

# Then and Now

## Right-Wing Extremism in 1995 and 2015

In April 1995, the Oklahoma City bombing delivered unprecedented death and destruction to America's heartland – and focused the country's attention on the problem of right-wing extremism. Just six years later, however, the 9/11 terror attacks understandably diverted America's consciousness away from the extreme right. In the intervening years, extreme right-wing movements have managed to fly largely under the radar of public awareness.

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing is an opportunity for Americans to take stock: How has the extreme right changed in the past two decades? Is it more dangerous? Less dangerous? Could something like the Oklahoma City bombing happen today?

Extreme political or social movements, when based on fundamental rather than passing concerns, often tend to be cyclical. They wax and wane depending on the viability of the political and social environment, the occurrence of spurring or triggering events, and the presence of energetic leadership. Extreme right-wing movements in the United States have largely followed such cycles, with surges occurring during the Great Depression, during the era of desegregation and the early Cold War, and in the early 1980s.

When extremist movements surge, their adherents become agitated and angry, and are more likely to take action, including violent action. Often, though not always, their membership will see a marked increase. In some cases, extremist movements can even temporarily penetrate into the mainstream and get some degree of support or sympathy there.

### **A Tale of Two Surges: The 1990s**

In the early-to-mid 1990s, a major up-swell of right-wing extremism took place, with a transformative effect on right-wing movements in the U.S. In previous eras, right-wing extremism in America tended to fall into one of two significantly overlapping spheres. One sphere contained the various racist and anti-Semitic white supremacist movements; the other sphere included groups and movements centered primarily on anti-Communist conspiracy theories.

The collapse of the Communist bloc in the late 1980s challenged many of the cherished beliefs of the anti-Communist extreme right in the United States. Some dropped out and became inactive, but an increasing number transferred their conspiracy theories from "World Communism" to a more diffuse and shadowy "New World Order" conspiracy. In so doing, they changed their target of anger from the now non-existent Communist bloc to the U.S. government itself, a government ostensibly in league with the "New World Order" to strip Americans of their freedom and enslave them to a one-world tyrannical government.

The surge of the 1990s greatly accelerated the growth of anti-government extremism in the United States, elevating what had been a relatively small component of the extreme right to one equal in status to white supremacists. This growth drew in new adherents with anti-government but not white supremacist viewpoints. These anti-government causes—primarily the militia movement, the sovereign citizen movement (then often referred to as the “common law court” movement), and the tax protest movement—became collectively known as the “Patriot” movement.

A number of triggers were largely responsible for the surge of the 1990s. Among these were the election of Bill Clinton after 12 years of conservative governance and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which became fertile grist for conspiracy mills. More important triggers were pieces of gun control legislation: the Brady Law of 1993, which mandated a waiting period for handgun purchases, and the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994, which prohibited possession of certain military-style firearms. Activists on the extreme right saw these measures through a conspiratorial lens as attempts to disarm the American people.

Especially important, however, were two deadly standoffs involving the federal government and extremist or fringe groups: the Ruby Ridge standoff in northern Idaho in late 1992 and the Branch Davidian standoff near Waco, Texas, the following spring. In both cases, the federal government made decisions that resulted in needless loss of life, including young children. The Ruby Ridge standoff, involving a white supremacist, galvanized the white supremacist right, while Waco played a crucial role in agitating the anti-government extreme right. Together, they acted as a one-two punch that infuriated the extreme right, brought in new members, and stirred many adherents to violence.

Looking back, it is clear that the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995 was not the beginning of the surge, which was in full-swing by early 1994, nor was it the culmination of the surge, which lasted through the 1990s. The bombing did, however, have a major effect on the surge, drawing public and media attention, as well of that as government and law enforcement. In the short run, the bombing may have actually strengthened right-wing extremism, as media attention helped bring in new recruits previously unfamiliar with the militia movement. In the long run, increased scrutiny by law enforcement resulted in the foiling of many plots and conspiracies, with an eventual dampening effect on the extreme right.

