

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

PATRIOTS OR PARANOIDS? THE CREATION OF A PUBLIC IDENTITY FOR
THE MODERN MILITIA MOVEMENT

A Thesis in Speech Communication

By

Heather M. Norton

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2005

The thesis of Heather M. Norton was reviewed and approved* by the following:

J. Michael Hogan
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences
Thesis Advisor
Chair of Committee

Thomas W. Benson
Professor of Speech Communication
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Rhetoric

Stephen H. Browne
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

John D. McCarthy
Professor of Sociology

James P. Dillard
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences
Head, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

The Oklahoma City bombing brought the modern Militia Movement to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. After uncovering accused bomber Timothy McVeigh's anti-government sentiments and his connections to the Michigan Militia, the federal government and the news media rushed to investigate the dangers posed by this movement—a movement that criticized the government for allegedly seeking to disarm law-abiding Americans and to limit their constitutional rights. The struggle that ensued over the public identity of the militias is the focus of this study.

The study investigates the public debate over the militias beginning with the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, and ending in 1996, when the militias disappeared from the headlines. Focusing on the “portraits” of the militias produced by the movement's own leaders, so-called “watchdog” groups, and the Clinton administration, it examines how a variety of advocates worked to shape public perceptions of the movement. In addition, it considers images of the militias in news coverage and popular culture.

Ultimately, the public image of the militias as dangerous domestic terrorists was the product of several factors. First, their perceived involvement in the Oklahoma City bombing fused the militias' identity with violence and terrorism. Second, the movement's lack of leadership and rhetorical sophistication gave an advantage to its critics in the public debate. Finally, the media's reliance upon the watchdog groups for “expert testimony” gave the militias' critics a decided advantage in the contest to shape public perception of the movement.

In exploring the contest over the militias' public image, this study reveals the difficulties faced by radical social movements in establishing a positive public image in mainstream news media and the power of professional watchdog groups and mainstream politicians in shaping media coverage.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction: The Modern Militia Movement	1
Scholarship on the Militia Movement	8
Plan of this Study	16
Notes	22
Chapter Two: Under Fire: The Militias Go Public	27
Militia Leaders Take the Stage: Embracing the Paranoid Style	31
Militia Leaders Respond to the Bombing: Retreat and Reconstruction	38
<i>The Militia Leaders on Capitol Hill</i>	45
Moderates vs. Militants	56
Conclusion	61
Notes	66
Chapter Three: Managing the Crisis: The Clinton Administration Responds to the Militia Movement	72
A Rhetoric of Resolve and Reassurance	74
Reframing the Oklahoma City Bombing	79
<i>The Crusade Against Radical Rhetoric</i>	82
<i>Clinton Implicates the Militias</i>	85
<i>Clinton Calls for Anti-Terrorism Legislation</i>	89
Conclusion	93
Notes	96
Chapter Four: On The Attack: “Anti-Hate” Watchdog Groups Sound the Warning	102
A Brief History of the Anti-Hate Watchdog Groups	106
A Dangerous New Movement	109
The Watchdog Groups and the Oklahoma City Bombing	114
<i>Assigning Blame: Militia Complicity in the Bombing</i>	116
<i>Vilification by Association: The Militias as Racist</i>	118
<i>A Maligning of Motives: The Militias as Paranoid</i>	121
<i>Engendering Fear: The Militias as Armed and Dangerous</i>	123
Redefining “Patriot”	126
Conclusion	131
Notes	134

Chapter Five: “Feeding Frenzy”: The News Media’s Depiction of the Militia Movement	140
The Militias as Harmless	142
The News Media Goes on the Attack	145
<i>Revealing Untenable Motives: The Militias as Paranoid and Racist...</i>	148
<i>Establishing the Threat: The Militias as Armed and Dangerous</i>	152
<i>Sources that Shaped the Media Coverage</i>	157
News Media Coverage of the Militias One Year Later	161
Conclusion	164
Notes	167
 Chapter Six: Crackpots and Terrorists: Representations of The Militia Movement in Popular Fiction and Film	172
The Militias in Popular Fiction: Criminals and Crackpots	174
<i>The Maggody Militia</i>	174
<i>Brothers.....</i>	178
The Militias in Hollywood Film: Dangerous Terrorists	181
<i>Militia</i>	182
<i>Arlington Road.....</i>	187
The Militias in Military Fiction: Principled and Formidable Foes	192
Conclusion	196
Notes	198
 Chapter Seven: The Development of the Militia Movement’s Public Identity	200
Larger Implications: The Militia Movement and Public Identity	204
Postscript.....	208
Notes	212
 Bibliography	216

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“What made you think that you could do this?” a woman from my small Indiana hometown asked me recently. “You’re from *here*.” To me, the answer was obvious. It is the *people* that we encounter—not the *place* that we begin—that allow us to go beyond what is known and expected. It is with that in mind that I acknowledge the following people for their assistance along the way.

My advisor, Dr. J. Michael Hogan, read numerous drafts of this project, pushing me to refine both my thinking and writing. He has convinced me that there is no excuse for not “sweating the details,” and this project is infinitely better for his careful guidance. The coursework and conversations that I enjoyed with my other committee members also prepared me for this undertaking. Although the late Dr. Richard Gregg was unable to witness the completion of this project, he still feels to me to be a part of it.

The administration and faculty of Fontbonne University, especially the Department of English and Communication, have been my colleagues and cheerleaders. Their support was unequivocal—and very much appreciated.

The friendships that I formed at Penn State were one of the most rewarding aspects of my graduate experience. I retained my sanity, self-confidence, and sense of humor due mostly to the friendship of Jennifer Borda, Elise Harbin, David Schultz, and Judith Weiner. I like to think that I helped them do the same. Everyone who writes a dissertation should be so lucky as to have a friend and writing partner like Dave.

Melva Eddy set me on the path to a career in communication, and was the first to suggest to me that I could be from somewhere “small” and still “think big.”

Dr. Larry and Jean Underberg opened their home to me—and then ignored me—as I worked to finish the major revisions on this document. I was fortunate to meet them as an undergraduate at Manchester College, and have benefited from their generosity, encouragement, and thoughtful commentary since. Both were significant factors in the completion of this project.

My family shared much of the emotional burden of this process. Specifically, my parents Kim and Mary Norton, my grandmothers, Betty Kellett and Dorcas Norton, and my sister Brooke and her family Chris, Gabrielle, and Owen. Joan Arnold and Bob Gallup, while perhaps not related, certainly fall into this category. Although I suspect that they might not always have understood *why* I chose to pursue this path, they certainly never wavered in their support of my work. If they did waiver, they kept to themselves. Either way, I am deeply grateful for their continued love and support, as well as their daily examples of how to live loving, genuine, and meaningful lives.

Chapter One

Introduction: The Modern Militia Movement

A frustration born of the union between personal impotence and an omnipotent cause leads to the righteousness that can brook no talk of practicality.

--Garry Wills, *A Necessary Evil*¹

Garry Wills's reflection on terrorist bombers is also an apt description of the modern Militia Movement. The Militia Movement emerged from rural America in the mid-1990s to oppose what it purported to be the federal government's increasing disregard for the constitutional rights of its citizenry. Arguing that they, themselves, were duty-bound to reverse the nation's course, the militias organized and armed themselves in preparation for a war with the U.S. government. Practicality, it seems, was of little concern. The militias' secret meetings, paramilitary training, conspiracy theories, and links to terrorist acts such as the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City soon earned it the reputation of being "the most brutal face of the extreme right in the United States today."²

Most of mainstream America became acquainted with the Militia Movement in the weeks after the April 19, 1995, bombing in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people. The attack's similarity to the February 26, 1993, bombing of the World Trade Center by Muslim terrorists from the Middle East initially led reporters and terrorism experts to speculate that the same forces had struck again.³ The initial speculations proved incorrect, however, and a shocked nation watched as Timothy McVeigh, a young Army

veteran of the Persian Gulf War, was arrested for the crime. Investigators quickly uncovered McVeigh's anti-government sentiments and attendance at a Michigan Militia meeting, and the public turned its attention to the Militia Movement to understand the beliefs that had prompted the most destructive act of domestic terrorism in United States history. When introduced to the movement through the media coverage, legal scholar David Williams reported, most people "reacted with horror at the paranoia, racism, and violence that is characteristic of some of the movement's members."⁴ Although militia leaders vehemently denied any association with McVeigh, the public's understanding of the movement has since been rooted in the Oklahoma City bombing. Martin Durham observed, "Whether mocked as weekend warriors or feared as fascist Friekorps, [the militias] have been seen as the milieu from which the Oklahoma bombing emerged."⁵

This project examines the public debate over the Militia Movement after the Oklahoma City bombing. It considers the factors that contributed to the creation of the movement's public identity by examining the public discourse produced by the movement itself and by its opponents. It focuses on the public statements of militia leaders, representatives of the Clinton Administration, and anti-hate watchdog groups. Finally, it considers the portraits of the militias created by mainstream press coverage of these groups and by representations of the militias in popular culture.

The Militia Movement is comprised of a network of discrete and autonomous units linked more by ideology than formal structure, but united in its shared suspicion of the federal government.⁶ Militia followers offer the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as the authorizing source for the existence of their movement. The movement has articulated its foremost concern as what it perceives as a government

conspiracy to disarm “law-abiding” citizens.⁷ In addition, many in the movement suggest that disarming all American citizens is only the first step in a secret government plot to relinquish the nation’s sovereignty to a “One World Government.”⁸ Many militia members contend that retaining their right to bear arms and mounting an armed revolution will be necessary to preserve the nation’s independence.⁹

Pointing to a single factor that caused the rise of the modern Militia Movement would ignore the complexity inherent in the development of this, or any, social movement. Scholars have suggested that “the rise of fundamentalism, awareness of governmental corruption and incompetence, declining educational standards, and the changing economy” have all contributed to the growth of the movement.¹⁰ Whatever the underlying causes, however, three precipitating events generally are identified as the catalysts that led disgruntled “patriots” to organize the Militia Movement. The first event has come to be known simply as “Ruby Ridge.” Attempts by federal marshals to serve an arrest warrant for gun charges on Randy Weaver in Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992 resulted in an armed standoff between Weaver’s family and government agents. The killing of Weaver’s wife and son during the episode convinced many already suspicious of the government’s activities of its special hostility toward those who violate gun laws. The second event came one year later when agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and the FBI were met with gunfire as they attempted to serve warrants on gun charges at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. After another standoff, on April 19, 1993, seventy-six men, women, and children died when fire engulfed the compound. The “assault” further demonstrated, at least in the minds of the growing militia contingent, the government’s increasing disregard for individual rights. Finally,

the militias interpreted passage of the Brady Bill in 1993 as further evidence of the government's anti-gun agenda. The Brady Law, which created a waiting period for handgun purchase, proved to militia leaders that the government was steadily moving toward denying American citizens the right to bear arms.

The unorganized and underground nature of the Militia Movement has made accurate estimations of its size difficult. In 1995 watchdog groups estimated that there were between ten thousand and forty thousand militia members in forty states.¹¹ The militias themselves usually put the figure much higher.¹² Watchdog groups claimed that the broader "Patriot Movement" had as many as five million followers in the mid-1990s, with most of those supportive of, if not actually involved in, the Militia Movement.¹³ Laird Wilcox, an independent researcher who studies extremism, however, has suggested that the movement had never attracted more than ten thousand members, and that many of those were driven away by the Oklahoma City bombing.¹⁴

Despite the movement's loose organizational structure, several prominent militia leaders emerged as media representatives of the movement in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. John Trochmann, co-founder of the Militia of Montana (M.O.M.), is the movement's most visible leader. The soft-spoken Trochmann has publicly defended the militias on numerous television news and interview programs. He also testified before a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee investigating the militias in 1995 and has spoken regularly at survivalist "Preparedness Expos."¹⁵ In addition to Trochmann, Norman Olson has been one of the most charismatic, outspoken, and militant militia advocates since he founded the Michigan Militia, the largest militia unit in the nation.¹⁶ Olson's fiery oratory reflects his background as a Baptist preacher. His militant rhetoric

and demeanor quickly made Olson a favorite of the media. Typically dressed in camouflage fatigues with “Commander” stitched on his breast pocket, Olson has represented the militias on several television news interview programs. He also testified in the 1995 Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing along with Trochmann and other militia activists.

Other militia spokespersons have included Ken Adams, one of Olson’s colleagues from Michigan and a regular representative of the militias on *Nightline* and other news programs, and James “JJ” Johnson, one of the movement’s few African-American leaders. Conspiracy theory guru Mark “From Michigan” Koernke also has been considered an opinion leader within the movement, although he has only occasionally been interviewed by print and broadcast media.¹⁷

Although each of these militia leaders has a different public persona, they are all united by their claims that the federal government is steadily eroding citizens’ freedoms. None claims to lead the Militia Movement nationally, but their regular public appearances in the national news media has created the impression that the movement does have a central leadership.

Some militia groups may be little more than an “armed neighborhood watch,” as John Trochmann has claimed, but others are heavily armed and produce “extreme antigovernment, tax protest, and conspiratorial ‘freemen’ rhetoric that more or less conforms to the media stereotype.”¹⁸ Militia leaders may deny that Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was a militia member, but there is little doubt that he was motivated by the same anti-government ideology. Therefore, it is difficult to dismiss law professor R. J. Larizza’s warning that “the militia movement can be viewed as a loose

cannon lurking in the shadows of American society.”¹⁹ To ignore or to discount the movement is to further marginalize it—at our own risk—and forfeit the opportunity to study the rhetorical nature of one of the late-twentieth century’s most radical social movements.

Besides the federal government, “watchdog” groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have comprised the most visible opposition to the militias. These groups are most concerned about the Militia Movement’s capacity for violence and what they perceive as a growing overlap between the militias and white supremacist groups.²⁰ While there are a number of watchdog groups, the SPLC and the ADL have been the most active in their opposition to the militias. Both have added the militias to their lists of “hate groups” in America.

Morris Dees and Joseph Levin founded the SPLC in 1971 as a small civil-rights law firm. It has become well known for its tracking of, and litigation against, racist groups such as Neo-Nazi Skinheads and the Ku Klux Klan.²¹ In 1994 the firm established the Militia Task Force to monitor the rising movement, and since then the Task Force has regularly provided the federal government, law enforcement agencies, and the media with information regarding the Militia Movement through special reports and the SPLC’s quarterly newsletter *Klanwatch*.

The ADL seeks to “expose and combat the purveyors of hatred in our midst.”²² The group focuses on fighting anti-Semitism, but it also monitors and publishes information about the militias as well as a variety of other groups on the far right. The ADL published eight reports between 1994 and 1996 “exposing” the militias. The reports included *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*

(1994); *Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows* (1995); *An Update of Armed and Dangerous* (1995); and *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute: A Response to Domestic Terrorism* (1995).²³ Representatives of the ADL also appeared on television news interview programs and testified before Congress about the danger posed by the militia “extremists.”²⁴

Despite their obvious biases as political opponents of the militias, watchdog groups have had a significant impact on public perceptions of the militias. They have highlighted the dangers posed by the militias in special reports, congressional testimony, and media appearances. As the most readily available sources on the militias and other far-right groups, the watchdog groups have provided much of the information about the militias used in mainstream news reports. These watchdog groups, Adam Parfrey has argued, have been accepted by the news media as “unimpeachable and objective news sources.”²⁵

Media coverage of the militias after the Oklahoma City bombing was extensive and generally focused on the movement’s paranoia and militancy. Political scientist John George and Laird Wilcox have characterized media coverage of the militias in the mid-1990s as a “feeding frenzy.”²⁶ Popular periodicals and newspapers, as well as broadcast and cable news programs, ran daily updates on the bombing, the investigation, and the Militia Movement’s responsibility in the attack. “The media,” journalist Mack Tanner observed, “told us with lots of film clips of Americans training in the woods that the militia movement represents a threat to American society every bit as serious as Middle Eastern terrorists.”²⁷

Leaders within the Militia Movement took exception to such characterizations and sought to publicly counter the images. The movement, once content to advance its message through personal networking, speeches, and mail-order videotapes, was forced into the spotlight to defend itself. Once there, militia leaders worked hard to shape a more positive public image for the movement by granting interviews with print and broadcast media, testifying before Congress, and making public speeches.

Although press coverage of the movement had subsided significantly by the end of 1996, by the late-1990s the Militia Movement had made its way into popular culture. It was the primary subject of two Hollywood movies, a series of adult military-adventure novels, a mystery novel, and a teen adventure story. Even when the news coverage faded, images of the Militia Movement remained prominent in American popular culture.

Scholarship on the Militia Movement

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied the Militia Movement, but whatever their field, most agree that the movement is but the latest incarnation of a long tradition of right-wing extremism and rural radicalism in America. Historian David H. Bennett has suggested that the militias are best understood “if viewed in the context of the long history of the far right,” with the 1960s secret paramilitary Minutemen and the California Rangers serving as the movement’s most recent historical antecedents.²⁸

Journalist Joel Dyer adds the Ku Klux Klan to the list of the militias’ historical precursors, calling the KKK “the granddaddy of today’s antigovernment movement.”²⁹

George and Wilcox have located the movement’s roots in the survivalist movement of the

late 1970s.³⁰ For historian Catherine McNichol Stock, the history of the far right is also inextricably linked to the tradition of rural radicalism: “From the earliest days of settlement on the continent, rural Americans have taken the law into their own hands.”³¹ She has claimed that the “new rural radicals,” however, have “moved to such places as Hayden Lake and Ruby Ridge, Idaho” and “disavowed the American government’s authority over them.”³² These scholars all agree that while the modern militias may appear to be a new movement, they are simply the latest manifestation of the reactionary right.

Most scholars dismiss the Militia Movement’s interpretations of the First and Second Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. Communication scholars Robert Hinrichs and Marouf Hasian Jr. have argued that the First Amendment protects the militias’ right to circulate their literature, but that the stockpiling of weapons does not qualify as free speech or free assembly.³³ Scholars also reject the Militia Movement’s claim to constitute the “well-regulated militia” referred to in the Second Amendment. David C. Williams, for example, has argued that the Constitution’s framers granted the right to bear arms against the government to a *united* national citizenry, which would “rise up as a single, organic collective and quickly restore legitimate government,” not to a disgruntled few who objected to the direction of the nation and sought revolution.³⁴ Chuck Dougherty, another legal scholar, also has contended that the militias of the Second Amendment no longer exist, but for a different reason. The functions served by the eighteenth-century militias have been reassigned to state organizations such as the National Guard and state law enforcement agencies, according to Dougherty, rendering the modern private citizens’ militias outdated and beyond constitutional protection.³⁵

Thus, despite the movement's claim to legitimacy under the Constitution, the scholarly community has found the militias' arguments to be essentially groundless.

