, 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.

The tremendous negative publicity that followed the “Unite the Right” rally—because a white supremacist drove his vehicle into a crowd of counter-protesters,

killing one—largely ended the militia experiment of showing up at white supremacist events. However, militia groups continued to show up at a variety of other events in order to counter antifa, Black Lives Matter, or other perceived leftists. 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 militia activists showed up](#) to counter-protest.

Militia movement adherents 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.

Militia groups 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. In Oregon in June 2019, some 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 2020, the militia movement saw several important opportunities to be active. Early in the year, much of this activity was centered around state-level gun control proposals in the wake of high-profile mass shootings such as [the El Paso shooting](#). Anything that suggests gun control—even very moderate “Red Flag” laws—easily angers the militia movement. In the winter of 2020, militia groups around the country organized or participated in “Second Amendment Rallies” and similar protests against gun control, including [a very large protest in Richmond, Virginia](#), in January 2020 that brought out gun rights activists, anti-government extremists, and many others on the right.

By March, much of the nation's attention was focused on the Covid-19 pandemic sweeping the country. Anti-government extremists, including militia activists, were **among the very first to oppose** government measures designed to combat the coronavirus. For the militia movement, opposition to coronavirus measures was to be expected, given the movement's longstanding conspiracy theories about government exploitation of epidemics to institute tyranny. Militia groups organized or participated in the first public "anti-lockdown" protests in Michigan and Ohio and became a common presence at such events thereafter.

Finally, militia groups reacted strongly to the outbreak of Black Lives Matter protests around the country following the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in late May. In contrast to the anti-government and anti-police boogaloo movement, which largely supported the BLM protests, from the very beginning **militia groups were far more hostile** to them, with one West Virginia militia adherent referring to protesters as "hired domestic terrorists bought and paid for by the socialist conglomerates in America." Soon militia groups or individuals **were frequently showing up** at such protests, sometimes with the stated goal of protecting businesses or monuments or to be available as a backup for law enforcement, but primarily coming out to oppose the protesters. Though militia members engaged in scuffles and fights at some of these events, they largely avoided more serious criminal incidents themselves. Nevertheless, their armed presence at events has increased tension levels and made such events more dangerous for everybody.

All three of these issues—state gun control measures, state pandemic measures, and BLM protests—were particularly convenient for the militia movement in that none of them involved the federal government or the Trump administration. Instead of focusing on the presidency militia groups could instead direct their anger towards state governors and legislators in particular.

The Militia Movement and Criminal Activity

From the beginning, the militia movement has had a strong association with criminal activity. Over the years, militia members have committed murders, engaged in armed standoffs, leveled terroristic threats against public officials, possessed or manufactured illegal weapons or explosives, or engaged in terrorist plots or acts.

The most common type of violation for the militia movement may be those related to illegal weapons or explosives. Militia adherents often build up arsenals of weapons and military gear. Given their obsession with weaponry and their belief that gun control laws are illegitimate, it is not surprising that more than a few have ignored laws about weapons and explosives when accumulating their arsenals. Militia adherents with past felony convictions also often ignore the restrictions on felons owning firearms.

Some recent examples of militia-related firearms and explosives arrests illustrate the propensity of militia members to engage in this type of criminal activity:

McCloud, Oklahoma, June 2020. Christopher Ledbetter, a member of the Sons of Liberty militia group, [pleaded guilty](#) to unlawfully possessing a fully automatic AK-47.

Troy, New York, June 2020. Shawn Flemming [was arrested](#) on 27 counts of criminal possession of a weapon in connection with an incident at a Black Lives Matter protest that led to the alleged discovery of firearms, ammunition, and “large capacity ammunition feeding devices,” as well as a tactical manual from the New England Minutemen militia group. Others with Flemming were arrested on other charges.

Loveland, Colorado, May 2020. Bradley Bunn, described by prosecutors as a member of an anti-government militia, [was arrested](#) on charges of possessing illegal destructive devices (pipe bombs), which he allegedly planned to use against law enforcement if they ever attempted a forced entry of his home.