The surge dwindled in the late 1990s, a process accelerated after the Y2K “Millennium” computer bug did not result in catastrophe and societal collapse as many right-wing conspiracy theorists had predicted—and even hoped for. By the early 2000s, movements such as the militia movement had reached their nadir. The violence and criminal activity took longer to drop to a lower level, perhaps because remaining right-wing extremists tended to be hard-core adherents.

### **A Tale of Two Surges: The 2010s**

It may surprise many readers in 2015 to learn that they have been in the midst of another surge of right-wing extremism. The current surge, which actually began in 2009 (but referred to here as the 2010s surge for convenience), has developed with relatively little media attention. Absent a high-profile event like the Oklahoma City bombing, only monitoring groups like the Anti-Defamation League and some law enforcement agencies discerned the beginning of the new surge.

As in the 1990s, the surge of the 2010s had triggering events. The 2008 election of Barack Obama, not only a Democratic president but also the nation's first African-American president, greatly upset white supremacists. At the same time, anti-government extremists quickly linked Obama to their "New World Order" conspiracy theories about American concentration camps, martial law, and gun confiscation.

Anti-government extremists also received a particular boost because of the twin economic catastrophes of a major recession and the mortgage/foreclosure crisis, which together created a large pool of desperate, angry people. In particular, the sovereign citizen movement was able to capitalize on these crises.

Unlike the surge of the 1990s, which galvanized white supremacists and anti-government extremists relatively equally, the surge of the 2010s disproportionately involved anti-government extremists. While white supremacists became angrier, more agitated, and also more violent, they did not appreciably increase in numbers (for reasons explained below). Anti-government extremists, on the other hand, increased both in hostility and in numbers, with the militia movement, for example, more than quintupling in size during the period 2008-2010.

The lack of a violent event of the scale of the Oklahoma City bombing, however, made it harder to draw public attention to this surge. Though even in 2009 alone right-wing extremists of various sorts had committed a string of grisly murders and attacks, none approached the scale of the 1995 bombing. And so, even when some events, such as white supremacist James Von Brunn's deadly attack on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2009, garnered national media attention, it tended to be short-lived and narrowly-focused.

Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center tried to draw attention to the surge, but with limited success. And when Department of Homeland Security analysts released a report in 2009 intended to alert law enforcement to the resurgence, it was withdrawn after a partisan political reaction. Sadly, much of its content would prove prophetic. It would take the brutal 2010 murder of two West Memphis, Arkansas, police officers by anti-government extremists to fully engage the attention of law enforcement. Throughout the period 2009-2015, media coverage of the resurgence remained scattershot.

As of 2015, the United States is still in the midst of a right-wing extremist surge. High profile incidents such as the deadly attack on Jewish institutions in Overland Park, Kansas, and the assassination of two police officers in Las Vegas by anti-government extremists still occur on a regular basis. If the past is any indication, violence may continue at a relatively high level for some time after the surge does begin to ebb.

### White Supremacists in 1995 and 2015

One of the most striking differences between the state of right-wing extremism in 1995 and in 2015 is the relative condition of the main white supremacist movements.

White supremacists played a major role in the 1990s surge of right-wing extremism, in large part because the Ruby Ridge standoff was such a mobilizing event for them. Just two months after the standoff, in October 1992, Colorado white supremacist leader Pete Peters convened a meeting of 160 prominent right-wing extremists, mostly white supremacists, to discuss responses and reactions to the standoff—an unprecedented show of unity for the movement.

The already volatile white supremacist movement had become fighting mad. This, combined with the movement's relatively healthy numbers, meant many white supremacists were poised to act.

Among those ready to take advantage of the surge were the neo-Nazis. Not the largest in raw numbers, they had the benefit of considerable organization and commitment. The 1990s were the high-water mark for the National Alliance, the most successful neo-Nazi group the United States had yet seen. Led by the intelligent and charismatic William Pierce—whose novel *The Turner Diaries* had helped radicalize so many right-wing extremists, including Timothy McVeigh—the National Alliance billed itself as the vanguard of a future white revolution. With a membership approaching 1,500 (large for a right-wing extremist group) and even more sympathizers, the National Alliance had many active units around the country. By the end of the 1990s it would even purchase the hate rock business Resistance Records to grow its base of support and act as a cash cow.