A subject central to scholarship on the militias has been the question of who joins the militias and why. Surprisingly, many "ordinary Americans" populate the movement, Bennett reports.³⁶ George and Wilcox are a bit more specific, stating that white men between the ages of thirty and sixty comprise the core of the movement.³⁷ FBI Special Agents James E. Duffy and Alan C. Brantley put the age range slightly lower, claiming that most militia members are "white males who range in age from the early twenties to the mid-fifties."³⁸ Analyzing population data, Sean P. O'Brien and Donald P. Haider-Markel concluded that activists were more likely to be found among "larger populations of Gulf War veterans, ardent gun owners, the politically disenchanted, and populations with a greater propensity for violence."³⁹ While white men comprise the largest contingent, George and Wilcox note that a "surprising number" of women are also active participants, and that several African-Americans, Asians, American Indians and Jews have been associated with militias.⁴⁰

Scholars typically attribute militia membership to societal change and religious fundamentalism. Bennett has suggested that the emergence of the militias and their attractiveness to members were a "byproduct of the end of the Cold War and the social and economic upheavals of the time."⁴¹ Having lost a common enemy provided by the Cold War, and struggling in quickly changing economic times, people in search of a way to make sense of the ever-changing world turned to the convenient explanations provided by the far right. Anthropologist Keith Akins also has argued that militia activism is explained in part by members' difficulty competing in today's economy, but Akins has

further suggested that religious fundamentalism more completely accounts for militia membership. Anti-government conspiracy theories are attractive to those who have already adopted a fundamentalist perspective and view the world “through a dualistic, conspiratorial, and millennial lens,” Akins contended.⁴² He has insisted, however, that “they are not evil people, nor are they stupid. Neither are they ‘crazy’ or ignorant. They are simply people in distress, caught up in cultural events beyond their control or comprehension.”⁴³

In analyzing the ideology of the Militia Movement, scholars have distinguished between moderate and more radical versions of militias. For example, Timothy Seul’s interactions with individual militia members and his attendance at various militias’ meetings led him to develop a typology of militia ideology that distinguished between “Patriotic Liberals” and “Patriotic Reconstructionists” within the movement. A Patriotic Liberal is a grassroots activist who believes in vigilant observation and reform of the government, but is not an extremist.⁴⁴ A Patriotic Reconstructionist, on the other hand, believes in conspiracies, sees no evidence of the America that he or she once loved, and finds nothing about the nation worth reforming.⁴⁵ Rebecca Katz and Joey Bailey’s content analysis of militia literature distinguished between “hate militias,” based on principles that exclude women and minorities, and “constitutional militias,” which are primarily concerned with abuses of power by the federal government.⁴⁶ Joe Bellon’s rhetorical analysis used individual militia members’ own language about their enemies to categorize them and identify three distinct types of militias. “Warrior Militias” are the most militant and dangerous, in that they offer members the opportunity to “become the kind of military hero most frequently idolized in modern popular culture: not the

plodding foot soldier, but the lone, well-armed patriot who eschews formality and hierarchy alike and pursued his own style of justice.”⁴⁷ “Racial Militias” are based on religious teachings that assert the supremacy of the white race and provide members “the opportunity to ally themselves with God” in a fight against the evil government.⁴⁸ Finally, “Public Militias” are akin to Seul’s Patriotic Liberals and Katz and Bailey’s constitutional militias in that they pose little threat of violence and are more interested in informing the public than in waging war against the federal government. All of these scholars recognize that individual militias exist on a continuum and range from those that pose little threat to those that are genuinely dangerous. They seem to agree that the most virulent militias are formed when anti-government sentiment is fused with firearms, racism, and wild conspiracy theories.

Rhetorical scholars have focused on how the Militia Movement has created an identity for its members to rally around. In an examination of four videotapes produced and distributed by the Militia of Montana, Elizabeth Mahan found that the movement’s collective identity revolved around the telling and re-telling the stories of Ruby Ridge and Waco. Mahan found that the videos depicted the Weavers and Branch Davidians as “Triumphant Individuals and Pioneers” who were “simply trying to live peacefully and practice religious freedom.” The videos aligned these modern martyrs with the heroes of the Revolutionary War.⁴⁹ Bellon found that the militias’ descriptions of their enemies were foundational to creating their own identity. More specifically, his analysis revealed that both the enemies chosen by the militias, and the words used to describe those enemies, were important to understanding how the militia interpreted the threat it faced, as well as how it wanted its members to perceive themselves.⁵⁰

Geoffrey Baym's examination of local television news coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing stands as one of only two scholarly studies focusing on media coverage of the Militia Movement. Examining eight local news stories from Salt Lake City, Utah, the communication scholar suggested that media coverage "was largely an effort to assess blame and re-establish the boundaries of moral propriety."⁵¹ Television news, Baym argued, used a "moralizing discourse" to maintain its privileged position as the primary narrator and moral agent of the people, while excluding the voice of the militias from the public debate.⁵²

Journalism and media scholar Steven M. Chermak conducted a more extensive study of the media coverage of the militias for his book *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement*.⁵³ Chermak examined newspaper coverage and popular entertainment media as a means of understanding the creation of the public's understanding of the militias, as well as what that construction revealed to be the media's role in shaping community boundaries.⁵⁴ He found that the news media most often used "threat" frames to depict the militias, specifically depicting the militias as "terrorists" and a "growing movement," and that popular culture outlets solidified the image of the militias as a legitimate threat through their regurgitation of "the most extreme of the distorted images presented in the news."⁵⁵

The difficulty and danger associated with studying such suspicious and militant groups has prompted scholars to turn to the watchdog groups for much of their information on the militias. Bennett, for example, acknowledges his debt to, among others, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League for the materials used to prepare his chapter on the rise of the Militia Movement.⁵⁶ Many

scholars have also cited *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat*, by the SPLC's Morris Dees as a useful source of information. While scholars no doubt understand the biases of watchdog groups, the fact remains that such groups often represent their only source of information about key figures or events.

While scholars studying the Militia Movement have elucidated many of its important aspects, there is still important work to be done. This project contributes to a more complete understanding of the Militia Movement on several fronts. First, few scholars have seriously examined the Militia Movement's own rhetoric in an effort to understand the public appeals of militia leaders. Accepting the rhetoric of the militias as just the most recent incarnation of extremist-right ideology has excused scholars from the need to critically evaluate the movement's rhetoric. With the exception of Mahon and Bellon, scholarly considerations of the rhetoric of the militias' own messages have been superficial, at best. While Mahon and Bellon each offer a careful rhetorical analysis of militia rhetoric, they limit their investigations to appeals made to movement members or sympathizers. Many questions remain, then, about how the Militia Movement sought to create a more legitimate public identity in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. This project fills that gap in our understanding of the Militia Movement by carefully considering the rhetoric generated by the militias for the purpose of public image repair and enhancement.

In some ways, watchdog groups remain the best source of information about the militias, yet they are hardly purveyors of objective information. In an attempt to influence policy, watchdog groups manipulate claims to coincide with their political agenda while ignoring evidence that contradicts or detracts from their purpose, as

sociologists Betty Dobratz and Stephanie Shanks-Meile have argued.⁵⁷ For example, based on their own research at white supremacist rallies, Dobratz and Shanks-Meile found that the SPLC's reporting portrayed such rallies as "more militant and dangerous with higher turnouts" than the researchers themselves had observed.⁵⁸ Joshua Freilich, Nelson Almanzar, and Craig Rivera have likewise noted that information from watchdog groups may be tainted by the organization's ideological opposition to the militias and should also be suspect due to watchdog groups' habit of being "somewhat vague in disclosing their methodology."⁵⁹ Instead of treating the watchdog groups as sources of objective information, this study approaches them as the Militia Movement's chief antagonists in an ongoing public debate. It examines their rhetoric as one side in the rhetorical *contest* over the militias' public identity.

Finally, scholars have focused on the militias themselves to the exclusion of the larger public conversation about the movement. Scholars have not examined reaction to the movement by the federal government or the watchdog groups. Nor have scholars, with the exception of Baym and Chermak, examined how the militias were covered by the news media or how the militias were represented in popular culture. This study of each of the "players" in the militia debate helps fill these gaps in the literature. No movement exists in a vacuum, and understanding the larger debate over the Militia Movement allows a better accounting of the choices made by the movement as well as by its opposition.

Plan of this Study

This study considers the Oklahoma City bombing as the precipitating incident that brought the Militia Movement to the attention of mainstream America and sparked a public debate over the movement's identity and character. I investigate the public conversation about the militias, focusing on the "portraits" of the militias produced by each of the debate's participants to discover: (a) *what* each of the parties wanted the public to believe about the Militia Movement, and (b) *how* they attempted to render their particular portrait persuasive. Finally, I examine news media coverage and representations of the militias in popular culture to determine how the portraits were appropriated for wider dissemination and which portraits ultimately prevailed. Therefore, this project was driven by the overarching questions: What portraits of the Militia Movement did both supporters and critics offer in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing? What rhetorical strategies did they use to promote their preferred images of the movement? More specifically, how did the various players try to legitimize or delegitimize the militias? Finally, how were those portraits received by, and reflected in, news coverage of the militias and in the rhetoric of popular culture?

To answer these questions, I investigated the public rhetoric of the Militia Movement, the Clinton administration, the two most prominent "anti-hate" watchdog groups, and the news media beginning with the rise of the movement in 1994 and concluding when media coverage of the movement faded in mid-1996.⁶⁰ Because the Oklahoma City bombing was the context within which the militias were made public, I used the public conversation about the militias in the wake of that event as the focal point

of analysis for each chapter. I examined how each of the parties in the debate characterized those who joined the militias, the origins and history of the movement, its purpose and core beliefs, its vision of the future, and its strategies and methods in pursuing its goals.⁶¹ In doing this I looked for characteristic patterns of discourse—historical accounts and analogies, interpretive frames, images of the opposition, predictions and prophecies, and the like—that shaped a particular public image of the Militia Movement. Finally, I examined the image of the militias as it was as reflected in popular culture by analyzing the dramatization of the movement in popular film and fiction.

As this study reveals, the public image of the modern Militia Movement as dangerous domestic terrorists was a product of several factors. The circumstances under which the militias came to public consciousness was key. The perception that the militias were somehow involved in the Oklahoma City bombing, and the nation's need to make sense out of that horrific act of domestic terrorism, fused the militias' identity to violence and terrorism. Second, the Militia Movement's general lack of internal coordination and rhetorical sophistication made it easier for the professionalized "counter movement" of the watchdog groups to discredit the movement. Finally, the media's adoption of the watchdogs as their primary sources on the militias provided the militias' most zealous opposition with a platform from which to broadcast its anti-militia message. With the anti-militia groups' viewpoints sanctioned as "objective" news, the militia groups were at a clear rhetorical disadvantage.

Chapter Two analyzes the efforts of militia leaders to shape a positive image for the movement. As rhetorician J. Robert Cox has argued, "one of the most acute and

continuing rhetorical problems to engage the leaders of a controversial movement is the need to establish a credible image for dissent.”⁶² Such problems were especially acute for the militias because of their admittedly radical nature and the lack of a central leadership structure that might have coordinated the public utterances of the group. Before the Oklahoma City bombing, the militias struggled to have their grievances and paramilitary ambitions taken seriously, and so they deliberately attempted to gain respect by touting their movement as an angry, armed rebellion. After bomber Timothy McVeigh became identified with the militias, however, the movement sought to “soften” its image. No longer dismissed by the media as isolated “nuts” playing harmless war games, militia members found themselves portrayed as dangerous domestic terrorists. The bombing, and the subsequent portrayal of the movement, threatened to undermine its public legitimacy and base of support. Militia leaders, therefore, redefined their movement’s image and adopted new rhetorical strategies designed to position it in the tradition of Revolutionary War militias.

Chapter Three examines the Clinton administration’s response to the Oklahoma City bombing and the Militia Movement. As both the actual and symbolic victim of the Oklahoma City bombing, the federal government responded legally with prosecutions of the individuals responsible and with augmentation of the “Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995,” including a number of amendments designed to expand the powers of federal law enforcement agencies to track and prosecute terrorism. Rhetorically, the Clinton administration managed the initial crisis using a rhetoric of resolve and reassurance, and characterized the bombers as “evil,” “murderous” “cowards.” Quickly, however, Clinton turned his criticism to the increasingly hateful tone of public discourse, and on the militia

in particular, as he placed his administration's critics on the defensive. He described the militias generally as "extremists," dismissed their beliefs as irrational, derided their rhetoric as "hate-filled," and warned that continued anti-government rhetoric would surely induce some of the more unbalanced members of the movement to commit further atrocities. One way to confront the threat that the militias represented, Clinton insisted, was for Congress to pass the anti-terrorism legislation that he had sent to Congress. Yet Clinton also emphasized the need for a change in the public discourse of American politics—an end to the rhetoric of hate.

Chapter Four examines the efforts of the so-called watchdog groups to expose and delegitimize the militias. While the federal government has been the Militia Movement's actual target, the watchdog groups served as the chief voice of opposition in the debate over the militias. With their abundant funding and media savvy, the watchdog groups had begun their efforts to discredit the militias well before the bombing. They therefore stood ready to counter the Militia Movement's efforts to repair its image. The Oklahoma City bombing provided the watchdogs with a broader public platform from which to broadcast their anti-militia warnings. The Militia Movement, they insisted, was the ideological birthplace of the bombers and harbored more Timothy McVeighs within its shadowy confines. The watchdogs were less interested in presenting a complete and accurate portrait of the militias than in the fanning alarmist flames ignited by the bombing. Using rhetorical strategies designed to discredit and vilify the militias, the watchdog groups portrayed the movement as racist, paranoid renegades who posed a danger to citizens and government alike.

Chapter Five considers news accounts of the Militia Movement. The impact of mass media on social movements is “undeniable,” according to social movement scholar Liesbet van Zoonen, “not only because of the impact they have on activists, but also—and more importantly—because of their role in the construction of a movement’s collective and public identity.”⁶³ The media’s unsympathetic portrait of the militias in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing was largely shaped by the enduring news values and conventions, but it also reflected an ideological choice to privilege the watchdog groups’ portrait of the militias over that of the movement’s own leaders. The militias depicted in news media reports was a shadowy group of rural, paranoid white men who had armed themselves in preparation for war with the federal government. The media warned its audience that the groups’ conspiracy theories and paramilitary training fused to create a genuine threat to the nation.

Chapter Six breaks away from the battle over the Militia Movement’s public identity immediately in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing to consider how the characters and stories of the Militia Movement were later dramatized in entertainment media. Clearly, popular culture both reflected and created images of the militias, but looking at the ways in which popular culture appropriated the images of the militia activist provides some measure of who prevailed in the public debate over the movement’s public identity. The films and novels examined in this study reflected and encouraged the cultural anxieties about the militias and their motivations. They also presented the groups as criminals or terrorists who used patriotism as a convenient excuse to eschew the nation’s laws and other dictates of society. The authors of these popular culture texts uniformly depicted the militia members as outlaws in conflict with law and

order and a danger to those around them. The artifacts affirmed the news media's depiction of the militias as domestic terrorists and solidified the Militia Movement's status as a symbol of paranoia and violence.

Chapter Seven draws on the conclusions of earlier chapters to explore some broader implications of this case study. It summarizes how the Militia Movement came to be viewed as a dangerous terrorist movement and uses the case study to shed light on the complex processes of identity creation in social movements. It suggests implications for our understanding of how movements try to shape news coverage of their efforts and the role of government and "counter movements" in the construction of a movement's public identity. Finally, it explores the implications of the study for our understanding of the relationship between social movements and the news media and popular culture.

This project takes a rhetorical approach to understanding the public controversy over the modern Militia Movement in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. It considers how the constituent players in the controversy surrounding the militias constructed different portraits of the movement for the consumption of the American public. Ultimately, it reveals which portrait of the militias prevailed and explains how and why that image gained ascendancy. Examination of the rhetorical interplay of the militias, the government, the watchdog groups, and the media of news and popular culture, contributes to our understanding of strategies available to social movements and their opponents as they battle to define their worlds.

Notes:

1. Garry Wills, *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 201.
2. Michael Cox and Martin Durham, "The Politics of Anger: The Extreme Right in the United States," in *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Paul Hainsworth (New York: Pinter, 2000), 287.
3. Mark Tanner, "Extreme Prejudice: How the Media Misrepresented the Militia Movement," *Reason*, July 1995, 42.
4. David C. Williams, "The Militia Movement and the Second Amendment Revolution: Conjuring with the People," *Cornell Law Review* 81 (May 1996): 880.
5. Martin Durham, "Preparing for Armageddon: Citizen Militias, the Patriot Movement and the Oklahoma City Bombing," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8 (Spring 1996): 76.
6. Joshua D. Freilich, Nelson A. Pichardo Alamanzer, and Craig J. Rivera. "Organizations Explicitly and Implicitly Promote Deviant Behavior: The Case of the Militia Movement," *Justice Quarterly* 13 (September 1999): 675.
7. The Second Amendment reads: "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."
8. John Keith Akins, "God, Guns, and Guts: Religion and Violence in Florida Militias" (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1998), 1. The "One World Government" is also known as the "New World Order."
9. L. Ross, "Militia Nation: Saying It With a Gun," *The Progressive*, June 1995, 26-27.
10. Akins, "God, Guns, and Guts," 56.
11. Chip Berlet, "Militia Nation," *The Progressive*, June 1995, 22-24.
12. On *The Phil Donahue Show* in December 1994 Robert Fletcher of the Militia of Montana estimated that the militia had approximately ten million people meeting regularly as a part of the militia movement. Multimedia Productions, *The Phil Donahue Show*, December 27, 1994 [videotape].