Ripley, Ohio, February 2019. Ryan King and Randy Goodman, members of the militia group United Sheepdogs of Ohio, were arrested on federal charges of conspiring to possess destructive devices in connection with an attempt to construct large pipe bombs they called "crater makers." In August 2019, King and Goodman [pleaded guilty](#) to the charge.

Most seriously, the militia movement has a long history of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States. From the mid-1990s, the militia movement has been a significant source of domestic terrorism; this is one of the main reasons the movement is a perennial concern to law enforcement.

Terrorist incidents connected to the militia movement include the following:

Detroit, Michigan, October 2020. Thirteen members of a small militia group that called itself the Wolverines Watchmen [were arrested](#) (some on federal charges, some on state charges) in connection with an alleged plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Group members also reportedly discussed other violent acts, including attacking police, storming the state capitol, and kidnapping the governor of Virginia.

Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin, September 2020. [Federal agents arrested](#) two Missouri militia members, Michael Karmo and Cody Smith, on charges of being felons in possession of firearms after a witness told police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, that the two were coming to Kenosha to "loot and possibly 'pick people off.'" Kenosha is the place where a deadly shooting occurred during Black Lives Matter protests in August 2020.

Cleveland, Ohio, May 2020. Christian Ferguson [was arrested](#) on federal kidnapping charges for an alleged plot to ambush and kill police officers and start an anti-government insurrection. Ferguson was reportedly trying to start his own militia group, the so-called 75th Spartans.

Lombard, Illinois, August 2019. Daniel Waters [was arrested](#) on explosives charges after police allegedly found in his home materials used to make explosives. They also found a notebook in which Waters allegedly described plans to start a "black ops" militia group to gather intelligence on potential targets and to set up ambushes.

Campaign, Illinois, November 2017. Three men, Michael Hari, Joe Morris and Michael McWhorter, all members of the Illinois-based White Rabbit Militia, [were arrested](#) in November 2017 after they allegedly drove to Champaign, Illinois, to bomb the Women's Health Practice, which performed abortions. They allegedly threw an explosive device into the building, but it failed to detonate (see also August 2017 below),

Bloomington, Minnesota, August 2017. Four members of a small Illinois militia group dubbed the White Rabbit Militia [were arrested](#) in August 2017. Three of the men, Michael Hari, Joe Morris and Michael McWhorter, allegedly drove to Bloomington, MN, to bomb the Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center mosque there. Also arrested, for other crimes but not this bombing, was Ellis Mack. The group also allegedly robbed Walmart stores and attempted to rob suspected drug traffickers in December 2017. In January 2018, they allegedly planted an incendiary device on railroad tracks and tried to extort money from a railway company by threatening to destroy more tracks (see also November 2017 above).

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 2017. Three Percenter Jerry Drake Varnell was arrested in August 2017 after he allegedly attempted to detonate an explosives-filled van outside the BancFirst building in Oklahoma City. Varnell expressed that he hoped to form a militia group. The van did not contain real explosives, however, as Varnell was the subject of an undercover sting investigation. Varnell was charged with attempting to use an explosive device and attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction against interstate commerce. In 2020, Varnell [was sentenced](#) to 25 years in prison.

Garden City, Kansas, October 2016. Three members of a small militia group called The Crusaders **were arrested** in connection with an alleged terrorist plot to use truck bombs to blow up an apartment complex inhabited primarily by Somali immigrants and where a small mosque was located. Arrested were Curtis Allen, Gavin Wright, and Patrick Eugene Stein, charged with conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction. According to authorities, the militia members thought that Somalis and immigrants presented a threat to American society and that the defendants hoped that the bombing might inspire other militia groups and “wake people up.”