Aryan Nations, another leading neo-Nazi group, claimed a smaller but still substantial membership. Its leader, Richard Butler, was in declining health but an energetic prospective successor, Ray Redfeairn, emerged on the scene in Ohio. Redfeairn drew considerable support from within the group while avoiding FBI attempts to bring a criminal case against him.

The National Socialist Movement, a third major neo-Nazi group at the time, was also growing. So too was another group, the World Church of the Creator, which was not actually a neo-Nazi group but one with shared sympathies, led by the law school student Matt Hale.

Another segment of the white supremacist movement was also growing: racist skinheads. This white supremacist offshoot of the skinhead subculture arrived on American shores from Great Britain in the mid-to-late 1980s. By the mid-1990s, they were a firmly established component of American white supremacy, boasting significant multi-region groups such as the Hammerskins and American Front, as well as a host of small, local racist skinhead crews and unaffiliated white power skinheads. During these years, their propensity for violence, including vicious hate crimes, became well-established.

One of the most important components of the white supremacist movement in the 1990s was the largely unknown religious sect Christian Identity, which was responsible for many of the major right-wing extremist conspiracies and acts of violence in the 1980s and 1990s. Aryan Nations, in fact, was an explicitly Christian Identity group, as were a number of Ku Klux Klan groups. Prominent Christian Identity ministers such as Pete Peters used a variety of media to reach followers across the country. Because Randy Weaver and his family, the targets of the Ruby Ridge standoff, were Identity adherents, followers of Christian Identity became particularly angry and prone to action during the 1990s.

The fourth large segment of the white supremacist right, so-called “traditional” white supremacists, consisted of those groups that had emerged in opposition to desegregation. Overwhelmingly, this segment consisted of Ku Klux Klan groups, dozens of which operated in the United States, but it also included non-Klan groups such as the Council of Conservative Citizens. This latter group, descended from the White Citizens Councils in the South during the Civil Rights era, reached its peak during the surge of the 1990s, not only gaining a substantial membership but attracting the support or membership of a number of local and state politicians in southern states. These included one governor, Kirk Fordice of Mississippi who spoke at group events and described them as “some very good people...with some very good ideas.” In 1998, Mississippi Senator Trent Lott's ties to the group were revealed, resulting in a major scandal.

Ku Klux Klan groups did not enjoy such “mainstream” support, but had managed temporarily to arrest the long-term decline that had plagued them since they lost their battle to deny equal rights to African-Americans. Several robust Klan groups—among them the American Knights of the KKK, the White Camelia Knights of the KKK, the Keystone Knights of the KKK, the National Knights of the KKK, the Knights of the KKK and the Invisible Empire Knights of the KKK—regularly held public and private rallies across the country, especially in the Midwest and the South, the Klan’s two historical bases of support.

The only major segment of the white supremacist movement left out of the surge were white supremacist prison gangs. These gangs had evolved in a very different context from the other four sub-movements and in the 1990s had relatively little contact with them (this would change in the 2000s).

The two primary effects of the surge on white supremacists were, first, a modest growth in numbers (particularly for neo-Nazis, racist skinheads and Christian Identity) and, second, the commission of a lengthy series of violent acts, from hate crimes to terrorists plots.

Just months after the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, Oklahoma Christian Identity adherent Willie Ray Lampley and members of a small cell of white supremacists and militia adherents were caught plotting a series of bombings against civil rights organizations (including the Anti-Defamation League), gay bars, abortion clinics, and other targets. Two groups of white supremacist bank robbers, one based in the Midwest and the other in the Pacific Northwest, committed multiple armed bank robberies (and, in the case of one group, bombings) stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars to finance the white supremacist cause. White supremacist and anti-abortion extremist Eric Rudolph began a series of bombings, including one at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Such acts continued on a regular basis throughout the 1990s, including (among many others) a Klan plot to blow up a natural gas processing plant, multiple murders committed to establish an “Aryan People’s Republic,” a plot by the “New Order” to bomb government buildings and assassinate public officials, and, in 1998-2000, a series of deadly shooting sprees by white supremacists targeting Jews, African-Americans and other minorities.