13. Berlet, "Militia Nation," 22-24.
14. Laird Wilcox, e-mail message to author, January 19, 2001.
15. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information, *The Militia Movement in the United States*, 104th Cong., 1st sess., June 15, 1995; Mike Tharp and William J. Holstein, "Mainstreaming the Militia," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 21, 1997, 25.
16. Though the Michigan Militia dismissed Olson for his public insistence that the Japanese government perpetrated the Oklahoma City Bombing in retaliation for an alleged American government's nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system, he founded another militia in Michigan and has remained an important opinion leader in the movement.
17. David Van Biema, "The Message From Mark," *Time*, June 26, 1995, 57.
18. John George and Laird Wilcox, *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists, and Others* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 260-261.
19. R. J. Larizza, "Paranoia, Patriotism, and the Citizen Militia Movement: Constitutional Right or Criminal Misconduct?" *Mercer Law Review* 47 (Winter 1996): 633.
20. See: Morris Dees with James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm. America's Militia Threat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Kenneth S. Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
21. "25 Years of Seeking Justice," *SPLC Report*, March 1996, 1.
22. Anti-Defamation League, "History of the Anti-Defamation League, 1913-2000," <http://www.adl.org/ADLHistory.html>
23. Irwin Suall, *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1994); Steven M. Freeman, *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1995); Thomas Halpern, *Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows; An Update of Armed and Dangerous* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1995).
24. Suall, *Armed and Dangerous*, 1.

25. Quoted in Laird Wilcox, *The Watchdogs: A Close Look at Anti-Racist "Watchdog" Groups*, 2nd ed. (Olathe, Kan.: by the author, 1999), 14.
26. George and Wilcox, *American Extremists*, 246.
27. Tanner, "Extreme Prejudice," 43.
28. David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to Militia Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), xviii, 3.
29. Joel Dyer, *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 241.
30. George and Wilcox, *American Extremists*, 249.
31. Catherine McNichol Stock, *Rural Radicals: From Bacon's Rebellion to the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 89.
32. Ibid., 3.
33. Robert Hinrichs and Marouf Hasian Jr., "The Militia Movement and the Limits of Freedom of Expression," (paper, National Communication Association Convention, New York City, November 1998).
34. Williams, "The Militia Movement and Second Amendment Revolution," 882.
35. Chuck Dougherty, "The Minutemen, the National Guard and the Private Militia Movement: Will the Real Militia Please Stand Up?" *John Marshall Law Review* 28 (Summer 1995): 985.
36. Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 471.
37. George and Wilcox, *American Extremists*, 249.
38. James E. Duffy and Alan C. Brantley, "Militias: Initiating Contact," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1997, 23.
39. Sean P. O'Brien and Donald P. Haider-Markel, "Fueling the Fire: Social and Political Correlates of Citizen Militia Activity," *Social Science Quarterly* 72 (June 1998): 464.
40. George & Wilcox, *American Extremists*, 249.
41. Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, 469.

42. Akins, "God, Guns, and Guts," x-xi.
43. Ibid., 161.
44. Timothy M. Seul, "Militia Minds: Inside America's Contemporary Militia Movement" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1997), 120.
45. Ibid., 135.
46. Rebecca C. Katz and Joey Bailey, "The Militia, A Legal and Social Movement Analysis: Will the Real Militia Please Stand Up? Militia Hate Group or the Constitutional Militia?" *Sociological Focus* 33 (2000): 139.
47. Joseph G. Bellon, "Well Regulated: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Modern American Militia Movement" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Georgia, 1999), 185.
48. Ibid.
49. Sarah Elizabeth Mahan, "A Dramatistic Analysis of the Video Rhetoric of the Militia of Montana" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 1997), 177.
50. Bellon, "Well Regulated."
51. Geoffrey Baym, "Constructing Moral Authority: *We* in the Discourse of Television News," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (Winter 2000): 93.
52. Ibid., 109.
53. Steven M. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002).
54. Ibid., 6-7.
55. Ibid., 116; Ibid., 210.
56. Bennett, *Party of Fear*, x.
57. Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, "*White Power, White Pride!: The White Supremacist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 3.
58. Ibid.
59. Freilich, Almanzar and Riviera, "Organizations Explicitly," 662.

60. In her book on the abortion controversy, Celeste Condit drew her primary sources not from a discrete body of texts, but instead from the “public discourse that constituted the most visible element of that controversy.” I will follow this lead and do the same for the controversy surrounding the identity of the militia movement. Celeste Michelle Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 1.
61. Elisabeth Van Zoonen, “The Women’s Movement and the Media: Constructing a Public Identity,” *European Journal of Communication* 7 (1992): 458. Van Zoonen suggests focusing on the traditional journalistic categories of what, who, how, and why when surveying media coverage to determine how the news has covered a movement. this approach would seem equally an equally valid way to consider how movements, opponents, and countermovements also attempt to construct a public identity.
62. J. Robert Cox, “Perspectives on Rhetorical Criticism of Movements: Antiwar Dissent, 1964-1970,” *Western Speech Journal* 38 (Fall 1974): 262.
63. Liesbet van Zoonen, “A Dance of Death: New Social Movements and Mass Media,” in *Political Communication in Action: States, Institutions, Movements, Audiences*, ed. David L. Paletz (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1996), 201.

Chapter Two

Under Fire: The Militias Go Public

The only thing standing between some of the current legislation
being contemplated and armed conflict is time.

--James Johnson, Ohio Unorganized Militia.¹

Armed with semi-automatic rifles and wild conspiracy theories, the modern Militia Movement moved out of its backwoods bunkers and into American living rooms in the mid-1990s. The national mainstream media discovered the fledgling movement in 1994. Between August and December of that year, the *New York Times*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Time* all published short reports treating the militias as a peculiar but generally innocuous groups that operated on the far-right fringe of society. On April 19, 1995, a truck-bomb demolished the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and wild speculation attributing the act to Middle-Eastern terrorists erupted in the news media. Three days after the bombing, however, federal authorities charged Timothy McVeigh with the crime and announced that he and alleged co-conspirator Terry Nichols had ties to the Michigan Militia. The modern Militia Movement subsequently found itself the target of intense media attention with news reports echoing alarming proclamations made by the Clinton administration and “anti-hate” watchdog groups. Together these voices warned Americans that the militias were the newest and most virulent domestic terrorist threat of the 1990s.

Public derision of the militias by the news media, the Clinton administration, and watchdog groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) left the movement's leaders with few rhetorical choices. They could either retreat, allowing their detractors to define the public image of the Militia Movement, or they could advance, "going public" to defend their cause. They elected the latter course of action; they chose to pursue a conscious strategy of "damage control."

The Militia Movement had grappled with public image problems before the Oklahoma City bombing. Press coverage had portrayed the militias as a lunatic fringe of right-wing fanatics obsessed with firearms and conspiracy theories. In 1994, the ADL had issued an ominous twenty-eight-page report titled *Armed & Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*, warning that militia devotees might resort to force or violence in service of their anti-government cause.² Like the mainstream news media, however, the ADL ultimately minimized the military threat posed by the movement.

Militia leaders first responded to the image of their movement as paranoid and only minimally threatening by appearing as guests on *The Phil Donahue Show* in December 1994.³ Dressed in camouflage fatigues (referred to by the Armed Forces as Battle-Dress-Uniforms) that underscored their paramilitary character, the militia leaders claimed to represent millions of Americans who were fed up with the federal government's alleged assault on civil liberties and its abuse of the citizenry. The *Donahue* appearance was the militia leaders' only major effort to publicly defend the movement before it became linked with the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing.

The bombing transformed the militias' image problems. Despite never having identified himself as a militia member, accused bomber Timothy McVeigh's adherence to the movement's anti-government ideology made him the militias' most recognizable disciple. For many, he personified what the SPLC warned was a serious new threat posed by thousands of militia members who hated the government and awaited their own opportunity to attack the system.⁴ Accordingly, the militias were no longer dismissed as inconsequential; they were publicly reviled as a genuine terrorist threat.

Militia leaders chose television news interviews as their primary vehicle in the campaign to manage the movement's image. Distrustful of the mainstream media, militia leaders sought opportunities to appear live or on unedited tape during news interview programs, including *Nightline*, *This Week with David Brinkley*, *Rivera Live*, and *Face the Nation*. Militia leaders also testified at a Senate hearing held to investigate the Militia Movement.⁵

To this point, scholarly attention to the rhetoric of the militias has been limited to analyses of the members' motivations and mindsets. Joseph Bellon, for example, examined militias' web pages to identify different types of militias. The investigation enabled him to discern the "social attractions" engendered by the various militia types.⁶ Similarly, Sarah Mahan was interested in the collective identity that exists among militia members. She examined videotapes popular within the movement to unearth and explain the self-images that the militias embraced.⁷ Charles Stewart, Craig Smith, and Robert Denton used the narratives appearing on various militias' web sites and in *The Turner Diaries*, a book favored by the extremist right, as a means of discerning how militia members perceived and explained the world.⁸

Instead of mining the rhetoric of the militias to better understand the members' mindset, this chapter examines the messages produced by militia leaders in their effort to strategically manage the movement's public identity. It assumes that the public utterances of the militia leaders were intended to shape the public image of the movement, and that an examination of those statements will reveal what they hoped mainstream America would come to believe about the movement.

The nature of the Militia Movement as a decentralized, radical movement complicated the militia leaders' efforts to present a single, unified image of the groups. Though unified by their distrust of government and their allegiance to the Second Amendment, the movement was by no means monolithic. Militias—and the leaders who the media invited to speak on their behalf—varied widely in their level of militancy and in their belief in conspiracy theories. Without a central leadership to formally unify the disparate voices, the image of the movement generated by the leaders reflected their divergent ideas regarding the role and prominence that paramilitary training should play in the movement's public image.

The evolution of the public identity of the Militia Movement also reflected a changing rhetorical situation. Before the Oklahoma City bombing, when the militia leaders were challenged to prove their movement's relevance and potency, they constructed an image of the movement as an armed uprising of angry Americans. However, after the militias were linked to the Oklahoma City bombing and critics began to vilify movement members as dangerous domestic terrorists, militia leaders moderated the movement's image by relocating its motivation in fear rather than anger and by minimizing the references to conspiracy theory. They also began to go on the offensive,

claiming that critics had misrepresented the militias. The militia leaders took the opportunity to testify at a Senate hearing to highlight their civic virtues and to further distance themselves from the image of “domestic terrorists.” The portrayal was undermined, however, by their continued alignment with the violent and revolutionary militias of the colonial era. Finally, one year after the bombing, militia leaders had clearly split into two camps. One contingent continued to assert that the militias were a peaceful collection of concerned citizens. The other insisted that the militias were a formidable army on the brink of armed revolution.

Militia Leaders Take the Stage: Embracing the Paranoid Style

The militias first caught the attention of the national mainstream press eight months before the Oklahoma City bombing. The August 15, 1994, issue of *U.S. News and World Report* featured a two-page article, “The Rise of Citizen Militias,” that focused primarily on the developing Militia Movement in Montana.⁹ The *New York Times* put the Michigan Militia on its front page three months later in an article that featured the group under the headline, “Fearing a Conspiracy, Some Heed a Call to Arms.”¹⁰ *Time* magazine followed suit in its December 19 issue with “Patriot Games,” an article that described the militias as an extension of the larger Patriot Movement.¹¹

These initial reports actually mocked the militias’ beliefs and paramilitary training exercises. The press reports portrayed the movement as the product of fear and alienation among rural Americans unable to cope with the changing political, social, and economic landscape. While explaining the militias’ core concerns about increasing government

intrusion into citizens' lives, the authors dismissed the distress as either the complaints of the disaffected or the rantings of conspiracy freaks. Likewise, the reporters poked fun at the militia members and their paramilitary training exercises, calling the participants "would-be warriors" and reducing the training to "playing games in the woods."¹² Reporters did, however, add the obligatory warnings that these "middle-aged self-styled warriors" should be monitored, lest their crackpot conspiracy theories drive a few members to commit violence.¹³

"The Rise of the Citizen Militias" was the first article to alert mainstream America about the growing Militia Movement. Reporter Mike Tharp suggested that the eclectic members were united by their desire to thwart gun restrictions and increased government intrusion into their lives, wild conspiracy theories, and general "long-simmering anger against the government."¹⁴ He dismissed the claim that America was being taken over by a "one world government," calling the examples movement leaders offered "apocalyptic allegations."¹⁵ Tharp did not address the paramilitary aspect of the militias, but he did report that the movement had thus far been nonviolent and that movement leaders hoped to keep it that way.

Having accompanied the Michigan Militia "on maneuvers," Keith Schneider presented the militia to readers of the *New York Times* as "big bellied men in uniforms."¹⁶ His article represented the group as odd, but generally harmless. Despite the Michigan Militia's apparently concerted effort to impress Schneider with its paramilitary training exercises and its list of grievances against the government, the article suggested that he took neither too seriously. Observing that members were united by their love of guns, suspicion of government, and affinity for conspiracy theories, Schneider noted that many

members had difficulty even describing their own amorphous grievances.¹⁷ Schneider also dismissed the concerns of violence and racism raised by watchdog groups. He cited experts who suggested that the militias were significantly less dangerous than other small, conspiracy-driven movements, and he denied that racism or anti-Semitism played a significant role in the movement.

Like Schneider, Christopher John Farley accompanied the Michigan Militia on paramilitary training exercises for his article in *Time*, “Patriot Games.”¹⁸ Like his journalistic colleagues, Farley dismissed the militia’s paramilitary training as the “wilderness training excursions” for “would-be warriors.”¹⁹ He also ridiculed the militia’s concerns and beliefs as “wild accusations.”²⁰ Farley did, however, embrace the watchdog community’s allegations that the militias had dangerous ties to white supremacist groups.

While the mainstream media dismissed the militias’ grievances and paramilitary training, watchdog groups were issuing warnings about the movement. The ADL published its first report about the movement, *Armed & Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*, in October of 1994.²¹ The “fact-finding report” was sent to law enforcement agencies and news media outlets. It outlined militia activity in thirteen states, and it insisted that “hatemongers of long standing” played central roles in the militias.²² It cautioned that the movement was preparing to forcibly resist the federal government and its law enforcement agencies.

Militia Movement leaders chose *The Phil Donahue Show* for their only national television appearance prior to the Oklahoma City bombing. The show was taped in front of a live studio audience and aired on December 27, 1994.²³ Host Phil

Donahue and the studio audience members questioned the leaders about their beliefs and intentions over the course of the televised hour. The appearance represents the militia leaders' first attempt to shape a more positive public image of their movement.²⁴ As such, it provides a benchmark for assessing how the rhetoric of the militias changed after the bombing.

Six militia leaders spoke on behalf of the movement on *Donahue*. Ken Adams, Ray Southwell, and Doug Hall represented the nation's largest militia, the Michigan Militia. John Trochmann and Robert Fletcher represented the Militia of Montana, widely referred to as M.O.M. due to its status as the first modern militia and its influence in organizing others across the nation. James Johnson, one of few African-American militia leaders, spoke for the Ohio Unorganized Militia.

Four of the six militia leaders visually announced their movement's paramilitary nature by appearing in combat gear. Michigan Militia leaders Adams, Southwell, and Hall, as well as Ohio Militia leader Johnson, wore their Army-style green camouflage fatigues tucked smartly into polished, black combat boots. Patches above their breast pockets bore their names and militia units. An American flag patch rode high on each man's right shoulder, while another patch bearing the image of a Revolutionary War-era Minuteman was displayed on the left. The Michigan Militia leaders sported matching military-style camouflage berets. Importantly, the men wore combat gear—not military dress uniforms. Their appearance begged the audience to consider them soldiers. In contrast, Trochmann and Fletcher wore three-piece suits. Their attire reflected their insistence that the Militia Movement was less about paramilitary training than about alerting the nation to the federal government's tyrannical actions and evil intentions.

The militia leaders' contrasting styles of dress punctuated the conflicting images of the movement. The spokesmen were unified in their portrayal of the militias as a large uprising of outraged Americans who opposed the federal government's increasing attack on civil liberties. They were also resolute in their insistence that the militias' mission was to inspire the citizenry to peacefully rise up and demand renewed government accountability. Although they usually claimed that paramilitary training was a secondary concern of the movement, the combat fatigues worn by the majority of the panel visually emphasized that aspect of the movement, and the militia leaders were quick to assert their willingness to oppose the government with armed force if necessary.

Donahue invited the militia leaders to appear on his program because, as he told them, "we want to know what motivates you." This line provided the opening that the militia leaders needed to counter the media and watchdogs' portrayal of their movement as paranoid and inconsequential. Ironically, the leaders provided a near-textbook example of what historian Richard Hofstadter has termed the "paranoid style," expressing their outrage at what they insisted was a plan by the federal government to relinquish the sovereignty of the United States to a "One World Government."²⁵ The new government would obliterate the freedoms that Americans treasure, they insisted. Their proof of the government's intentions was found in the incremental, but steadily escalating, encroachment on the rights of "law-abiding Americans."²⁶

According to the militia leaders, the federal government was slowly tightening the noose on the unsuspecting citizenry to prevent them from resisting the One World Government. Typical of the paranoid style, the militia leaders presented copious facts and specific examples to substantiate their charge. Their examples of government abuse

centered on the power afforded to federal law enforcement agencies and their use of that power to terrorize citizens in their own homes. The “invasion” of the Branch Davidian compound at Waco, Texas, by the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) was touted as the ultimate example of governmental oppression. The militia leaders also described an illegal search and seizure of weapons by federal agents in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico as a preview of what awaited the nation. Johnson insisted that similar sweeps in Shreveport, Chicago, and Boston had gone unpublicized because they had targeted the urban minority community. The panel uniformly agreed that, left unchecked, such tactics would become routine in the efforts to suppress resistance to the One World Government.²⁷

The Militia Movement, the leaders insisted on *Donahue*, was experiencing explosive growth as it attracted members from across gender and racial lines. According to Militia of Montana representative Robert Fletcher, the movement had grown to between eight and ten million active participants in only eighteen months. Adams, of the Michigan Militia, claimed there were active militias in forty-eight states. While men comprised the bulk of the members, “many ladies,” including one eighty-seven year old woman, had also joined the cause, the leaders reported. The militias also had attracted members from across racial lines. Johnson, himself African-American, served as visual evidence that the militias were not the exclusive province of white Americans. Furthermore, Johnson announced that the movement had attracted many African-American and Jewish supporters.²⁸

Forming militias, the leaders maintained, was their way of protecting themselves and America. In the main, the leaders insisted that the movement was a peaceful,

patriotic organization that desired nothing more than to awaken the sleeping masses and motivate them to political action. In Adam's words, "we want the American people to pull together, contact their local officials and tell them what the problems are so that we can sit down and start working on them." The paramilitary aspects of their movement were secondary, the leaders explained. The training maneuvers, according to Adams, were primarily focused on skills necessary for civic emergencies:

We train every weekend. You know what we train for? We train in first aid, we train in compass work, we train in search and rescue. We're there in case of a natural disaster that we can come out and serve and help people. If a child is lost in a woods we can have five hundred men out there in the woods helping them find that lost child and serve that sheriff. We're public servants.