Earlton, New York, October 2016. In a “sting” operation, **FBI agents arrested** militia adherent Robert Twiss of Earlton, New York, on a charge of unlawful possession of a rifle by a felon. The investigation began after the FBI learned that Twiss was allegedly forming a militia group with possible plans to engage in violence. During the investigation, the FBI learned that Twiss allegedly spoke of actions such as firebombing the FBI office in Albany and attacking the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Twiss also allegedly boasted about his ability to turn a propane tank into an explosive device and said that he was “extremely dangerous.” During the investigation, the FBI learned that Twiss, a convicted felon, had an M-1 rifle in his possession (felons are not normally permitted to own firearms) and arrested him on that basis.

Stockton, Utah, June 2016. Militia leader William Keebler of Stockton, Utah, **was arrested** in June 2016 after allegedly attempting to set off a bomb at a Bureau of Land Management facility in Arizona. Keebler also allegedly scouted a mosque, an FBI office and an Army National Guard building as possible targets. He allegedly attempted to obtain two bombs for his plot from someone who turned out to be an undercover FBI agent. He was charged with one count of attempted damage to a federal facility by means of fire or explosive.

Sequatchie County, Tennessee/Hancock, New York, April 2015. The **FBI arrested** Robert Doggart, an ordained minister and anti-Muslim extremist from Tennessee,

on charges related to a plot to attack Muslim-owned buildings, including a mosque and school, in Hancock, New York, and to shoot occupants. Hancock is the location of "Islamberg," a commune associated with a small Islamic sect. Doggart accumulated weapons and explosives and attempted to recruit militia groups to help him with this attack. In September 2020, Doggart received a 120-month maximum statutory sentence. A South Carolina militia member, William Tint, was also arrested in connection with the plot and eventually entered into a plea deal, pleading guilty to lying to federal agents.

Rome, Georgia, February 2014. [FBI agents arrested](#) three North Georgia members of a militia group, charging them with conspiracy to receive and possess unregistered destructive devices. According to the FBI, Terry Eugene Peace, Brian Edward Cannon and Cory Robert Williamson, attempted to obtain thermite and pipe bombs in order to launch terrorist attacks against the federal government. Based on on-line comments they made, the trio seem to have hoped to spark a government overreaction that would cause the militia movement to rise up against the government. The trio pleaded guilty in May 2015.

Maplewood, Minnesota, December 2013. [FBI agents in Minnesota arrested](#) self-described militia leader Keith Michael Novak on fraud charges for allegedly stealing confidential personal information of hundreds of military personnel in order to create fake military IDs for members of his militia group, the 44th Spatha Libertas. At a hearing in mid-December, an FBI agent testified that Novak had discussed blowing up a National Security Agency building and said that he had a "target package" for investor Warren Buffett. Novak pleaded guilty to stealing identification information and received a two-year sentence in 2014.

Montevideo, Minnesota, May 2013. [Agents with the FBI arrested](#) militia member Buford Braden "Bucky" Rogers, of Montevideo, Minnesota, after discovering two Molotov cocktails, two "black powder and nail devices," a pipe bomb, and a semi-automatic rifle at his home. Rogers was a convicted felon prohibited from possessing firearms. An FBI affidavit asserted that Rogers regularly talked of

plans to use his militia group, a tiny group called the Black Snake Militia, to cut off communications to the City of Montevideo, raid the National Guard Armory, and bomb the Montevideo Police Department. Rogers pleaded guilty to being a felon in possession of a firearm and possessing an unregistered destructive device and received a 40-month prison sentence.

Fort Stewart, Georgia, December 2011. More than a dozen members of a militia group called Forever Enduring Always Ready (FEAR) **were arrested** in Georgia in connection with a double homicide in which FEAR members shot and killed one of their own members, whom they suspected might become an informant. They also killed the man's girlfriend. FEAR members feared that their terrorist plans, which ranged from bombings and crop-poisoning all the way to assassinating the president, might be exposed. FEAR leader Isaac Aguigui was also charged with murdering his pregnant wife in order to get insurance money with which to buy guns, ammunition, and other materials for the group's actions. Those arrested pleaded guilty or were convicted of various charges against them and received varying sentences of up to life in prison.