In the early to mid-2000s, however, segments of the white supremacist cause suffered significant setbacks, especially the neo-Nazi movement, as the two most prominent groups, the National Alliance and Aryan Nations, imploded after the deaths of their leaders. The World Church of the Creator similarly collapsed after leader Matt Hale received a 40-year prison sentence for soliciting the murder of a federal judge. The steep decline of the neo-Nazi movement led to some gains by racist skinheads but overall was a major setback for the white supremacist movement. Klan groups, too, went into decline once more after trying, but mostly failing, to capitalize on growing anti-immigration sentiments. Here, too, leader deaths and group fragmentation played a major role. During these years, many Christian Identity adherents also became less active as Ruby Ridge receded into the past.

The significance of these setbacks was clear in 2009, when right-wing extremism experienced another resurgence, but the white supremacist movement was not as able to capitalize on it as in 1995. Anger levels grew appreciably—but not numbers.

Even without increased numbers, white supremacists managed to make themselves felt with a series of brutal violent attacks, including—but hardly limited to—a spree of shootings and sexual assault by Massachusetts white supremacist Keith Luke, the Von Brunn attack on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Richard Poplawski’s ambush and murder of three Pittsburgh police officers, Wade Michael Page’s

shooting rampage against a Wisconsin Sikh temple, and the deadly attacks on Jewish institutions in Overland Park, Kansas, carried out by long-time white supremacist Frazier Glenn Miller.

The one true recent growth area for white supremacists has been with white supremacist prison gangs, which increased both in number and membership across much of the United States. Even more importantly, such groups became just as active on the streets as they were behind bars. In 2015, a list of the largest white supremacist groups in the U.S. would consist primarily of white supremacist gangs that originated behind bars. Moreover, thanks in large part to the Internet (see below), members of these gangs are increasingly able to develop connections with and imbibe ideas from other segments of the white supremacist right.

### Anti-government Extremists in 1995 and 2015

The growth of anti-government extremism has been the most important development in the extreme right in the past 20 years, playing a major role in the surges of both the 1990s and the 2010s.

Prior to the 1990s, anti-government extremism within the extreme right significantly overlapped with white supremacy; it wasn't even necessarily a fully separate movement. The surge of the 1990s, however, brought in a huge influx of new blood to the anti-government sphere of the extreme right. These new adherents were not white supremacists or necessarily even racist, but rather had extreme conspiratorial beliefs about their own government. The militia movement that emerged in the 1990s even included some African-American activists, most notably J. J. Johnson, who headed the largest militia group in Ohio. The sovereign citizen movement had attracted African-American adherents since 1995.

Seen in this light, Timothy McVeigh—who had ties to white supremacy as well as anti-government extremism—though after his arrest he tried to downplay the former—was not so much a symbol of the new type of anti-government extremist as he was a bridge between old and new. In 1994-1995, many who monitored the extreme right had difficulty understanding the nature of anti-government movements like the militia movement, initially assuming that it was populated by white supremacists, then later acknowledging that many adherents were not racist but arguing that those people were being manipulated by a core group of actual white supremacists.

It took a few years before it became generally understood that the “Patriot” movement of the 1990s was not simply white supremacy in a different guise but rather represented a different form of right-wing extremism, whose ire was aimed specifically at the government.

In the wake of the triggering events of the early 1990s, the “Patriot” movement grew amazingly quickly. During the course of 1994, militia groups had formed or were forming in the majority of states. The sovereign citizen movement—often referred to as the “common law court” movement at the time, because forming fictitious judicial entities was a favorite tactic—grew nearly as quickly, as did the tax protest movement.

Many of the people who joined these movements were very angry, especially those drawn to the militia movement. In the early years of that movement, federal and state law enforcement agencies would make major arrests of militia group members who were engaged in a variety of plots and conspiracies in West Virginia, Georgia, Arizona, Washington, Michigan, Florida and many other states. Sovereign citizens

conducted their own forms of violence, including spontaneous violent encounters with law enforcement as well as high-profile standoffs with the government by groups such as the Montana Freemen and the Republic of Texas. However, even those standoffs did little to raise public awareness of the sovereign citizen movement to that enjoyed by the militia movement.