Fletcher was especially emphatic: "It has nothing to do with a handful of crazy people running through the woods and practicing to shoot unknown, mysterious people."²⁹

Despite their disclaimers, however, the militia leaders clearly advertised the paramilitary aspect of their movement. In choosing to identify themselves as a part of the "militia," they necessarily embraced the historical image of armed resistance. As noted earlier, the majority of the leaders wore the uniform of combat soldiers, visually reinforcing their commitment to battle. Finally, the leaders' comments reinforced their image of being battle-ready. For example, when Donahue asked if they "stocked armament," Fletcher spoke for the group when he responded, "absolutely. We stock whatever is necessary to protect ourselves." In response to Donahue's inquiry as to what action the militia leaders would take if the government ever came for their guns, Johnson leaned back in his chair with his arms folded across his chest and replied with a smirk:

“When the government comes for my gun I’m simply going to let them have it.”

Donahue acknowledged the double entendre and responded: “Funny. Funny. You’re serious? You’d pull the trigger on a federal agent coming up to your place?” Johnson insisted: “Third Amendment says I can. I will. A man’s home is his castle. If I have to die proving that, so be it.”³⁰

The conflicting messages regarding the paramilitary nature of the militias left open questions about the movement’s intentions. Were they peaceful prophets doing their best to warn the unsuspecting American people about impending doom? Or were they dangerous private armies ready to declare war on their own government? For many Americans, that question was answered by the arrest of Timothy McVeigh for the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Militia Leaders Respond to the Bombing: Retreat and Reconstruction

The three-day period between the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, and the arrest of Timothy McVeigh brought speculation from the media and resolve from the Clinton administration. News reports claimed that the investigation focused on Middle-Eastern terrorists. Ted Koppel, for example, reported on Nightline that the Oklahoma City Police Department was seeking “two Middle Eastern Men.”³¹ CBS Morning News reported that “unofficially the FBI is treating this as a Middle Eastern-related incident.”³² The Clinton administration refrained from public speculation as to the identity of the bombers, and instead simply referred to the perpetrators as “evil cowards” and vowed to bring the bombers to justice.³³

The arrest of McVeigh for the bombing simultaneously put a face on the “evil cowards” and redefined the image problem of the Militia Movement. In one heinous act, McVeigh transported the militias from what sociologists Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian would label a “peculiar” movement—one that was odd but ultimately harmless—to a “revolutionary” movement that people had reason to fear.³⁴ Previously ridiculed and dismissed, the militias were now associated with the most deadly act of domestic terrorism in American history.

As the most readily available “experts” on the militias, representatives of the watchdog groups were often solicited by the news media to comment on the nature of the militias and the danger that they posed. The watchdog groups repeatedly warned the nation that the militias were comprised of renegade, gun-toting racists. SPLC co-founder Morris Dees’ assessment on *This Week With David Brinkley* was typical of the watchdog groups’ post-bombing rhetoric:

I think we’re talking about a few kooks in a nation of millions of people, but it doesn’t take many kooks to blow up a building like we just saw. The vast majority of people in citizens militia are guys who like to get out on the weekend, dress up in the paramilitary clothes and shoot their AK-47s, but we’ve noticed, in the last six months, especially, with this fertile ground of anti-government fervor in these individuals, an infiltration by white supremacist, neo-Nazis, people in the Aryan Nations infiltrating these groups and guiding their actions into something more dangerous.³⁵

The Clinton administration responded to McVeigh’s arrest by attacking the vituperative rhetoric that emanated from the right and by insisting that the bombing

victims deserved nothing less than to have the “dark forces which gave rise to this evil” purged from society.³⁶ “They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life,” Clinton told the audience gathered for the “Time of Healing” prayer service in Oklahoma City on April 23.³⁷ The administration quickly introduced counter-terrorism legislation in Congress, and the militias became its prime example of the threat posed by domestic terrorism.

News reports treated the militias as the source of the bombing, focusing on the movement’s love of guns and conspiracy theories. Comments similar to David Brinkley’s on *This Week with David Brinkley* were frequent:

Members of the so-called militia in twenty or thirty states hate the government because they think it hates them. . . . They have guns and they want to keep them. Some are racists, but most seem not to be because they think they have another enemy—government. The evidence now is that the Oklahoma City bombing was done by members of this group.³⁸

Such comments overtly linked the militias to the bombing and suggested that there was reason to fear more terrorism from the movement. Representatives of the Clinton administration and watchdog groups regularly reinforced the sentiment.

The news media turned to the leaders of the Michigan Militia for the movement’s response to the bombing and to answer charges that McVeigh had been associated with their unit. Norman Olson, the Baptist preacher and gun shop owner who founded the Michigan Militia, Ken Adams, who had represented the movement on *Donahue*, and Ray Southwell, the Michigan Militia’s Chief of Staff, spoke for the movement in this escalating battle over the militias’ public image.

The militia leaders took offense at the way in which their movement was being depicted by the watchdog groups and in the media, and they adjusted their rhetorical strategy to counter the attack. To defend their movement, the leaders denied that the militias were in any way involved in the bombing, and they insisted that the good people of the militias were being unfairly conflated with “fringe groups.”³⁹ They railed against reporting that they claimed had misrepresented the militias and unnecessarily alarmed the nation by depicting them as a paranoid, anti-government force. Furthermore, while they continued to maintain, as they had on *The Phil Donahue Show*, that the formation of militias was a legitimate exercise of constitutional power by ordinary citizens, the leaders recast the motivation of the group to be more publicly palatable and less threatening. Militia members had taken up arms because they *feared* their government, the leaders maintained—not because they were *angry*. They likewise jettisoned references to the One World Government conspiracy theory. While the leaders still insisted that the government was out of control, they no longer publicly asserted that the government’s abuses of power were part of a larger conspiracy.⁴⁰

Still, the militia leaders continued to send a mixed message as to their paramilitary nature. Olson, especially, seemed to revel in the attention finally afforded to his militia, as he continued to appear in his battle dress uniform and advertise his militia’s readiness to die for the cause. Adams, on the other hand, repeatedly turned the conversation away from the issue of guns and paramilitary training and toward the movement’s civic activities.

Olson’s first interview after McVeigh’s arrest was a short phone conversation with Ted Koppel on *Nightline* the night of McVeigh’s arrest. Olson’s remarks were

largely out of step with the re-configuration of the militias that was to come. Olson characterized the Oklahoma City bombing as an example of what can happen when the government is not held accountable for its actions. He seemed to defend the bombers when he opined that they were simply attempting to “balance the scales of justice” after the debacle of Waco: “It may be retribution, it may be revenge, Ted, but they are bringing about what they believe is measure for measure, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” He followed the analysis with a statement that insinuated that the militias were similarly principled: “We’re doing what we’re doing for principle, for ideal, for those standards and values that we esteem, and a man will die for conviction.”⁴¹

Unlike Olson, Adam’s depiction of the militias two days later on *This Week With David Brinkley* explicitly distanced the movement from the bombers. He denied any connection to McVeigh and Nichols, and called the act a “terrible tragedy” without suggesting an explanation or justification. “We certainly do not condone anything that took place in Oklahoma City, and our hearts are extended to those people in their losses,” he stated.⁴²

Adams also disputed the image of the militias as radical, gun-toting groups ready to take down the federal government. The militias were *not* dangerous, anti-government bands that trained relentlessly for war, he maintained. Instead, they were a collective of “pro-government,” “God-fearing” Americans who wanted nothing more than to *educate* people about the federal government and persuade them to take political action. His group certainly could not foresee a situation under which they would fight anyone, he swore. Paramilitary training was a *small* part of their activities. While

confessing to a bit of “target practice,” Adams denied that most of his training involved firearms. Instead, he contended that the militias typically trained for search and rescue.⁴³

Furthermore, Adams attempted to draw a distinction between the “real” militias and the militias as they had been represented in the news media. Calling the media’s reporting on the movement “absolutely irresponsible,” he charged the press with spreading lies and fear about the racist, violent nature of the militias. The militias’ image, he maintained, had been tarnished by the media’s equation of the entire movement with “very, very radical fringe groups.” “That’s absolutely as tragic as the bombing itself,” he opined, “trying to spread fear like that from honest, God-fearing, American loving people as we are.”⁴⁴

Olson’s tone had moderated slightly when he appeared on *Nightline* the second time. Ted Koppel hosted the April 25 broadcast of *Nightline* from the Decker United Methodist Church in Decker, Michigan.⁴⁵ The special edition of *Nightline*, entitled “Trouble in the Heartland,” brought together townsfolk and six camouflage-clad members of the Michigan Militia, including Olson and Southwell. Although Koppel directed most of his questions to the “civilians,” Olson and Southwell also received substantial airtime.

Olson and Southwell insisted that the militias were deeply fearful of the federal government—not angry. “We’re fearful of our government. We’re fearful of the terrorism going on on [sic] the American people,” Southwell insisted. He cited the government’s killing of Randy Weaver’s son, wife, and friend after a standoff with the family in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, as an example. “The federal government set him up. That frightens the American public,” he insisted. Olson expressed fear that the nation was

“slipping into totalitarianism where the government controls the people.” “We’ve enjoyed two hundred twenty years of a people controlling the government, and things are changing, and I think we sense it. I sense it. I sense it very deeply,” he said. It was that fear that prompted the people to create militias to defend their homes and property from the renegade government, the leaders maintained.⁴⁶

Olson and Southwell cast the militias as the people’s last, best hope. The movement reminded the American people of their right and responsibility to stop government tyranny, they insisted. “We have shown Americans that they can stand up and they can speak out against their federal government,” Olson said. He even likened the Michigan Militia to the Underground Railroad: “I believe here in Michigan, I believe there is a pathway of hope, and I believe that we, the people of Michigan, need to stand up.” The way to do that was through legislation, the leaders contended—specifically through initiating “sheriffs’ empowerment acts” that keep law enforcement powers in local hands.⁴⁷

Olson and Southwell also picked up on Adams’ theme that the militias had been victims of a reckless media. Southwell was incensed at an (unnamed) article in *Time* that included what he believed to be lies about the Michigan Militia. Olson went so far as to blame the media for a death threat that he had received. He read a letter addressed to him from a critic in Tulsa, Oklahoma: “We are coming for you. Pray for your soul.” Olson commented, “Thank you, media.”⁴⁸

The first week after the bombing found the militia leaders making subtle adjustments to their rhetorical portrait. After Olson’s renegade interview, the new

depiction cast the militias as misunderstood, fearful citizens who worked to stem the federal government's increasing disregard of civil liberties.

The Militia Leaders on Capitol Hill

The watchdog groups and news media had spent the weeks after the bombing fanning the flames of alarm about the militias. According to the SPLC's Morris Dees, the militias' hatred, paranoia, racism, and obsession with weapons were a "recipe for disaster."⁴⁹ The sentiment was echoed by watchdog representatives who published reports, appeared on television news interview programs as experts on the militias, and testified before various congressional committees in the same capacity. The news media broadcast the concerns voiced by the watchdogs' representatives and suggested that the shadowy movement's paranoia and obsession with guns rendered them dangerous.

The Clinton administration had followed the Oklahoma City bombing with commentary that condemned extremist rhetoric and berated militia adherents as unpatriotic extremists whose very existence created an urgent need for Congress to pass anti-terrorist legislation. Clinton had sent the "Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995" to Congress on February 10, 1995, two months before the Oklahoma City bombing. According to a fact sheet distributed by the White House, the legislation was designed to "strengthen the United States' hand in combating terrorists, whether they strike at home or abroad."⁵⁰ The provisions of the act, however, were primarily focused on combating terrorism perpetrated against the United States by *foreign* terrorists, and on the pursuit of foreign terrorists who used the United States as a base of operations from which to attack

other countries. After the bombing, Clinton augmented the original legislation with the “Antiterrorism Amendments Act of 1995,” transmitted to Congress on May 3, 1995. The Amendments provided law enforcement agencies with resources to track and prosecute suspected terrorists within the United States, be they foreign or domestic. For example, the measure allowed investigators to gain access to financial records and credit reports of suspected terrorists as a means of tracking the source and use of funding. It also expanded the electronic surveillance privileges of law enforcement, required the inclusion of taggants (microscopic particles used to track chemicals) in the raw material used in standard explosive devices, and increased penalties for attacking federal employees or knowingly transferring firearms or explosives to be used in a crime.⁵¹

Leaders in the Militia Movement viewed the legislation as another attack on personal liberties. In the name of stopping “terrorist” activity, law enforcement agencies could more easily tap militia members’ phone lines, obtain records about the groups from hotels, motels, storage facilities, and vehicle rental agencies, and more vigorously prosecute those who targeted federal employees. Norman Olson derided Clinton’s tactics on the April 25 broadcast of *Nightline*: “He stumped for legislation and asked America to come close so he could hug them like a father, saying ‘We’ll give you more security, all you have to do is give up more liberty.’ We’re sick of it.”⁵²

On June 15, 1995, as the legislation was under consideration in the Senate, the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information of the Senate Judiciary Committee held a three-hour hearing entitled “Militia Movement in the United States.”⁵³ Subcommittee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-PA) indicated that the hearings

were prompted by the increased visibility of militia groups in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing.⁵⁴ The hearings aired on C-SPAN and were re-broadcast three times.

Three panels of witnesses testified at the hearing. The first panel was comprised of Senator Max Baucus from Montana and Senator Carl Levin from Michigan, both of whom testified about the threats posed by the militias in their respective states. Baucus accused the militias of bringing an “atmosphere of terror” to his state. Levin echoed Baucus’ concerns and described his own apprehensions about the militias’ activities. Specifically, he found “the stockpiling of firearms and explosives, paramilitary training, conducting surveillance of, and even stalking law enforcement personnel” to be most distressing.⁵⁵

Testimony by a panel of three national and state law-enforcement officers and two county attorneys added to the charges against the militias. Representatives of the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), and the Missouri State Highway Patrol, along with attorneys from Montana and Arizona, related the problems posed by militia activity in their respective jurisdictions.

Five militia leaders testified as the final panel. The first four had represented the militias on *Donahue* six months earlier. John Trochmann and Robert Fletcher represented the Militia of Montana. Ken Adams spoke on behalf of the Michigan Militia. James Johnson represented the Ohio Unorganized Militia. Norman Olson, who had not appeared on *Donahue* but had been interviewed regularly by the media after the Oklahoma City bombing, represented his new organization, the Northern Regional Michigan Militia.⁵⁶

The militia leaders were speaking directly to those against whom they usually railed. It was an opportunity to “do battle” with their opposition by leveling charges against the government and by vigorously defending the militias. The forum provided militia leaders a unique opportunity to respond to their critics, bolster their movement’s image, and recruit new members.⁵⁷ Each leader was afforded an uninterrupted opening statement to present their justification and characterization of the movement. While their speaking time was limited, it was much longer and less structured than the sound-bite answers that the leaders had been restricted to in news interviews. Furthermore, unlike their other opportunities to speak publicly, their opening statements were not constrained or directed by the questions of reporters. The leaders could prepare their statements in advance and present their grievances and their defense of the militias in the best light possible. Although the militia leaders were questioned by several of the subcommittee members, the questions generally provided the militia leaders with significant opportunities to explain and defend the movement.

The militia leaders used the hearings to present the militias as organizations of non-violent patriots doing their best to publicize the transgressions of government and to involve their fellow citizens in the political process. Trochmann went so far as to characterize the Militia Movement as a “giant neighborhood watch.”⁵⁸ That image, however, was undermined by the leaders’ continuing historical references to the colonial revolutionaries and by their steadfast insistence that the militias would defend the citizenry with paramilitary force should the situation warrant such action.