Macon, Georgia, November 2011. A federal grand jury **indicted four people** associated with a North Georgia militia group for plotting to buy explosives and trying to make ricin to use in attacks against the government. The men had discussed dispersing ricin dust in major U.S. cities, assassinating federal officials and employees of federal agencies, and had surveilled target buildings in Atlanta, including the offices of the ATF and IRS. Frederick Thomas and Dan Roberts were each convicted of giving undercover agents money and a firearm in exchange for an M-4 assault rifle silencer and what they believed were C-4 explosives. They were each sentenced to five years in prison. Samuel Crump and Ray Adams were convicted of conspiring to produce a biological toxin and received 10-year sentences.

Fairbanks, Alaska, March 2011. Four sovereign citizens and militia members in Alaska **were arrested** in 2011 on federal and state weapons and conspiracy charges

related to a plot to murder federal and state government officials engaged in criminal cases against some of them. They dubbed it the “2-4-1” plot, because they decided they would kidnap or kill two officials for every militia member arrested or killed. Charges against a fifth defendant were dropped after he agreed to testify against the others. On January 8, 2013, a U.S. District court judge sentenced Alaska Peacemakers Militia members Schaeffer Cox and Lonnie Vernon to over 25 years in prison each (Cox’s sentence was later reduced to 15 years). Lonnie Vernon’s wife Karen received a sentence of 12 years in prison. Coleman Barney received a five-year sentence on weapons charges.

Collinsville, Alabama, April 2007. [Federal agents arrested](#) five members of the Alabama Free Militia following the largest weapons seizure to occur in the South in years. During a bond hearing, an ATF agent testified that Raymond Kirk Dillard, Adam Lynn Cunningham, Bonnell Hughes, Randall Garrett Cole, and James Ray McElroy were planning an attack on Mexicans in a town near Birmingham. The agent further said that the group had an alleged policy to shoot at any government agents that attempted to approach them. All five men pleaded guilty to various weapons charges.

Casper, Wyoming, February 2007. A federal judge sentenced Wyoming militia member Richard Serafin to nearly seven years in prison for firearms violations, including possession of firearms in furtherance of a crime of violence. The charges [stemmed from a federal investigation](#) into Serafin, during which Serafin told an undercover agent of his plans to move to the Arizona/Mexico border to assist in killing immigrants.

Wexford County, Michigan, October 2003. [Federal agents arrested](#) Michigan militia member Norman Somerville, charging him with illegal possession of a machine gun, being a marijuana user in unlawful possession of four military rifles, and attempting to manufacture marijuana. Court documents stated that Somerville was planning to kill police officers in retaliation for the earlier fatal shooting of Michigan militia member Scott Allen Woodring by state police. The

documents also revealed that a source told investigators that Somerville wanted to cause a car accident with his Jeep, which he was trying to equip with a machine gun, in order to shoot responding police officers. Somerville was later convicted of unlawfully possessing machine guns and sentenced to 80 months in prison.

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, October 2002. Idaho Mountain Boy militia leader Larry Eugene Raugust [was arrested](#) in October 2002 on explosives charges in connection with a plot to kill law enforcement officials should they attempt to evict a friend of his. In 2003, Raugust pleaded guilty to 15 counts of making, possessing and transporting pipe bombs and land mines. He received a 77-month sentence.

Flathead, Montana, February 2002. David Earl Burgert and members of his "Project 7" militia group [were indicted](#) on weapons and conspiracy charges for plotting to kill judges and law enforcement officers in hopes of starting a revolution. Burgert was convicted of weapons violations and served eight years in federal prison. The remaining Project 7 members pleaded guilty and received lesser sentences. As of 2020, Burgert is wanted by the federal government on attempted murder charges after a shootout with law enforcement in 2011.

Elk Grove, California, December 1999. Three members of the San Joaquin Militia [conspired to use a weapon of mass destruction](#) in connection with a plot to destroy a propane storage facility, a television tower and an electrical substation, and to kill a federal judge. The militia group's leader, Donald Rudolph, was convicted but given a lesser sentence of five years after testifying against his co-defendants, Kevin Ray Patterson and Charles Kiles. Both Patterson and Kiles were convicted and sentenced to more than 20 years in prison.