By the end of the 1990s, however, many anti-government extremists had lost their energy, while a number of them were in prison. Meanwhile, sovereign citizens found that their cherished “common law courts” were typically nothing more than a fast track to jail. Both movements went into a period of decline. The decline that was particularly steep for the militia movement, which at one point in the early 2000s looked like it might simply die out. However, the movement stabilized and even had a mild rebound—enough to insure that it would be around for the next resurgence.

The surge that began in 2009 continued the long-term trend of anti-government extremists playing an increasingly important role within the extreme right. A wave of anti-government anger swept the country, creating the Tea Party movement in the mainstream and, on the fringes, giving new life to the “Patriot” movement.

The growth of anti-government extremists was just as dramatic in 2009-2010 as it was in 1994-1995. The number of active militia groups tracked by the Anti-Defamation League grew from around 50 in early 2008 to more than 250 by 2010, though most of these groups were small. Militia-related plots and conspiracies began to emerge again, typically targeting law enforcement, government officials, or government buildings.

Between 2009 and 2015, the state of Georgia alone saw three major militia-related conspiracies. The largest and most chilling involved more than a dozen individuals, most actually serving in the U.S. Army at the time, who had formed a militia group called Forever Enduring Always Ready (FEAR) that plotted a variety of terrorist acts. Not only did FEAR kill one of its own members, whom they suspected of being an informant, but they also murdered his teenage girlfriend. The ringleader, Isaac Aguigui, murdered his own pregnant wife to get funds to support his group.

A number of violent incidents in recent years involved individuals who adhered to the ideology of the militia movement but who were not formally part of any specific group. Perhaps the most alarming example of this type of extremist-related violence is the case of Jerad and Amanda Miller. Based on an analysis of his actions and writings, Jerad Miller appears to have closely hewed to the anti-government ideology and conspiracy theories associated with the militia movement. His wife, Amanda, started out with more generic anti-government attitudes but adopted militia beliefs after meeting Jerad. In June 2014, the couple entered a Las Vegas pizza restaurant and gunned down two police officers eating lunch. They moved to a Walmart, where Amanda killed a civilian who attempted to stop them. In a final shootout, police killed Jerad Miller and Amanda Miller committed suicide.

The growth of the sovereign citizen movement, fueled by the recession and the mortgage crisis, was even more spectacular, with resulting violence, scams and frauds, and “paper terrorism” retaliatory tactics occurring all across the country. A 2014 survey of law enforcement officers revealed that the sovereign citizen movement was their highest extremist-related concern. The concern is understandable; sovereign citizens have been involved in many of the shootouts between police and extremists in recent years, with incidents typically stemming from confrontations during traffic stops or residence visits. Sovereign citizens have also been arrested in the 2010s for plots to kill or kidnap police officers or government officials.

One of the major areas of growth for the sovereign citizen movement in recent years has been within the African-American community—a community not historically associated with right-wing extremist movements. However, the ideology of the sovereign citizen movement is so flexible that it was able to make inroads among Africa-Americans, resulting in an Afro-centric offshoot of the sovereign citizen movement often called the “Moorish” movement. The sovereign citizen movement has also made inroads into other minority communities within the U.S., and expanded abroad to other English-speaking countries, making it to some extent an international movement.

### The Role of Technology in 1995 and 2015

One of the most striking differences between right-wing extremism as it existed in 1995 and its current state in 2015 is the role of technology in the two different eras. In particular, the growth and evolution of the Internet has affected almost every aspect of right-wing extremism, just as it has influenced so many facets of modern life.

The world in which Timothy McVeigh lived and acted was, in practical terms, largely a pre-Internet world. McVeigh himself never seems to have participated on the Internet before his arrest. In 1995, access to the Internet was quite limited; it is estimated that by the end of the year only around 16 million people in the world used the Internet.

So where did McVeigh get his information? He, and others like him, absorbed their extremist rhetoric from a range of sources. McVeigh subscribed to or read many right-wing extremist newsletters and publications, ranging from the anti-government *Patriot Report* newsletter to the anti-Semitic and conspiratorial *Spotlight* newspaper (even placing classified ads in the latter). He purchased extremist and conspiracy VHS videotapes at gun shows and from mail order catalogues. He listened to right-wing radio shows broadcast over little-known satellite radio stations.