The militia leaders used their opening statements to air their charges of government transgressions in a more direct way than they had in the past. They also

drew parallels between their own circumstances and those of the colonial patriots. The contemporary political situation mirrored that of the Revolutionary War, the militia leaders claimed; the modern government had strayed from its constitutional moorings and had run roughshod over the citizenry, just as King George had abused the colonists two hundred years earlier. Trochmann, the first militia leader to speak at the hearing, introduced the image. In a prepared statement saturated with examples of what he insisted were abuses by the federal government, Trochmann entered into the official record a copy of the *Declaration of Independence* that detailed some of the parallels between the militias' concerns and the colonists' original grievances.⁵⁹ Trochmann claimed, "The document speaks for itself once again as it did over two hundred years ago when flagrant injustice continued out of control by oppressive public servants."⁶⁰ The content and phraseology of Trochmann's list of grievances was stylistically similar to the *Declaration of Independence*, further reinforcing the parallel. For example, Trochmann charged that Clinton had turned the presidency into a "position of dictatorial opposition" through his use of executive orders to circumvent Congress. Instead of providing specific examples of the offensive executive orders, Trochmann emphasized the generally tyrannical behavior of the government at Ruby Ridge and Waco in the following tirade:

When government [*sic*] allows our military to be ordered, and controlled by foreigners under Presidential order, allowing foreign armies to train on our soil, allowing our military to label caring patriots the enemy, and then turns their tanks loose on U.S. citizens to murder and destroy or directs a sniper to shoot a mother in the face while holding her infant in her arms, you bet your constituents get upset.⁶¹

Johnson likewise focused much of his testimony on the transgressions of the federal government and their similarity to the oppression that inspired the American Revolution. Johnson, however, was even more vague in his charges. “To put it to you bluntly,” Johnson testified, “some of the legislation that has been coming out of Washington, some of the executive actions that are taking place—ladies and gentlemen, these things started a revolution two hundred years ago and got this country started.” He also warned that “the only thing standing between some of the current legislation being contemplated and armed conflict is time.” According to Johnson, militia members also were concerned about “confiscatory tax rates” and “increasingly heavy regulations.”⁶²

The militia leaders also used their opening statements to cast the militias as a non-violent response to government oppression. Several of the leaders referred to the Constitution directly when defending the militias as a legitimate means of monitoring the government and protecting the citizenry. It was Olson, however, who provided the most detailed constitutional justification for the militias. Olson’s entire opening statement was comprised of his interpretation of the Constitution as it related to the formation of militias. According to Olson, the Constitution is a document that limits the power of government, not the people. Therefore, while the Constitution recognizes the right of the people to keep and bear arms, the right to do so is actually a *natural* right: “Those rights existed in the States prior to the formation of the Federal Union. In fact, the right to form militia and to keep and bear arms exists from antiquity. The enumeration of those rights in the Constitution only underscores their natural occurrence and importance.” Olson reinforced his justification for the militias with his usual vehemence and colorful language: “The federal government itself is the child of the armed citizen. We the

people are the parent of the child we call government. . . The increasing amount of federal encroachment into our lives indicates the need for parental corrective action. In short, the federal government needs a good spanking to make it behave.”⁶³

The militia leaders claimed that their only goal was to return the government to its proper constitutional role through political pressure and informational campaigns. The militia leaders described their informational campaigns and political activities as examples of their nonviolent efforts. They often referred to their efforts to initiate legislation and to encourage voter participation. Adams told the Senate subcommittee that some militias were setting up programs for voter registration and “getting involved in the legislation and the process that we all love.” Johnson predicted that the Patriot community would soon run its own candidates for office in order to bring about constitutionally based reform from within.⁶⁴

Throughout the hearing, the militia leaders took direct aim at the mainstream media, which they accused of inaccurate and irresponsible portrayals of the movement’s beliefs and activities. Although rarely specific in their charges, the leaders denounced the general treatment of the militias by the press. Trochmann addressed the issue in his opening statement. Clearly angry, he warned the senators that:

We, the People have about had all we can stand of the twisted, slanted, biased media of America who take their signals from a few private covert special interest groups bent on destroying what is left of the American way. We respectfully request that you rely upon your own investigations, steering clear of the media and their rumor-gossip mills of misinformation.⁶⁵

In a similar fashion, Olson told the senators that: “We are not what you think we are. We are not what the press wants to feed to the American people.”⁶⁶

The question-and-answer session following the militia leaders’ opening statements allowed the leaders to directly address those aspects of the movement that they insisted the media had misrepresented. Subcommittee members took turns querying the militia leaders on their attitudes and activities, rarely engaging them beyond the initial question or providing any significant challenges to the leaders’ answers. Furthermore, the questions provided the leaders with a platform for downplaying their militias’ paramilitary activities and again affirming that the militias posed no threat to the nation.

The senators’ questions allowed the militia leaders to reject their critics’ charges that the militias were in any way responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing, as well as to deny that racism or anti-Semitism motivated the militias. Trochmann had opened his testimony with a forceful condemnation of the bombing and promised to assist in the investigation: “It is sad that this opportunity to address the Senate has arisen out of the Oklahoma tragedy. We wholeheartedly denounce the deplorable act of violence. We have, and will continue to assist in any manner to apprehend all persons that may have planned and/or carried out that dastardly deed at whatever level they may hide.”

Questions from the senators allowed the leaders to further their defense. For example, in an exchange with the hearing’s chair Arlen Specter, Olson reminded the panel that the FBI had cleared the Michigan Militia of any involvement less than two weeks after the bombing. The leaders reinforced their innocence in the Oklahoma City bombing by uniformly denying that they believed such violence would be acceptable under any circumstances. In a question that seemed oddly “soft,” Senator Diane Feinstein (R-CA)

asked each of the militia leaders if they believed that “there are any circumstances in which an individual has a right to blow up a building.” Fletcher’s response was representative of his colleagues: “No, absolutely not . . . I don’t think anybody could perceive that point in time where that would make sense, particularly if we are talking the housing of infants and that type of thing.”⁶⁷

The question-and-answer session also provided the militia leaders a chance to address another aspect of the militias that watchdog groups had raised: racism. For example, Feinstein provided the militia leaders with an unobstructed opportunity to repair their image. The leaders responded vigorously to Feinstein’s question of “Why do I read constantly these violent quotes, this hatred for other people, this anti-Semitic, anti-black—I mean, driving people to have this intense fear and antagonism?” Referring to fellow panelist Johnson, Trochmann responded hotly, “Would you like my black friend to answer that for you?” Fletcher also took offense, calling such accusations “garbage”: “We stand down from any hate kind of rhetoric whatsoever, period. And my wife of twenty-five years who is Jewish and Italian—my business partners for four or five different years were blacks, and my granddaughter is half American Indian. So if I am racist, I am doing a lousy job of it.” But it was Johnson who was especially vehement, reporting that “I am getting real tired of being called a Klan member. I am getting tired of being called a member of the Aryan Nation group.” The number of black militia members was growing rapidly, Johnson contended, and he reiterated that race had nothing to do with the militias: “This movement isn’t about guns and skin color. It is about liberty, and it is about freedom.”⁶⁸

Senators' questions also allowed the militia leaders to reinforce their claims that the militias posed no threat to the nation. The leaders claimed that their movement was law abiding and non-violent, and that a war with their government was not their goal. Johnson's response to a question by Senator Fred Thompson (R-TN) regarding the choice of the militias to work outside of "the system" was a succinct summary of the militia leaders' approach. "Nobody is going to go out there and shoot things," Johnson insisted, "Nobody is going to go out there and blow things up. We are not baby killers; we are baby boomers. We are not terrorists; we are taxpayers. We are not extremists; we are just extremely ticked off."⁶⁹

The militia leaders also uniformly indicated that they recognized and supported the rule of law. Olson, for example, echoed the other leaders when he noted that, "There is no other reason to take the law into one's own hands unless it is for the preservation of himself or his property, his family. What we have done—and this is how I deal with the law, and I recognize and submit to the law." The leaders also reassured the senators that the militias were not a threat to the government. "I can assure you, sir, and all members of Congress and all the people of this nation that the militia does not constitute any threat to this nation," Adams commented. Johnson explained that militias drew their strength not from firepower, but from "being armed with knowledge."⁷⁰

Again, however, the militia leaders told conflicting stories about their paramilitary activity. Although they insisted that the movement was a defensive entity dedicated to peaceful political pressure as a means of returning the federal government to its constitutional mandates, they never denied that they were armed and ready to fight. Johnson insisted the militias' intention was not to wage war, but he then warned that, "if

a war is waged, these groups plan on winning.”⁷¹ The militia leaders’ bold comparison of the current situation to the Revolutionary War also implied a warning. One could not ignore that colonial militias ultimately resorted to war against an oppressive government. Even as the militia leaders attempted to downplay their paramilitary activities, their favorite historical analogy warned of impending violence.

Olson continued to present himself as the paramilitary point man. Unlike his colleagues, who testified in suit and tie, Olson wore his battle dress uniform. He also was quite aggressive verbally. While the other leaders insisted that the government needed to bring itself back in line, Olson contended that the government needed “a good spanking.” Adding to his revolutionary persona, Olson also sparred with Senator Specter, chair of the committee, at various points during the hearing. While arguing with Specter about the possibility that the authorities had arrested the wrong man for the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, Olson goaded Specter about the “single-bullet theory” produced by the commission that he had chaired in 1963 to investigate the John F. Kennedy assassination. Olson also told Specter, “We stand against oppression and tyranny in government and we, many of us, are coming to the conclusion that you best represent that corruption and tyranny.”⁷²

The militia leaders used the hearing as an opportunity to indict the government and its “tyrannical” behavior. The militia leaders presented the formation of militias as a valid, constitutional response of a people oppressed by their government. The Militia Movement had mobilized informational campaigns and civic action as a means of forcing the federal government back into line with the Constitution, the leaders contended. While they expressed hope that their public informational campaigns would bring about

changes, their admission that they were prepared for a fight with the government may have undermined their credibility.

Moderates vs. Militants

By the fall of 1995, public and news media attention had shifted from the Militia Movement to the murder trial of football superstar-turned-actor O.J. Simpson. News coverage of the militias dropped dramatically. The Clinton administration had few occasions to comment on the militias. Watchdog groups, however, continued to publish reports warning the public against buying into the militia leaders' efforts of image restoration.

Spring 1996 brought a nearly three-month standoff between federal law enforcement agencies and an anti-government group calling itself "The Freeman" near the small town of Jordan, Montana. The Freeman, a small band of twenty-one people, rejected the legitimacy of state and federal governments and had declared a local 960-acre ranch owned by one of its members a "sovereign" state they called "Justus Township." Federal authorities arrested two of the group when they left the property on March 25, 1996, charging them in a bogus check-writing scheme and with the intimidation of a federal judge. Ten others wanted on related charges refused to leave the ranch where their families and a cache of over one hundred weapons and forty thousand rounds of ammunition remained.⁷³ They vowed to shoot anyone who came in after them, and a standoff ensued. Militia-types and federal officials alike feared that the standoff would become another Ruby Ridge or Waco.⁷⁴

After the tragedies at Ruby Ridge and Waco, the FBI had developed new strategies of engagement designed to bring about peaceful resolutions to such situations. According to Attorney General Janet Reno, the FBI had taken “great pains to ensure that there is no armed confrontation, no siege, no armed perimeter, and no use of military assault-type tactics or equipment” as there had been in the two previous sieges.⁷⁵ She insisted that the FBI was intent on negotiating a peaceful solution.

The FBI was successful. The standoff ended peacefully on June 15th, eighty-one days after it had begun. After cutting the electricity to the ranch and pledging to not storm the farmhouse, the FBI negotiated the surrender of the fugitives.⁷⁶

With this standoff came renewed attention to the militias. The Freeman, although not technically a part of the Militia Movement, were an armed, “anti-government” group that embraced many of the movement’s principles. Thus, militia leaders were solicited by the news media during the first week of the standoff to comment on the situation. Three news interview programs featured militia leaders as guests to comment on the situation and on the militias more generally.⁷⁷

The images of the militias advanced by the movement’s leaders in their three interviews demonstrate the final split in the Militia Movement that had long been festering. The “moderates” and the “radicals” offered distinctly different portrayals of the movement. Although appearing separately and representing different militias, John Trochmann of the Militia of Montana, who appeared on the March 31, 1996, episode of *This Week with David Brinkley*, and Ken Adams of the Michigan Militia, who was interviewed the next evening on *Nightline*, offered complimentary accounts of the militias as nonviolent patriots who were vigilantly working *with* the government to bring

about a peaceful resolution to the standoff with the Freeman. Norman Olson, in contrast, derided the duo as “moderates” and proclaimed himself—and the “real” militias—ready for battle.⁷⁸

Four journalists questioned Trochmann, who appeared via satellite on *This Week With David Brinkley* the first Sunday after the standoff began. Trochmann emphasized his desire to have the siege end peacefully. “We do not want bloodshed in America,” Trochmann insisted, refusing to speculate about a resolution to the siege that was not peaceful.⁷⁹ Trochmann also underscored his active intervention in the process, noting that he had issued a press release that implored militias from across the nation to stay away from the siege. “If anyone from another state wishes to come visit in Montana, they better do it without their guns,” he told the panel.⁸⁰

Trochmann was also quick to distance the militias from the Freeman. Journalist Cokie Roberts questioned Trochmann directly about a newsletter that he had written which praised the Freeman for “paving a new road for the rest of us.” “It seemed to be referring both to their monetary shenanigans as well as what they were preaching in their compound,” Roberts commented. Trochmann defended himself, replying that the newsletter had been printed over a year before, and that “since then, a lot has happened.” He suggested that what many in the movement actually admired was the *self-governing* nature of the Freeman. “Our forefathers left Europe because of tyranny in government, and we find it all over this country, all over again, with federal encroachment into the lives of private citizens,” Trochmann insisted. It was the Freeman’s fight against government encroachment which was to be lauded—not their illegal activities, he explained.⁸¹

The journalists' questions also enabled Trochmann to comment more generally on the militias. He continued to insist that the militias were nonviolent groups concerned about the direction of the government: "We believe that some of our public servants are straight over the line. We believe that the Constitution is the job description from us to our public servants. We want our government back."⁸² He suggested, however, that the answer to the tyrannical government was necessarily political, and that the judicial system could be one place to start reforms.

In contrast, Olson was ready for war. Appearing on *Face the Nation* the same morning as Trochmann, Olson insisted that the "real" militias were militant and battle-ready. "There are those who are moderate. There are those who believe the treachery and they will believe the promises of the federal government," he barked. "The uniform and the guns mean that I'm hard-line, out on the front, in the trenches with the true militia of the United States." Olson seemed invigorated by the possibility of a battle in Montana. "I believe that we have the possibility of armed revolution on our hands," he stated. He declared his intention to travel to the standoff: "If this is going to be the place where the second American Revolution finally culminates in war, then it's good for a battlefield commander to be there to look at the logistics."⁸³

Olson also indicated his support for the Freemen and their willingness to act according to their beliefs. When *Face the Nation* host Phil Jones asked Olson if he would publicly request that the Freemen come out, Olson indicated that he could not do that: "They are not going to come out and I'm not going to violate their conscience by telling them that they have to violate their conscience. I'm not going to do that."⁸⁴

Ken Adams—Olson’s former Michigan Militia compatriot—appeared the next night on *Nightline*. The contrast between the two could not have been more stark. Adams indicated his belief that the standoff could be resolved without bloodshed and spoke of his own cooperation with the federal government to affect that end. In his portrayal, the militias supported the government, were cooperating fully with it, and endeavored only to encourage the government to act more responsibly.

The militias, Adams insisted, expected a peaceful end to the standoff—not a war with the government. The first question that Adams fielded was about Olson’s claim that the standoff could spark the “Second Revolution.” Interviewer Cokie Roberts questioned Adams directly on Olson’s statement made the day before. Adams dismissed Olson’s ranting as unrepresentative of the Militia Movement. “He speaks for himself and his organization, and not necessarily for the whole nation. He’s very outspoken, and uses the press to his advantage quite wisely.”⁸⁵ Later, Adams reminded the audience that the circumstances of this standoff were different than those in the past, and he insisted that a peaceful resolution was possible. “The people that are in charge here are not the same people that were in charge at Waco and Ruby Ridge, so we have a completely new set of circumstances, we’re trying to work through it. I believe we can work through it and everyone just has to have patience,” he stated.⁸⁶

Adams indicated that he himself had lent his expertise to the FBI in an attempt to affect the best possible outcome to the standoff. The FBI had contacted him three months earlier to see what he could do to help, Adams revealed. He also had been instrumental in forming a “critical incident group” that linked the FBI, college professors, and militia members to resolve such situations without violence. According to Adams, the group’s

purpose was to “sit and discuss these things and try to resolve situations before they happen, and after they happen, try to examine what took place, what worked best, and maybe what we can improve in the future.”⁸⁷

In Adam’s portrayal, the militias were not hostile to the government, but indeed were recognized as a valuable resource by the government for avoiding and managing difficult situations. This cooperation was evidence that the militias did not hate the government, as its detractors had charged. In fact, the militias considered the government to be “the finest form of government in the world.”⁸⁸ The Militia Movement only endeavored to improve it.

The rhetorical split was complete. The Militia Movement had always been an amalgam of ideologies and activities, but the leaders had generally worked to portray the militias as unified by basic principle and purpose. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the radically independent revolutionaries found it difficult to construct a consistent and cohesive image.

Conclusion

As they negotiated the paradoxical goals of resisting federal tyranny while reassuring the nation that they posed no domestic threat, the militia leaders often provided contradictory messages to the public. The tension was evident in each stage of the militias’ image building and restoration efforts.

Initially, when the mainstream news media mocked and dismissed the Militia Movement, movement leaders turned to entertainment media in an attempt to establish a

more positive public image for the movement. *The Phil Donahue Show* afforded militia leaders their first opportunity to speak to a national audience in a way that their interviews with print reporters had not. The entire television hour was dedicated to the militia leaders, who capitalized on the opportunity to “spread the word” about their fight against government tyranny and the impending One World Government. They showcased their conspiracy theories and paramilitary training activities, assuring the audience that the militias were committed to stopping federal oppression.

The arrest of anti-government zealot Timothy McVeigh for the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building put the militias at the center of a national firestorm. Militia leaders appeared on television news interview programs to defend the militias and mitigate the damage done to the movement’s public image by its association with McVeigh. The news interview programs provided a public platform for the militia leaders, but they were constrained by journalists who seemed already convinced of the militias’ guilt in the bombing. The militia spokesmen were largely at the mercy of journalists who set the agenda and directed the conversation to depict the militias as “monsters worth fearing.”⁸⁹ The militia leaders’ assertions that the mainstream media were misrepresenting the movement garnered little traction with interviewers.

It was not until the militia leaders testified before a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee that militia leaders were afforded the opportunity to speak at length about their movement. The militia leaders made the most of the opportunity to set their own agenda. They articulated many of their criticisms of the government, attacked the mainstream media for misrepresenting their cause, and emphasized their efforts to peacefully reform the government. They undermined their own efforts to downplay their

paramilitary proclivities, however, by defending their right to exist as armed militias and through repeated comparisons of their cause to the American Revolution.