Saint Petersburg, Florida, December 1999. In late December 1999, [federal agents arrested](#) Florida militia leader Donald Beauregard in connection with a plot to rob National Guard armories and steal explosives and to blow up transmission lines,

power stations, and a nuclear power plant. Beauregard pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges and received a five-year sentence. James Troy Driver, an accomplice in the plot, received a lesser sentence.

Battle Creek/Kalamazoo, Michigan, March 1998. In 1999, members of the North American Militia of southwestern Michigan [were convicted](#) on various conspiracy and weapon charges related to a terrorist plot. Prosecutors accused Bradford Metcalf, Kenneth Carter, and Randy Graham of plotting to kill federal officials, and to destroy a federal building, an IRS office, utility transmitters, and a television station. Carter pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with the government; he received a five-year sentence. Metcalf received a 40-year sentence; Graham a 55-year sentence.

Fort Hood, Texas, July 1997. Authorities in Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and other states [arrested members of an underground militia cell](#) on weapons charges in connection with a planned attack on Fort Hood, Texas, during a Fourth of July celebration. The plot formed after members became convinced that foreign “New World Order” troops were being trained on the base and feared an invasion by the United Nations. Two of the men involved, Bradley Glover and Michael Dorsett, were discovered by authorities armed and preparing for the attack at a campground close to Fort Hood. Glover and the other members arrested received varying sentences on weapons convictions in the various states where they were apprehended.

Kalamazoo, Michigan, March 1997. A [federal judge sentenced](#) militia member Brendon Blaszczyk to three years in prison after Blaszczyk pleaded guilty to making pipe bombs. During an April 1997 hearing, a federal agent testified that Blaszczyk had been plotting to blow up federal buildings and a television station. Blaszczyk’s arrest was an early arrest associated with an investigation into the North American Militia that would result in more arrests in 1999 (see above).

Clarksburg, West Virginia, October 1996. [FBI agents arrested](#) Mountaineer Militia leader Floyd Raymond Looker and six others on charges related to stockpiling plastic explosives, grenades and homemade bombs for use in a plot to blow up the FBI's national fingerprint records facility in Clarksburg. A jury convicted Looker of conspiracy to manufacture explosives, transporting unregistered firearms, conspiracy and providing material support to terrorists. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison. Four other defendants were convicted on various related charges, while two were acquitted.

Phoenix, Arizona, July 1996. Members of the Arizona Viper Militia [were arrested](#) on conspiracy and weapons charges in connection with an alleged plot to attack a variety of government buildings in Phoenix. Evidence against the group included illegal weapons, hundreds of pounds of ammonium nitrate, and scouting tapes made with detailed narration on how target buildings could be captured and destroyed. Most of the defendants eventually entered into plea deals, receiving sentences of one to nine years in prison.

Bellingham, Washington, July 1996. [FBI agents arrested](#) a group of individuals affiliated with the militia and sovereign citizen movements, including Washington State Militia leader John Pitner, on conspiracy, weapons and explosives charges. According to the indictment, the defendants built, or conspired to build, pipe bombs and other explosive devices, and discussed plans to bomb various targets, including a bridge, radio tower, and train tunnel. The indictment also alleged the group plotted to assault or kill federal agents. Four defendants were convicted on weapons charges, while Pitner was convicted on weapons and conspiracy charges.

Macon, Georgia, April 1996. Georgia militia members Robert Edward Starr III and William James McCranie, Jr., [were arrested](#) by federal agents in April 1996 on conspiracy and explosive charges for having built pipe bombs, planning to distribute them among militia members in anticipation of a war against the

government. Both men were found guilty of weapon charges and sentenced to eight years in prison.

Muskogee, Oklahoma, November 1995. Willie Ray Lampley, an adherent of the white supremacist Christian Identity sect and leader of a small militia cell, **was arrested** with members of his cell after plotting to bomb civil rights organizations, federal agencies, gay bars, and abortion clinics. All defendants were convicted of conspiracy to manufacture and possess a bomb.