This constituted the right-wing extremist media in 1995. When extremists mobilized, they tended to do so slowly, as it took time for news to get around. A few extremists used ham radio. Particularly popular were so-called “fax trees,” organized by groups like the American Patriot Fax Network, where people would fax messages to others, who would send the information down the line to their own fax lists, and so forth. How did McVeigh express his opinions? He wrote letters to newspapers.

Right-wing extremists were not backwards about technology; some had even used computer bulletin boards back in the 1980s. When Usenet, a massive compilation of early Internet-based discussion forums or “newgroups,” grew in popularity in the early 1990s, white supremacists quickly joined to spread hatred and Holocaust denial. In early 1995, a militia-related newsgroup appeared in Usenet. When the World Wide Web began to spread in 1994, right-wing extremists hopped aboard and became some of the Web’s early adopters. The first white supremacist site, Stormfront, debuted in 1995 (and not only survives in 2015 but thrives); others would soon follow. Still, the sum total of extremist users was still extremely small, because the total of all users was tiny.

The number would not, however, stay small. By the time a federal jury convicted Timothy McVeigh for his crimes, the Internet had 70 million users. At his execution, it had half a billion. Today, over three billion people use the Internet and that number still growing.

The exploitation of the Internet by right-wing extremists has occurred in three main stages. From 1995-2000, most extremist content consisted of static web pages created by groups or individuals. During the period 2001-2006, the rise in popularity of on-line discussion forums fostered much more frequent interaction between extremists, allowing them to network and to spread their ideas more quickly. On-line commerce also took off, allowing right-wing extremists to sell everything from white power music to books about conspiracy theories.

The most significant stage, however, really took hold in 2007 and continues today. Social networking sites exploded in popularity, heralding what some dubbed “Web 2.0.” From the beginning, both white supremacists and anti-government extremists took to social networking sites. Myspace was especially popular at first, then Facebook, as well as video streaming sites like YouTube. In addition, extremists were also active in a wide variety of smaller and more niche social networking sites, including some they created for themselves.

The social networking revolution had major implications for right-wing extremists of all persuasions. Extremists found that social networking sites offered them very useful personal platforms. They were able to connect with like-minded people more easily than ever, with some extremist groups forming in the physical world entirely through connections made online. Violent or criminal acts now sometimes occurred in the same way, with perpetrators meeting each other on-line or formulating their plans over the Internet.

Social networking made things like fax networks look as ancient as dinosaurs. It no longer took days or weeks or months for news of a mobilizing event to make its way across a movement. Now it might take only hours.

The growth of social networking sites has also exposed large numbers of younger people to these movements, allowing many to join. This was most noticeable with the militia and sovereign citizen movements. The 1990s version of these movements included some young people, but most adherents tended to be middle-aged or older. By the 2010s, a flood of twenty-somethings were involved with anti-government extremist movements. In fact, a number of the militia members and sovereign citizens arrested in recent years have been in their twenties.

Finally, social networking has facilitated connections within and among extremist groups. This has been especially true for white supremacist prison gangs, allowing members on the streets to stay in contact with each other, while also allowing members of such gangs to meet and interact with white supremacists from other movements. As a result, gangs have adopted more beliefs and concepts from other white supremacists. Social networking has also allowed the growth of real-world ties between extremists, from shared social events to shared participation in hate crimes.

Of all the changes between 1995 and 2015, the development and evolution of the Internet has been the most significant. That said, overall there has still been more continuity than change from one era to the next. Right-wing extremism was a major threat in 1995, targeting minorities, the government, and anybody who did not subscribe to their fringe ideologies. In 2015, the situation is the same. In both eras, right-wing extremists have been responsible for the majority of extremist-related violence in the United States.



However, the Oklahoma City bombing, in its horror and destruction, highlighted the danger that right-wing extremists posed in 1995. The more recent resurgence of right-wing extremism has gone largely unnoticed.