Finally, the militia leaders' last real attempt to modify the image of the movement came one year after the Oklahoma City bombing, as the Freeman engaged in a standoff with the federal government. As guests again on news interview programs, most of the militia leaders retreated still further from the movement's earlier claims of militancy. Norman Olson, however, centered attention on the militias as a paramilitary movement, announcing that the "true" militias were ready for war.⁹⁰

To suggest that the public image of the Militia Movement was a product of a well-planned public relations strategy would be misleading. These were not men trained or experienced in the slick world of image management. They were blue-collar "true believers" who simply believed that the nation was imperiled by the actions of its government. That is not to say, however, that there was not a pattern of logic at work. Much of what the leaders said after the Oklahoma City bombing reflected rhetorical strategies associated with image repair. The militia leaders used the strategy of denial.⁹¹ They denied that the Militia Movement was responsible for the bombing, and they denied that the media image of the militias was accurate. The militia leaders also worked to "reduce the offensiveness" of the militias by toning down their conspiracy theories and reframing their movement as a civic and educational group instead of a paramilitary power.⁹²

Rebel Norman Olson, however, often derailed these efforts at image repair. Social movements comprised of conspiratorial, armed radicals should perhaps expect to find a loose cannon or two in their ranks. To be sure, Olson complicated the other militia

leaders' image repair efforts. Olson considered himself a battlefield commander, and he seemed to eagerly anticipate the opportunity to confront the federal government. As other militia leaders were working to moderate the militias' public image, Olson could barely restrain himself. Ultimately, he broke ranks with the other militia leaders, disparaging them as "moderates."⁹³

The other militia leaders did little to rein Olson in. In truth, there was little that they could have done. Olson's behavior demonstrated one of the difficulties inherent in a decentralized movement such as the militia: lack of legitimate leadership. At the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, Olson was the leader of the Michigan Militia, making his comments as legitimate as those of any other militia leaders. Because each militia operated independently, the other militia leaders had little leverage with which to compel Olson to conform. To complicate the more moderate militia leaders' dilemma, the news media loved Olson. As sociologist Todd Gitlin observed in his study of the news media's treatment of the New Left in the 1960s, the media "certifies" certain movement leaders and can elevate those leaders to celebrities.⁹⁴ Olson's brash demeanor and bold proclamations fit the media's image of the militias. The media found that Olson could usually be counted on to produce an outrageous sound bite, and his camouflage uniform made for good visual "news." When the media anointed Olson the iconic militiaman, it made the task of subduing his comments even more difficult.

The bifurcated and contradictory rhetoric of the militias' own leaders left room for others to impose their own interpretation on the militias. Depending on one's proclivities, the militias were either civic organizations that occasionally took target practice, or armed radicals fed up with the federal government and ready to take it down.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, there was significant danger for the militias in leaving themselves open to speculation regarding who represented the “real” Militia Movement.

Notes:

1. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information, *The Militia Movement in the United States* 104th Cong., 1st sess., June 15, 1995, 94.
2. Irwin Suall, *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1994), 26.
3. Multimedia Productions, *The Phil Donahue Show*, December 27, 1994 [Videotape]. Hereafter cited as *Donahue*.
4. CBS News, *CBS This Morning*, April 24, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *CBS This Morning*.
5. Senate, *The Militia Movement in the United States*.
6. Joseph G. Bellon, "Well Regulated: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Modern American Militia Movement" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1999), 69.
7. Sarah Elizabeth Mahan, "A Dramatistic Analysis of the Video Rhetoric of the Militia of Montana" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 1997), 18.
8. Charles Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton Jr., *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 3rd ed. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 2001), 249-261.
9. Mike Tharp, "Rise of the Citizen Militias," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 15, 1994, 34-35.
10. Keith Schneider, "Fearing a Conspiracy, Some Heed Call to Arms," *New York Times*, November 14, 1994, A1.
11. Christopher John Farley, "Patriot Games," *Time*, December 19, 1994, 48-49.
12. *Ibid.*, 49.
13. Schneider, "Fearing a Conspiracy," A1.
14. Tharp, "Rise of Citizen Militias," 35.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Schneider, "Fearing a Conspiracy," A1.

17. Ibid., A14.
18. Farley, "Patriot Games," 48.
19. Ibid., 48, 49.
20. Ibid., 49
21. Suall, *Armed & Dangerous*.
22. Ibid., 26.
23. *Donahue*.
24. While militia leaders likely made local, and possibly regional, public appearances, the *Phil Donahue Show* was their first appearance on the national stage.
25. Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 29.
26. *Donahue*.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. CNN, "Text of Janet Reno Press Conference," April 4, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript.
32. CBS News, "Manhunt Under Way for those Responsible for the Oklahoma City Bombing," *CBS Morning News*, April 20, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript.
33. "Remarks on the Bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:552.
34. Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian, *Collective Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 257.

35. ABC News, *This Week with David Brinkley*, April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *This Week with David Brinkley*.
36. "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:573.
37. Ibid.
38. *This Week With David Brinkley*, April 23, 1995.
39. ABC News, *Nightline*, April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *Nightline*.
40. Adams even denied such beliefs when directly confronted with them. ABC News, *Nightline*, April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *Nightline*.
41. *Nightline*, April 21, 1995.
42. *This Week With David Brinkley*, April 23, 1995.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. ABC News, *Nightline*, April 25, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *Nightline*. *Nightline* chose Decker, Michigan because it was the town nearest where investigators had searched the farm of suspects Terry and David Nichols for bomb making materials. Decker is also near the headquarters of the Michigan Militia.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid. Sheriff's Empowerment Acts generally prevent federal law enforcement officials from entering a sheriff's jurisdiction and carrying out any activities without first notifying the sheriff. The militia supports county sheriffs because of the sheriffs' status as the only elected law enforcement officers. The militias consider the sheriffs to have legitimate power, unlike the Federal government's law enforcement agencies that they consider to be akin to government-sponsored terrorists.
48. Ibid.

49. CBS News, *CBS This Morning*, April 24, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript.
50. "Fact Sheet: Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995," (Clinton Presidential Materials Project, 2001) [database on-line]; available from:
<http://clinton6.nara.gov/1995/02/1995-02-10-fact-sheet-on-omnibus-counterterrorism-act-of.html>.
51. Ibid.
52. *Nightline*, April 25, 1995.
53. Senate, *The Militia Movement in the United States*.
54. Ibid., 1.
55. Ibid., 5, 44.
56. In the intervening time between his televised interviews the week of McVeigh's arrest and the senate hearing, Olson had been ousted as a Michigan Militia leader due to his public insistence that the Japanese government had bombed the Murrah Federal building in retaliation for a Serin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. Jill Smolowe, "Enemies of the State," *Time*, May 8, 1995, 64.
57. Militia leaders considered this to be an opportunity to attract more members. Jonathan Karl, *The Right to Bear Arms: The Rise of America's New Militias* (New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1995), 147; Timothy M. Seul, "Militia Minds: Inside America's Contemporary Militia Movement" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1997), 126.
58. Senate, *The Militia Movement in the United States*, 83.
59. Trochmann had the *Declaration of Independence* entered it into the official record as a part of his testimony.
60. Senate, *The Militia Movement in the United States*, 83.
61. Ibid., 84.
62. Ibid., 92, 93, 93.
63. Ibid., 94.
64. Ibid., 91, 93.
65. Ibid., 84.

66. Ibid, 98.
67. Ibid., 83, 100, 110, 110.
68. Ibid., 110, 111, 111, 112.
69. Ibid., 103.
70. Ibid., 103, 108, 144, 93.
71. Ibid., 104.
72. Ibid., 95, 98, 99-100. Olson at one point implied that the Senate was the puppet of the CIA, and at another insisted that many in the militia community found Specter to best represent the “corruption and tyranny” that the militia opposed.
73. Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 325.
74. ABC News, *Nightline*, April 1, 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *Nightline*; CBS News, *Face the Nation*, March 31, 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *Face the Nation*.
75. ABC News, *This Week with David Brinkley*, March 31, 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *This Week with David Brinkley*.
76. “No Flames, No Guns in Montana,” *New York Times* (Late Edition) June 15, 1996, A18.
77. The militia and Freeman differed ideologically in that the Freeman did not believe that the state and federal government had any jurisdiction over them. Therefore, they felt no compulsion to abide by its laws. The militia did not deny the validity of the governments—they simply thought that the government had overstepped its bounds. While the Freeman “opted out” of the system, the militia leaders claimed to want to change the system from within. Both groups, however, were considered anti-government.
78. *Face the Nation*, March 31, 1996.
79. *This Week with David Brinkley*, March 31, 1996.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.

- 82. Ibid.
- 83. *Face the Nation*, March 31, 1996.
- 84. *Nightline*, April 1, 1996.
- 85. Ibid.
- 86. Ibid.
- 87. Ibid.
- 88. Steven M. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon, The Media Construction of the Militia Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 210.
- 89. *Face the Nation*, March 31, 1996.
- 90. William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 63.
- 91. Ibid., 77.
- 92. *Face the Nation*, 31 March 1996.
- 93. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 2.

Chapter Three

Managing The Crisis: The Clinton Administration's Response to the Militia Movement

The bombing in Oklahoma City was an attack on innocent children and defenseless citizens. It was an act of cowardice, and it was evil. The United States will not tolerate it. And I will not allow the people of this country to be intimidated by evil cowards.

--President William J. Clinton¹

President William J. Clinton made no mention of the modern Militia Movement in this, his first official statement in response to the Oklahoma City bombing. Indeed, when he briefed the nation at 5:30 p.m. on April 19, 1995, it remained unclear who was responsible for the deadly blast. Nonetheless, Clinton's first public statement regarding the act and its architects demonstrated his appreciation of the role of modern American presidents as "image makers," particularly in times of crisis.²

As presidential scholar Amos Kiewe has argued, presidents "seek the opportunity to define situations and to construct the reality they wish the public to accept."³ Presidents employ rhetoric to influence how the public perceives situations and to shape public discussion of issues. The president's role in defining situations and directing public discourse is especially apparent in times of perceived crisis. In fact, rhetorician Theodore Windt has contended that political crises are "primarily rhetorical."⁴ That is, situations are elevated to the status of crisis through the president's characterization of them as such. According to Windt, "situations do not create crises. Rather, the

president's perception of the situation and the rhetoric he uses to describe it mark an event as a crisis.”⁵ The power to influence citizens' thoughts about crises allows considerable sway over the ways in which the public *responds* to issues, rhetorical scholar David Zarefsky has noted.⁶ In defining an event, a president prescribes and subtly promotes his preferred response.

The Clinton administration's efforts to define the Oklahoma City bombing as a “crisis” and to demonize its perpetrators began immediately following the blast and continued over six weeks.⁷ The administration's public responses took a variety of forms, including press briefings, written proclamations, public addresses, and an appearance by Clinton himself on the television news program *60 Minutes*. Clinton led the administration's response, although Press Secretary Mike McCurry and Attorney General Janet Reno also briefed the press on the tragedy.

This chapter analyzes the Clinton administration's response to the Oklahoma City bombing as it unfolded over those six weeks after the bombing, with particular attention to how it interpreted the bombing and served Clinton's broader political goals. I show how the Clinton administration employed crisis rhetoric as its primary means of managing the attack, not only characterizing the bombing as a terrorist attack on innocent civilians that demonstrated the danger and depravity of far-right extremists, but also as a means of demonstrating the hateful, violent tone of conservative rhetoric in general. In addition, the administration's response to the bombing served to display Clinton's strength as a leader and promote the administration's anti-terrorism legislation.

The administration's response to the bombing consisted of a campaign involving two separate, but related, phases of crisis management rhetoric. Initially, the Clinton

administration reasserted its power and authority through a rhetoric of resolve and reassurance. Before any suspects were arrested, the administration focused attention on its investigative and apprehension efforts, while it assured the nation that the perpetrators would be brought to justice. Upon the arrest of Timothy McVeigh, the Clinton administration shifted rhetorical strategies to capitalize on the connection between the bombing and the militias. Then, the administration turned its attention away from the bombing itself to focus attention on a larger “crisis” involving the spread of extremist groups advocating hatred and violence. The administration broadened its approach, attacking all those who engaged in radical rhetoric, using the militias as the primary example of contemporary right-wing extremism. This broader “crisis” in turn rationalized counter-terrorism legislation as the best means of protecting the public.

A Rhetoric of Resolve and Reassurance

The Oklahoma City bombing stunned the nation. Domestic terrorist attacks were largely unknown to Americans.⁸ The gruesome images of rescue workers pulling victims from piles of rubble had accompanied news reports from the Middle East and other violent parts of the world—but not the American Midwest. Public memory scholar Edward Linenthal later explained the root of the shock: “It took place in what was envisioned as America’s ‘heartland,’ shattering the assumption that Middle America was immune to acts of mass terrorism as well as the assumption that the nation still had ‘zones of safety,’ such as day care centers.”⁹ As one federal office worker who survived

the bombing lamented, “It’s not Jerusalem. It’s not Baghdad. It’s not Bolivia. It’s Oklahoma.”¹⁰ Its sense of security shattered, the nation looked to Clinton for leadership.

As president, Clinton was expected to provide the nation with a framework for understanding the tragedy that both comforted those grieving and reassured the rest of the nation that the perpetrators would be caught. Rhetorician Bonnie Dow has claimed that that while presidents rhetorically *constitute* some crisis situations as a means of gaining support for a policy, at other times they are called on to *react* to circumstances that the public already perceives to be a crisis.¹¹ Epideictic strategies necessarily dominate the rhetoric of presidents responding to a crisis, according to Dow, as such strategies “allow the audience to reach a communal understanding of the events which have occurred.”¹² Rhetorical critic Celeste Condit agreed, noting that “the epideictic speaker will be called forth by the community to help discover what the event means to the community, and what the community will come to be in the face of the new event.”¹³

By his own admission, Clinton had been overshadowed in the early months of 1995.¹⁴ Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and his Republican contingent had swept into Washington with victories in the 1994 mid-term elections and proclaimed a “Republican Revolution.”¹⁵ The Republican takeover of Congress put Clinton on the political defensive. He retreated from the public scene in early 1995 when the Republicans focused the political spotlight on their “Contract With America.” While the Republicans pressed forward, former political correspondent Robert Shogan observed that “the president’s silence was so conspicuous it became embarrassing.”¹⁶

The bombing, however, called Clinton back to rhetorical prominence under difficult, but politically favorable, circumstances. According to Shogan, it “served as the

domestic equivalent of an international crisis, providing a climate in which Americans rallied around their chief executive.”¹⁷ “Here at last was a misfortune for which no one could blame Clinton and which he could address without having to reconcile the countless internal contradictions and inconsistencies that had tormented his presidency,” Shogan explained.¹⁸ This Clinton did as he responded to the bombing with five press conferences, five speeches, and an interview on the television news magazine *60 Minutes*. Of these appearances, the five press conferences and one of the speeches comprised the Clinton administration’s *initial* response to the bombing and demonstrated a direct and decisive response to the crisis.

In the first hours and days that followed the bombing, the Clinton administration treated the bombing as a major crisis and managed the moment with a rhetoric of resolve and reassurance. The administration moved with poise and purpose as it focused public attention on the victims, the perpetrators, and the investigation that it insisted would lead to their capture. An anxious nation was repeatedly assured that the assailants would be caught and punished for their crime.

The identity of the bombers was initially unknown, and the Clinton administration scrupulously avoided speculation as to the perpetrators’ identity or motivations. Clinton was vigorous, nonetheless, in his condemnation of the bombing and those who had committed it. With little other choice, Clinton characterized the bombers based on the nature of their action. He favored “cowards,” “murderous,” and “killers” to describe the bombers, implicitly characterizing those responsible as terrorists.¹⁹ In his first press conference on April 19, Clinton implied that the bombing was a terrorist act, as he insisted that the purpose of the attack was “intimidation.”²⁰ At a press conference the

next morning, Clinton was even more strident as he asserted that the bombing was directed against the entire nation: “This was an attack on innocent children, on innocent victims, on the people there in Oklahoma City. But make no mistake about it: this was an attack on the United States, our way of life, and everything we believe in.”²¹

Instead of focusing on the bombers, the Clinton administration initially drew attention to that over which it had control: the investigation and search for the bombers.²² Administration officials bolstered the appearance of the administration as stalwart and reassured the nation as it announced that the full investigative and law enforcement powers of the federal government would be brought to bear in the pursuit of justice and national security. Press Secretary Mike McCurry was the first administration official to brief the press on the bombing. At 1:35 p.m. on the day of the bombing, he announced that the administration was convening a working group to coordinate the response of the federal government to the bombing. He also announced that the government had activated an emergency response plan through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.²³ Later in the afternoon, Attorney General Janet Reno held a press briefing of her own, vowing to “pursue every lead and use every possible resource to bring the people responsible to justice.”²⁴ Reno delineated the federal agencies and resources that had been dispatched to run the investigation. Clinton likewise expressed his unyielding commitment to the investigation in his first public remarks on the bombing at a press briefing held immediately before Reno’s. He repeatedly assured the nation that the federal government was taking steps to “assure the strongest response to this situation,” and that it was sending “the world’s finest investigators to solve these murders.”²⁵ Let there be no doubt, Clinton insisted again in remarks the next day: “Whoever did it, we

will find out, and there will be justice that will be swift and certain and severe. And there is no place to hide. Nobody can hide anyplace in this country, nobody can hide anyplace in this world from the terrible consequences of what has been done.”²⁶ Clinton’s rhetoric was firm and decisive, demonstrating sure-footed leadership.

Despite his focus on the bombers and the investigation, Clinton did not neglect his broader obligation to manage the emotional aspects of the crisis and provide a sense of unity for the nation. Clinton praised the bravery and fortitude of the people of Oklahoma City, and he used the rescue efforts to illustrate the power of good to triumph over evil. He expressed solidarity with the victims by ordering all federal buildings to fly their flags at half-staff, and he reassured Oklahomans and the nation with optimistic statements: “You will overcome this moment of grief and horror. You will rebuild. And we will be there to work with you until the work is done.”²⁷ Life would continue despite the tragedy, Clinton assured both the victims and the nation.

The rhetoric of the Clinton administration was tough yet tempered in the days after the bombing. Clinton provided the nation with an understanding of the event as a horrifying crime committed by evil, cowardly terrorists who would be caught and punished. The President merged condemnations of the bombing with words of hope and reassurance. The message was clear and the administration was steady as it managed the initial crisis.

On April 21, federal authorities arrested Timothy McVeigh and questioned Terry Nichols regarding his role in the bombing. The arrest provided a face to the previously unknown perpetrators and revealed the suspects’ alleged connection to the Michigan Militia. Subsequently, the Clinton administration would seize this opportunity to

condemn not only the perpetrators of the bombing but also the extreme, hate-filled rhetoric of the far right in general. The immediate crisis had passed, but the administration took advantage of the opportunity to use the incident to its full political advantage.

