

The US is facing a resurgence of home-grown militia groups advocating violence against government or minority targets. Amir Lechner examines the reasons for their rise and asks whether they present a serious threat

# HOME-GROWN RADICALS



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## FBI Definitions

**Terrorism:** The unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.

**Hate Crime:** A hate crime, also known as a bias crime, is a criminal offence committed against a person, property or society that is motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or ethnicity/national origin.

anti-government religious sect (the Branch Davidians) and their self-described prophet. During an invasion of the compound by federal agents, it burst into flames. Seventy-six of the persons within the building were killed; many of these were women and children. Official reports state the Davidians themselves started the fire in an enforced mass-suicide of everyone in the cult; it is widely held in many militia circles that the federal government started the fire, however.

The militia movement has always been present in the United States, dating back to the first years of rebellion; indeed, virtually all militia members see in themselves kindred spirits with the "everymen" who took up arms against the British during the Revolutionary War. The movement has, however, waxed and waned in popularity, generally along economic lines. The Waco incident, along with the economic recession of the early 1990s, inspired a huge resurgence in militia enrollment (as well as serving as the primary inspiration of Timothy McVeigh). By the end of that decade radical militias had all but vanished; the economy was recovering, a strict conservative was in the White House, and the national focus was soundly on a foreign threat.

The issues of today have prompted yet another revival of the militia movement. In the past two years, the United States has experienced a massive economic downturn, a shaken faith in the financial system, the election of the first African-American President and a focus by the ruling Democratic Party on increased co-operation with foreign countries. Given the trends of the past, it is not surprising that the Southern Poverty Law Center, a non-profit group that studies civil rights issues, noted a nearly 300 per cent jump in the number of known militia groups between 2008 and 2009 (from 42 to 127).

One generally does not get noticed in

society by staying solidly in the mainstream; to be notable, feared or respected, one has to embrace an extreme. Many people, like Ghandi, dislike violence, but like Machiavelli there are also many cynical political philosophers. Any ideological organisation provides a certain closed group dynamic, a safe bubble in which one can openly embrace and talk about opinions that in the larger society might be greeted with repulsion, confusion, or anger. This shifting of "normal" results in a jarring culture shock when someone from these small societies is suddenly thrust into the larger. One who might only be a slight outlier in a militia meeting room could be viewed as a near sociopath by the standards of society at large. Thus, while a militia group itself may not communally become physically violent, it can serve as a sort of support group, feeding the ideology of the few among them who intend to move from thoughts and words to actions.

Militia groups are not alone in fermenting violent response to social or political problems. Militias tend to attract those whose focus is political; hate groups such as the racial purists of the Supreme White Alliance, or Christian fundamentalists of the Army of God, are similarly frequent advocates of violence whose rhetoric has repeatedly inspired or validated the illegal actions of some members.

The targets of these radicals have been consistent for decades. The more politically inclined target government buildings associated with tax collection or law enforcement, while the religious fundamentalists target abortion providers, particularly Planned Parenthood facilities. The racial purists attack notable individuals or centers focusing on a particular ethnicity or religion, particularly Jewish synagogues.

Where would one draw the line between hateful speech and inciting violence? Between a militia group and

After nearly a decade of the word "terrorism" being virtually synonymous with "foreign extremist" in the United States, the March 2010 arrest of nine Hutaree militia members for "conspiring to levy war" against the US government has once again thrust domestic security risks into the forefront of the national conversation.

Many of the details that emerged following the arrest painted the militia members as almost comical: pseudo-military training videos dubbed with rock music; the invention of a "secret dialect"; noms de guerre such as "Merzonik" and "Pip". The group was undeniably well armed, however, and its plan (murdering a police officer and

then attacking the funeral with IEDs) was simple enough to be plausible.

Much of the Hutaree's philosophical foundation is shared by many of the estimated 130 armed militia groups in the United States. While they vary in priority from group to group, many of these "patriot" militia groups share the same elements: fear of government authority (specifically fear of the government disarming civilians), Christian fundamentalism, nationalism and racism.

The overwhelming majority of these militia groups pose no real risk, resembling highly political gun clubs more than paramilitary organisations. The incendiary rhetoric they espouse

has ultimately resulted in violent actions in the past, however. Easily the most notable is the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 persons and injured nearly 700 more. This, the largest terrorist attack on US soil prior to the September 2001 attacks, was perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, both of whom were associated with the militia movement.

The harmful wing of the militia movement thrives on perpetrating fears – political fears that the federal government will become authoritarian, or will collapse, or will cede sovereignty to a world government. These are intertwined with social fears – fears that



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*Militant groups in the US have attacked racial, religious and political targets*

► a terrorist organisation? Between the act of a lone-wolf rightwing extremist and a terrorist attack? These seemingly philosophical questions have a very real impact on which tools law enforcement has available to detect and prevent ideological violence before the perpetrators have the opportunity to execute their plans.

The Patriot Act in particular allows law enforcement significant leeway in dealing with terrorist investigations, but there is a definite reluctance to apply that term to domestic extremist groups. The indictment of the Hutaree, for example, charges them with being an “anti-government organisation which advocates violence against local, state, and federal law enforcement.” The group was charged with seditious conspiracy and attempt to use weapons of mass destruction, as well as several weapons-related charges, but there was no mention of the word terrorism.

This does not stem from an overall reluctance to bring terrorism charges to the courtroom; in addition to well-publicised applications to foreigners, US law enforcement have used terrorism-related charges against US citizens to stop school shootings, work-related murders, drug dealing, and many other crimes. The application of the word to domestic ideological extremists, however, is relatively rare.

While politics and public relations are

certainly partial causes for this reluctance, law enforcement is no doubt also taking care to ensure it does not produce a counterproductive backlash. Waco and other incidents in the early 1990s created the perception of a government crackdown on militias; the response was a drastic surge in militia membership. Even the possibility of tightened gun-control laws is sufficient to send sales of weapons and ammunition skyrocketing. If law enforcement made an observable effort to categorise more domestic ideological groups as terrorists, it would almost certainly result in more frequent attacks.

Perhaps the largest game-changer in this conversation is the Internet, which has the potential to exacerbate the closed-group mentality that fosters potentially violent ideologues. Chat rooms and websites on every manner of topic allow one to surround oneself only with those who hold similar opinions. A man sitting in a predominately African-American neighbourhood can have a bustling Internet social life communing only with neo-Nazi white supremacists. A global community of many thousands would be there to validate his opinions, make them seem typical, even suggest avenues to push them further into extremes. He can create a life where he almost never needs to be exposed to contrary points of view, and where no

one would see the potential for very real violence.

Our whole media structure is following the Internet – increasingly allowing individuals to customise their data intake to suit their philosophy. Regardless of where one falls on the political spectrum, one can find news channels, newspapers, radio talk shows and Internet social groups catering to one’s worldview. This will greatly complicate the problem of predicting militia and hate group-related violence in the United States. Soon, a mere counting of militia groups or hate groups will no longer give an accurate assessment of the severity of the threat. For that, one would have to immerse oneself in their virtual communities, read their blogs, listen to their talk shows and continually revise one’s definition of “normal”. ■

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