Reframing the Oklahoma City Bombing

On April 23, 1995, Clinton addressed the grieving community of Oklahoma City at a nationally televised prayer service, “A Time of Healing.”²⁸ As the prayer service expressed the nation’s grief and signaled the beginning of healing, Clinton’s address signaled a change in his own rhetorical approach to the bombing. The speech began with a focus on the bombing and its victims, then subtly shifted course to reveal Clinton’s new focus: extremist forces which threatened the nation. By reframing the Oklahoma City bombing as the result of broader political forces, Clinton laid a foundation for responses that went beyond the capture and punishment of the individual perpetrators. Clinton created the rhetorical space to discredit those individuals, beliefs, and behaviors that had plagued his presidency. He also created an exigency for strong anti-terrorism legislation.

Clinton’s opening comments were eulogistic in nature as he honored the dead and comforted the grieving. He praised the bombing victims as exemplary parents, workers, and citizens, noting that “they served us well, and we are grateful.” Clinton went on to acknowledge the depth of the grief experienced by those left to mourn: “Though we share your grief, your pain is unimaginable, and we know that.” Finally, he offered advice and wisdom through the words of a young woman widowed when a bomb brought down Pan

American Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. The woman urged the mourners to search for justice instead of being consumed by anger and hatred.²⁹

The widow's call for justice served as Clinton's fulcrum to pivot the audience away from their immediate grief toward consideration of broader social issues.

Clinton turned his attention from the specific bombers to what he obscurely termed "the dark forces which gave rise to this evil."³⁰ For the first time he blamed those people and ideals that he insisted had produced and compelled the bombers, and declared them the nucleus of the new national threat. Without being specific as to whether "the forces" were physical or philosophical, Clinton simply warned the audience: "They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life."³¹ Clinton then called the audience to "stand against the forces of fear."³² In what would become a familiar refrain, Clinton implored, "when there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it." As rhetorical scholar Jim Kuypers explained, "crisis rhetoric occurs when a president chooses to speak on an issue, whether to promote it as a crisis or diminish its perceived significance as a crisis."³³ Clinton sent a clear message in his remarks at the prayer service: the arrest of Timothy McVeigh revealed a new, and larger, crisis facing America.

Pundits praised Clinton's initial response to the bombing as reassuring and apolitical. Historian James MacGregor Burns and sociologist Georgia Sorensen later wrote, "All the heartfelt sympathy of the nation flowed through the president's words and deeds. If he was anything, Bill Clinton was the great comforter. He carefully avoided politicizing his reaction."³⁴ Similarly, Clinton's former speechwriter Michael Waldman observed, "It was the first time Clinton had been a reassuring figure rather than an

unsettling one. For many people, during those days, for the first time, he truly became a president.”³⁵

In the weeks to come, the Clinton administration capitalized on the momentum provided by its deft handling of the initial crisis and promoted its new agenda in the political and public sphere.³⁶ That the mainstream press was focusing attention on the alleged bombers’ connections to the far right was to Clinton’s clear political benefit. Not only was Clinton again in the spotlight, but the situation that had put him there revealed the violence and depravity of his critics on the far right. This, in turn, provided him with the justification for a broader campaign against extremism and validated his support for anti-terrorist and gun control legislation.

Clinton took advantage of the national climate of fear and uncertainty to advance his new agenda in three significant appearances. After vaguely suggesting a war against extremism in his remarks at the prayer service, Clinton fully unveiled his strategy during an interview on the April 23 broadcast of *60 Minutes*.³⁷ He continued the campaign in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when he spoke at the gathering of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC).³⁸ Finally, Clinton gave his new anti-terrorism theme its fullest expression on May 5 when he delivered the commencement address at Michigan State University.³⁹

In his appearances after the prayer service, Clinton framed the Oklahoma City bombing as part of a broader social crisis. In the process, he established a case for additional—and immediate—action. According to Zarefsky, “crises do not admit of time for reflective deliberation; the situation is urgent. A presumption for action is established.”⁴⁰ His rhetoric, therefore, became much more urgent as he argued for the

rejection of extremist rhetoric and those who employed it—and for passage of new anti-terrorism legislation. The danger was no longer from the bombers themselves, but from the nebulous extremist culture and incendiary speech that the bombing and its perpetrators represented. In his appearances in the weeks following the bombing, Clinton developed three themes. First, he denounced the inflammatory tone and content of the far right's public rhetoric, insisting that their rhetoric of hatred was ultimately behind the violence in Oklahoma City. Second, he vilified the militias in particular as the prime example of these extremists.⁴¹ Finally, he advanced his anti-terrorism legislation package—the “Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995” and “Antiterrorism Amendments Act of 1995”—as the best means of fighting back against the new terrorists. With these themes, Clinton effectively recast the crisis, further turning the Oklahoma City bombing to his political advantage.

The Crusade Against Radical Rhetoric

Clinton used the Oklahoma City bombing as both context and pretext for attacking extremist rhetoric. Turning attention away from the bombers themselves, he instead focused attention on those who engaged in what he considered to be incendiary and divisive speech. He accused the “purveyors of hate” of contributing to the bombing and warned that their continued inflammatory speech threatened domestic tranquility.⁴² Clinton's crusade against extremist speech centered on what Clinton labeled those “loud and angry voices” that exploited the right of free speech to spread hatred, fear, and paranoia.⁴³ This theme in the Clinton administration's crisis communication relied

heavily on the strategic ambiguity of his references to the “voices” and “dark forces” of extremism.⁴⁴

Clinton’s use of strategic ambiguity left the identity of the offending parties open to interpretation. While it was clear that he spoke generally about the right, the belligerent tone in the political arena led some to speculate that House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his “Republican Revolutionaries” were Clinton’s real targets.⁴⁵ Others believed Clinton was condemning right-wing talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy.⁴⁶ Although Clinton eventually named the militias as examples of the hateful forces, the audience initially was left to speculate as to the identity of the others. Clinton’s lack of specificity allowed him to draw attention to the hateful tone of the right and to press the connection between violent speech and violent action.

Clinton accused the agitators of attempting to divide the nation through their words and of cultivating an environment where violence was an acceptable response to discontent. In each of his three major appearances after the prayer service, he offered a blanket condemnation of those guilty of “purveying hate and implying with at least their words that violence is all right.”⁴⁷ Clinton’s campaign began in his *60 Minutes* interview, where he insisted that violence in America was attributable, at least in part, to the tone of public discourse. “It’s the words spouting violence, giving sanction to violence, telling people how to practice violence that are sweeping all across the country,” he insisted.⁴⁸ It was a theme that he explored in greater detail in his speech the next day at the AACC, where he chastised those who divided the nation and fostered an environment that encouraged violence: “But we hear so many loud and angry voices in America today whose sole goals seems to be to try to keep some people as paranoid as possible and the

rest of us all torn up and upset with each other. They spread hate. And they leave the impression that, by their very words, that violence is acceptable.”⁴⁹ Clinton used the bombing as a dramatic exemplar, suggesting that hateful speech had been a contributing factor in the bombing and warning that rhetorical extremism could trigger another attack. Warning that there might be others “on edge and capable of doing something like this horrible thing in Oklahoma City,”⁵⁰ Clinton insisted on *60 Minutes*: “You never know whether there’s some fragile person who’s out there about to tip over the edge thinking they can make some statement against the system and all of a sudden there’s a bunch of innocent babies in a day care center dead.”⁵¹

Clinton thus implied that there were more “McVeighs” lurking on the political fringe. He urged his audiences to stand up and speak out against those who encouraged such people with their hateful rhetoric. Clinton encouraged his audience to use their *own* freedom of speech to counter the hateful and reckless rhetoric of extremists. “I think that free speech runs two ways,” Clinton insisted, again on *60 Minutes*. “When people are irresponsible with their liberties, they ought to be caught up short, and they ought to be talked down by other Americans.”⁵² Clinton urged good Americans to use their own constitutional right of free speech to combat those who abused theirs: “When they say things that are irresponsible, that may have egregious consequences, we must call them on it. The exercise of their freedom of speech makes our silence all the more unforgivable.”⁵³

As Clinton defined the spread of immoderate and inflammatory rhetoric in America as a “crisis,” he retained the bombing as the immediate exigency demanding action. Framing his comments as attacks on those who may have *inspired* the bombers,

Clinton extended the responsibility for the bombing well beyond the suspects who had been arrested. Through the malicious mouthpieces that inspired Timothy McVeigh, Clinton implied, the threat to mainstream America lived on.

Clinton Implicates the Militias

The Clinton administration was careful not to name the Militia Movement as directly responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. Federal law enforcement agencies had found insufficient evidence to prove that the bombers had acted at the behest or with the knowledge of any militia unit. Thus, as Clinton explained, he was unwilling to blame any group for “something that we don’t have any evidence they have done.”⁵⁴ The lack of evidence may have prevented the Clinton administration from publicly blaming the militias for the bombing, but it did not preclude Clinton from insinuating that the militias had something to do with the attack. Nor did it stop him from presenting the militias as the best example of violent extremists inspired by the incendiary rhetoric.

On *60 Minutes*, Clinton used the incident at Waco to associate the militias with the Oklahoma City bombing and to suggest that the militias’ beliefs were “evidence of what is wrong” with the nation.⁵⁵ Clinton called into question the logic and patriotism of those who believed that the Oklahoma City bombing was an understandable, if wrongheaded, reaction to the federal government’s actions at Waco.⁵⁶ Emphatically, Clinton stated: “I cannot believe that any serious patriotic American believes that the conduct of those people at Waco justifies the kind of outrageous behavior that we’ve seen here at Oklahoma City or the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that we’re hearing all across

this country today. It's wrong."⁵⁷ Interviewer Leslie Stahl encouraged Clinton to provide a more fulsome explanation. "Despite what you say, we're talking about thousands and thousands of people in this country who are furious at the federal government for what you say is irrational, but they believe it," she insisted.⁵⁸ Making it clear that he was speaking about the militias, Clinton responded in such a way as to highlight the violent nature of the movement and assign guilt for the bombing: "They do not have the right to kill innocent Americans. They do not have the right to violate the law."⁵⁹ A moment later he again depicted the militias as a threat to democracy: "This is a freedom-loving democracy because the rule of law has reigned for over two hundred years now—not because vigilantes took the law into their own hands. And they're just not right about that."⁶⁰

Clinton, however, saved his most direct attack on the militias for his commencement address at Michigan State University. In the home state of the Michigan Militia—the nation's largest militia and the group that the alleged bombers reportedly had been associated with—Clinton blasted the militias as representatives of the "new and grave security challenges" that faced the graduates and the world.⁶¹

Clinton identified the militias as the newest menace in a long line of threats to freedom and liberty by framing his comments in terms of threats to national security. Each generation experienced challenges that it must meet or be defeated by, Clinton told the crowd. Earlier generations had faced World War II and the Cold War, and they rose to the occasion to defeat the threat and strengthen the nation. The mid-1990s were no different, Clinton maintained: "New forces threaten the order and security which free people everywhere cherish." The Oklahoma City bombing was Clinton's key example of

the new threat: “The dark possibilities of our age are visible now in the smoke, the horror and the heartbreak of Oklahoma City.” Warning that the bombing was not an isolated incident, Clinton then went on to place the Oklahoma City bombing in the company of other terrorist attacks around the globe. He listed a number of such attacks: “We see that threat again in the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York; in the nerve gas attack in the Tokyo subway; in the terrorist assault on innocent civilians in the Middle East; in the organized crime plaguing the former Soviet Union.” The list invited the crowd to understand the Oklahoma City bombing as a terrorist attack—and to view those responsible as evil terrorists.⁶²

Clinton detailed the extremist belief system of the militias and the dangers inherent in those beliefs. Refuting the militias’ claims that Americans lived in tyranny under an oppressive federal government, Clinton reminded the audience of their immense freedoms. “This is a very free country. Those of you in the Militia Movement have broader rights here than you would in any other country in the entire world,” Clinton insisted. Clinton reinforced his depiction of the militias’ beliefs as deviant and dangerous by pointing to the differences between “reasonable” positions and those of the militias. Clinton first focused on the danger that the group posed to law enforcement: “It is one thing to believe that the federal government has too much power and work within the law to reduce it. It is quite another to break the law of the land and threaten to shoot officers of the law if all they do is their duty to uphold it.” Clinton then moved on to pit the militias against good, law abiding citizens: “It is one thing to believe we are taxed too much and work to reduce the tax burden. It is quite another to refuse to pay your taxes, though your neighbor pays his.” Finally, Clinton revealed the hostility that the militias

held toward law enforcement officers and even rescue workers: “It is one thing to believe we are over-regulated and to work to lessen the burden of regulation,” he told the crowd, “it is quite another to slander our dedicated public servants, our brave police officers, even our rescue workers who have been called a hostile army of occupation.”⁶³

Beyond debunking the militias’ skewed, violent belief system, Clinton ridiculed their claim to patriotism. Taking direct aim at the militias’ depiction of itself, Clinton suggested the ludicrous nature of the movement’s beliefs. Clinton was adamant as he rejected the militias’ (mis)appropriation of the image of the country’s early revolutionaries. “If you appropriate our sacred symbols for paranoid purposes and compare yourselves to colonial militias who fought for the democracy you now rail against, you are wrong” Clinton admonished. “How dare you suggest that we in the freest nation on Earth live in tyranny. How dare you call yourselves patriots and heroes.” Clinton insisted that the militias actually *violated* the founders’ vision, as he reminded the audience of the founders’ respect for the rule of law: “Our founding fathers created a system of laws in which reason could prevail over fear. Without respect for this law there is no freedom.” Finally, Clinton denied that one could be both hateful and patriotic: “There is nothing patriotic about hating your country, or pretending that you can love your country but despise your government.”⁶⁴

Clinton’s attack on the militias portrayed the movement as dangerously misguided and inherently violent. As Clinton built his case against those whose rhetoric promoted violence, he offered the militias as his primary example of extremists inspired by calls for violence. The militias were the antithesis of the patriots that they claimed to be; they

were, instead, terrorists. Thus, the answer to the problem of the militias was new anti-terrorism legislation.

Clinton Calls for Anti-Terrorism Legislation

Clinton accompanied his criticism of extremist rhetoric and the militias with public calls for Congress to pass new counter-terrorism legislation. Clinton built and refined an argument that capitalized on the “crisis” of domestic extremism and offered his counter-terrorism legislation as the means of salvation. The “Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995” transmitted to Congress on February 10, 1995, was designed to increase the government’s ability to combat international terrorists that targeted the United States either on American soil or abroad. The legislation had seen little progress since its introduction to Congress. After the bombing, Clinton went public with his appeals for Congress to pass the Act, as well as the “Antiterrorism Amendments Acts of 1995” (transmitted shortly after the bombing), which augmented the federal government’s ability to fight domestic terrorism. The legislation was his response to the danger posed by the “right-wing paramilitary groups,” Clinton announced, and would “strengthen the hand of the FBI and other law enforcement officers in cracking terrorist networks, both domestic and foreign.”⁶⁵

Clinton’s call for the passage of the anti-terrorism legislation served dual political purposes. First, it demonstrated his administration’s leadership and tough stance against terrorism. Additionally, it put the Republican-controlled Congress in a double bind. If Republicans blocked the legislation, they risked appearing soft on terrorism at a time

when there was significant anxiety about the new “terrorist threat” in the nation. If they supported the measures, they risked alienating their right-wing supporters. The legislation increased the power of law enforcement agencies, and arguably impinged on civil liberties—issues important to conservatives. Ironically, the legislation embodied the very sort of governmental powers that the militias cited as evidence of governmental tyranny. However the Republicans responded, it seemed that the Clinton administration would benefit politically.

Rhetorically, however, Clinton’s advocacy for measures that would increase the power of law enforcement to track, survey, and prosecute alleged terrorists was a delicate maneuver. As rhetorical critics Denise Bostdorff and Daniel O’Rourke have contended, presidents managing domestic crises often face the challenge of negotiating conflicts between traditional, but opposing, American values.⁶⁶ These conflicts, the scholars maintained, “pose a dilemma for citizens as to which value and which side in the crisis they should support.”⁶⁷ For Clinton, this meant that while the Oklahoma City bombing may have frightened the American people, it presumably did not destroy their desire to maintain their individual and constitutional rights. Furthermore, one of the militias’ most basic charges was that the federal government was increasingly overstepping its bounds, especially in the realm of federal law enforcement. This required that the President advance his call for increased legislation in such a way that did not appear to be trampling personal freedoms and confirming the militias’ accusations—even if the legislation arguably did just that.

Clinton’s response to this rhetorical dilemma was to portray his legislation as a necessary mechanism to ensure domestic safety and security, as well as protect the

constitutional rights of all citizens. Perhaps mindful of the militias' contention that his own administration was systematically trampling on citizens' rights, Clinton told *60 Minutes* viewers the legislation would not infringe on peoples' basic civil liberties: "We will still have freedom of speech; we will have freedom of association; we'll have freedom of movement." Clinton admitted, however, that Americans would need to accept what he termed "discipline" on their freedoms in order to achieve an increased level of safety and to "go after the people who want to destroy our very way of life." He explained the discipline as "minor infringement on our freedom," comparing the new measures to installing metal detectors to combat the hijacking and bombing of airplanes.⁶⁸

In an important rhetorical shift, Clinton co-opted the rhetoric of the militias by emphasizing how the legislation would *protect* the civil liberties of all Americans. The militia leaders had long maintained that their movement was necessary to protect the people from governmental intrusion upon the civil liberties of citizens. In his address at Michigan State in May, Clinton struck at the heart of that contention, positioning the militias as the greatest danger to those very liberties. Clinton insisted that his anti-terrorism legislation would allow all citizens to enjoy their constitutional rights in an environment free from fear. Alluding to the children killed in the Oklahoma City bombing, Clinton pointed out the freedoms that all Americans would sacrifice if the new legislation *failed* to pass:

In fact, the failure to act will undermine those rights. For no one is free in America where parents have to worry when they drop off their children for day care, or when you are the target of assassination simply because you work for our

government. No one is free in America when large numbers of our fellow citizens must always be looking over their shoulders.⁶⁹

Clinton's final public appeal for Congress to pass his anti-terrorist legislation came a few weeks later in his weekly radio address on May 27. Concerned with how debate over that legislation was shaping up in the Senate, Clinton told the nation that those opposing the legislation were putting the nation at risk. The debate over the legislation had centered on three provisions that some maintained were overly intrusive and would lead to an erosion of constitutional rights. Clinton took the objectors to task for their "restrictive view" and insisted that they were impeding the administration's efforts to prevent further terrorist attacks and ensure the safety of the citizenry.⁷⁰ Clinton insisted that the legislation provided law enforcement agencies with the tools that they desperately needed to fight modern terrorists. "In the 21st century, the security of the American people will require us to fight terrorism all around the world, and, unfortunately, here at home. It's a fight we have to be able to win," Clinton concluded.⁷¹ Responding to those concerned about the legislation's restrictions on civil liberties, the Clinton administration argued that nobody's civil liberties were safe when terrorists threatened.

Clinton's legislative efforts were not completely successful. The Senate passed his anti-terrorism legislative package two months after the bombing, but nearly one year later the House passed a watered-down version of the bill, having stripped it of a number of proposals for cracking down on domestic terrorists, including provisions to chemically mark explosive materials, to deport foreigners who support terrorists activities more quickly than in the past, and to use new high-tech surveillance equipment to monitor the

communication of suspected terrorists.⁷² In his radio address on March 16, 1996, the President bitterly lamented the fate of the legislation: “The House has finally acted to gut the bill. The House took the teeth out of our efforts to fight terrorism. Unbelievably, the House voted to give law enforcement officials fewer tools to fight terrorism than they have to fight far less horrible crimes here at home.”⁷³ A month later, Clinton went after the House Republicans again, accusing them of caving to pressure from the “Washington gun lobby.”⁷⁴ “House Republicans took that bill apart piece by piece,” he told the audience, “Well now it’s time they put it back together. American cannot afford to settle for a fake antiterrorism bill. We need the real thing. And on my watch, I’m determined to get it.”⁷⁵ Congress passed the final bill that same week but excised several provisions that Clinton considered to be especially important, including those that would help police keep suspected terrorists under surveillance. It reconsidered other components of the bill, including requiring chemical identifiers on some explosive materials. Clinton claimed that the legislation that did pass represented “important progress,” and he indicated that, although it was not extensive as he would have liked, the legislation did “strike a real blow against terrorism.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

The Clinton administration’s management of the Oklahoma City bombing was later criticized by some who charged that it manipulated the tragedy for political gain. Political science and government scholar John J. Pitney Jr., for example, marked the Oklahoma City bombing as the beginning of the “them-versus-us” approach designed to

associate Republicans with “extremists” and “radicals.”⁷⁷ Waldman, who had described Clinton as a reassuring figure, also maintained that the president used the event “implicitly to marginalize the Republican Revolutionaries.”⁷⁸

Nonetheless, “Clinton and his aides felt that his handling of the Oklahoma tragedy had helped him politically,” journalist Elizabeth Drew observed. “His approval ratings in most polls shot up; the majority of people said they felt that he had acted like a leader.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, it provided Clinton with the platform and the exigency to attack those who had engaged in anti-government and extremist rhetoric at the expense of his administration. The perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing had dramatically demonstrated the danger and depravity of extremism, especially as it was manifested in the far right. The bombing provided Clinton with the golden opportunity to demonstrate the danger of right-wing extremism and to justify legislation on terrorism that increased the power of federal law enforcement agencies.

As Theodore Windt observed in *Presidential Rhetoric*, “The President of the United States has the greatest opportunity not only to influence but frequently to set the political language of our country and thus direct the thinking of our citizens.”⁸⁰ However, the Clinton administration’s influence on the public identity of the modern Militia Movement is difficult to measure. Through its handling of the Oklahoma City bombing, the Clinton administration presented an image of the Militia Movement as dangerous domestic terrorists who were at least partially responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. Directly and indirectly, the administration painted the militias as extremist groups that threatened the very civil liberties that they professed to be protecting. The rhetorical portrait of the group had little nuance. The administration

relied on disparagement of the militias' "extremist" beliefs and the violent act of one of its followers to discredit the whole movement in the eyes of the mainstream public.

When the Clinton administration responded to the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, it faced a complicated rhetorical situation replete with opportunity and risk. The bombing offered the Clinton administration a chance to demonstrate strong leadership in the face of an unforeseen tragedy. The tragedy needed to be effectively managed, however, lest the administration open itself to charges of using a national calamity for political gain. The Clinton administration not only endured the crisis presented by the Oklahoma City bombing, it made the most of the tragedy. Put in a position to demonstrate leadership under pressure, Clinton emerged from the rhetorical shadows decisive and determined. He put the Republican House on the defensive while at the same time conveniently disposing of what otherwise might have been a politically dangerous social movement. In short, Clinton managed his own image and that of the militias to propel his presidency back into the spotlight.

Notes:

1. "Remarks on the Bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:552.
2. Amos Kiewe, introduction to *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*, ed. Amos Kiewe. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), xvi.
3. Ibid.
4. Theodore Windt, "The Presidency and Speeches on International Crisis: Repeating the Rhetorical Past," *Speaker and Gavel* 11 (November 1973): 7.
5. Ibid.
6. David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 7.
7. The majority of Clinton's comments ended after six weeks. However, he continued to offer occasional statements on the bombing and resulting antiterrorist legislation until nearly a year after the blast.
8. The World Trade Center had been attacked in 1993 by Muslim extremists with a similar truck bomb.
9. Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.
10. Perspectives, *Newsweek*, May 1, 1995, 23.
11. Bonnie J. Dow, "The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53 (Summer 1989): 295.
12. Ibid., 296.
13. Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar," *Communication Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1985): 289.
14. James MacGregor Burns and Georgia J. Sorenson with Robin Gerber and Scott W. Webster, *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 222.

15. Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words that Defined the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 83.
16. Robert Shogan, *The Fate of the Union: America's Rocky Road to Political Stalemate* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 185.
17. Ibid., 187.
18. Ibid., 186.
19. "Remarks on the Bombing," 552; "Remarks and an Exchange with Reporters on the Oklahoma City Bombing," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:567
20. "Remarks on the Bombing," 552.
21. "The President's News Conference With President Fernando Cardoso of Brazil," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1: 560.
22. Mike McCurry, "Press Briefing 19 April 1995," (Clinton Presidential Materials Project, 2001) [database on-line]; available from: <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1995/04/1995-04-19-press-briefing-by-mike-mccurry.html>; Janet Reno, "Press Briefing 19 April 1995," (Clinton Presidential Materials Project, 2001) [database on-line]; available from: <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1995/04/1995-04-19-press-briefing-by-attorey-general-reno.html>; "Remarks on the Bombing," 552.
23. McCurry, "Press Briefing 19 April 1995."
24. Reno, "Press Briefing 19 April 1995."
25. "Remarks on the Bombing," 552
26. "The President's News Conference," 560.
27. "Remarks and an Exchange," 567.
28. "Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:573.
29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Jim A. Kuypers, *Presidential Crisis Rhetoric and the Press in the Post-Cold War World* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 7. This definition is nearly identical to the one offered by Kiewe in *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*, xxiii.
34. Burns and Sorenson, *Dead Center*, 222.
35. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 82.
36. The Clinton administration was buoyed by the President's handling of the Oklahoma City bombing. Elizabeth Drew, *Showdown: The Struggle Between the Gingrich Congress and Clinton White House* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996), 202.
37. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:574.
38. "Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges in Minneapolis, Minnesota," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:579.
39. "Remarks at the Michigan State University Commencement Ceremony in East Lansing, Michigan," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:641.
40. Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty*, 13.
41. Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office: Getting Reelected Against All Odds*, (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999), 210.
42. "Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges," 581.
43. Ibid., 580.
44. "Remarks at a Memorial Service," 573.
45. Shogan, *The Fate of the Nation*, 187.

46. Those who believed the radio hosts to be the target cited Clinton's remarks at the AACC where he indicted those sentiments "regularly said over the airwaves in America today." "Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges," 580. The Clinton administration and federal government had been favorite targets of ultra-conservative hosts like Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy. Liddy once advised listeners to shoot Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) agents in the head if served a warrant: "They've got a vest on underneath that [jacket]. Head shots. Head shots . . . Kill the sons of bitches!" Kenneth S. Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 222.
47. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" 578.
48. Ibid.
49. "Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges," 580.
50. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" 577.
51. Ibid., 578.
52. Ibid.
53. "Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges," 581.
54. Notice that Clinton does not absolve the militias from culpability; he simply notes that there was a lack of evidence. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" 577.
55. Ibid., 575.
56. Michigan Militia leader Norman Olson had made such a statement on the April 21 broadcast of *Nightline*. ABC News, *Nightline*, April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis online transcript.
57. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" 575.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 576.
60. Ibid.

61. "Remarks at the Michigan State University Commencement Ceremony in East Lansing, Michigan," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:643.
62. Ibid., 642, 643.
63. Ibid., 644.
64. Ibid., 644, 645;
65. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" 575.
66. Denise M. Bostdorff and Daniel J. O'Rourke, "The Presidency and the Promotion of Domestic Crisis: John Kennedy's Management of the 1962 Steel Crisis," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1997): 352.
67. Ibid.
68. "Interview on CBS' '60 Minutes,'" 575
69. "Remarks at the Michigan State," 644.
70. "The President's Radio Address, May 27, 1995," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1996) 1:758.
71. Ibid.
72. "The President's Radio Address, March 16, 1996," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1996*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1997) 1:463.
73. Ibid.
74. "The President's Radio Address, April 13, 1996," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1996*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1997) 1: 580.
75. Ibid.
76. "The President's Radio Address, April 20, 1996," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1996*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, DC: GPO, 1997) 1: 603.

77. John J. Pitney, Jr., "Clinton and the Republican Party," in *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*, ed. Steven E. Schier (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 175.
78. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 82-3.
79. Drew, *Showdown*, 200.
80. Theodore Windt, *Presidential Rhetoric: 1961 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1983), 3.

Chapter Four

On The Attack: The “Anti-Hate” Watchdog Groups Sound the Warning

There will be more bombs.

--Joseph Roy, Southern Poverty Law Center¹

As the Militia Movement rallied its troops to resist the federal government, two of the best-known “watchdog” groups, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), emerged as the militias’ most vocal and ardent antagonists. Together, these watchdog groups engaged in a crusade to vilify the militias as a movement to be feared and reviled, warning that racist, conspiratorial white men calling themselves “patriots” were marshalling private armies to bring down the federal government.

The emergence of organized opposition to the militias was predictable and follows a pattern observed by movement scholars. Robert Cathcart argued that such conflict is a defining feature of social movements, as movements are characterized by the “dialectical tension growing out of moral conflict.”² David Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg likewise have observed that, “any social movement of potential political significance will generate opposition.”³

The watchdog groups were on the case from the time that the militias began to surface in 1994. The ADL published its first “fact-finding report” about the groups in April of that year: *Armed & Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*. In this booklet, the ADL cautioned against dismissing as harmless those they labeled

“armed right-wing militants.”⁴ According to the report, the militias had declared war on the federal government, were influenced by militant white supremacists, and regularly trained in paramilitary tactics as they prepared for an armed confrontation with the federal government.⁵

Not until the arrest of Timothy McVeigh for the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City did the watchdog groups’ warnings attract much attention from the mainstream media. The bombing, the watchdog groups proclaimed, had tragically fulfilled their predictions; the growing discontent in the heartland had exploded with heartbreaking consequences.⁶ The attack provided the watchdog groups with the means and opportunity to transmit their warnings about the militias to a much broader audience. Their forums included media outlets and congressional hearings where representatives of the watchdog groups spoke as “experts” on the militias. Additionally, the bombing, and the public interest in the militias that followed, prompted the watchdog groups to publish follow-up reports detailing the militias’ size, scope, ideology, and intentions.

Much of the scholarly literature on the militias has relied upon these reports by watchdog organizations. David H. Bennett, for example, specifically thanked the ADL and the SPLC for providing materials that “proved useful” in preparing his historical study of the militias.⁷ Bennett was not alone in relying on the watchdog organizations. Scholars from across disciplines have cited the watchdog groups’ publications as important sources of information on the Militia Movement.⁸

Although the watchdog groups undoubtedly provided relevant and useful information, their publications were hardly objective and unbiased. In *The Watchdogs*:

A Close Look at Anti-Racist “Watchdog” Groups, Laird Wilcox, a professional researcher who studies extremism, argued that the watchdog groups are “agenda-driven special-interest groups, whose interests are economic as well as ideological, and not ‘experts’ in the sense of objective and disinterested scholarship.”⁹ Sociologists Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile have echoed that assessment. They warned that the groups “promote ‘claims’ that are compatible with their political agenda and neglect other ones as they attempt to wield political influence among policy makers.”¹⁰ As a result, reliance upon watchdog groups as sources of information about the Militia Movement has distorted much of the scholarship.

Unlike past studies of the Militia Movement, this chapter assesses the rhetoric of the watchdog groups as a strategic enactment of the watchdog community’s collective ideological agenda. It does not rely on the groups’ rhetoric as a source of unbiased information about the militias, but instead considers that rhetoric as part of an ongoing debate over the character and motives of the militias in both the year before and the year after the bombing.

As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, the watchdog groups used a rhetoric of vilification to fashion a public identity for the militias that would frighten and repulse the American public. It seems somewhat ironic that the watchdog groups responded to the militias with the same sort of vilification that characterized the militias’ own rhetoric. “Vilification is a rhetorical strategy that discredits adversaries by characterizing them as ungenuine and malevolent advocates,” as rhetorical scholar Marsha L. Vanderford explained; “Rather than differentiating opponents as good people with a difference of opinion, vilification delegitimizes them through characterizations of

intentions, actions, purposes, and identities.”¹¹ Vilification is pervasive in social movements, in part because, as rhetorical critic Martha Solomon has argued, identifying and describing the enemy “helps shape the perceptions of the uncommitted majority toward the opposition.”¹² Furthermore, as rhetorician Bernard K. Duffy has argued, vilification helps to “sustain the emotional fervor necessary to fight an ideological battle.”¹³ As Duffy concluded, an ideological battle “requires a dramatization of the enemy as a supremely potent villain whose features the audience can identify.”¹⁴ Presenting the militias as a unified group of racist, paranoid renegades, the watchdog groups argued that the extremist ideology and violent tendencies of the militias posed a grave danger to citizens and the government alike. Ironically, they did this to advance their own “anti-hate” agenda.

This chapter will first offer a brief history of the watchdog groups before turning to an examination of their strategies of vilification in the year before the Oklahoma City bombing. The watchdogs first assailed the militias in the ADL’s report *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*, published in the spring of 1994.¹⁵ In the report, the watchdogs began to establish the militias as a united, formidable force to be reckoned with. They characterized the militias as “desperate and dangerous,” and suggested that they were increasingly influenced by white supremacist groups.¹⁶ After the Oklahoma City bombing, the watchdog groups adjusted their tactics and stepped up their campaign to alarm the public and malign the militias. They blamed the militias for the Oklahoma City bombing, assembled a disparaging psychological profile of militia members, and warned that their paramilitary training exercises would inevitably lead to bloodshed. Finally, a year after the Oklahoma City bombing, the

watchdog groups directly challenged the militias' self-designation as "patriots." They insisted that the anti-government renegades were not true patriots, but indeed the antithesis of loyal Americans standing up for their constitutional rights.

A Brief History of the Anti-Hate Watchdog Groups

Much like the individual militia units that comprised the Militia Movement, the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center were unified more by common concerns and goals than formal alliance. The dedication of each group to rooting out those that they deemed purveyors of hatred and intolerance meant that the groups were united in their opposition to the militias. In terms of rhetorical style and strategy, their anti-militia campaigns were functionally indistinguishable.

The ADL has fought anti-Semitism for over sixty years. Sigmund Livingston established the ADL in 1939 under the sponsorship of the Jewish Fraternity, the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith.¹⁷ The organization operates offices in four countries and twenty-eight states, supporting the ADL's broad mandate to "expose and combat the purveyors of hatred in our midst, responding to whatever new challenges may arise."¹⁸ To those ends, the ADL monitors groups that it has determined to have anti-Semitic agendas, publishes "fact-finding reports" on a wide range of far-right groups, and provides "experts" to speak publicly on the issue of anti-Semitism.¹⁹ The ADL is also the "vanguard of opposition to paramilitary training," political scientists Donald Haider-Markel and Sean P. O'Brien contend.²⁰ The group has lobbied state governments tirelessly to adopt its "Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute," to restrict the ability of

paramilitary groups to train “for the purpose of creating civil disturbance.”²¹ In 1994 the ADL identified the militias as purveyors of hatred and published the first of eight reports that addressed the threat of anti-government groups and recommended responses to them. While the ADL’s reports were the organization’s most common means of warning the public about the danger of the militias, representatives also testified before Congress and made appearances on television news programs as “experts” on the movement.

The second major player, the Montgomery, Alabama, based SPLC, was established in 1971 by Morris Dees and Joseph Levin to further civil rights and pursue “equal opportunities for minorities and the poor.”²² In that quest, the SPLC operates a number of projects, including “Teaching Tolerance,” through which it distributes videotapes and magazines to schoolteachers to help promote racial tolerance. It is perhaps best known, however, for “Klanwatch,” a division of the organization dedicated to tracking and reporting racist activity and hate crimes. The SPLC also sponsors civil litigation against “hate” groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, on behalf of those victimized by the groups. The SPLC reports its findings on hate crimes and hate group activity to over six thousand law enforcement agencies six times per year.²³ Funded primarily by small donations from its roughly three hundred thousand contributors, the SPLC remains one of the wealthiest civil rights groups in America and one of the most profitable nonprofit organizations nationwide.²⁴ In 1994 the group had substantial financial reserves, with more than sixty million dollars in the SPLC coffers.²⁵ In 1994 Klanwatch established a “Militia Task Force” to monitor the rising movement and solicited additional monies to fund the project.²⁶ In its campaign against the militias,

Morris Dees was the SPLC's most visible spokesperson. Klanwatch co-director Brian Levin occasionally shared the duties.

By the time the Militia Movement appeared on the national scene, the watchdog groups were well entrenched in the political mainstream and pursuing a social agenda that effectively shielded them from criticism. By virtue of their professionalism, organizational longevity, and success in bringing civil cases against intolerant people and organizations, the watchdog groups had become respected sources of information about “hate groups” and their crimes. The watchdog groups’ self-assigned status as America’s premier crusaders against discrimination and intolerance had insulated the organizations from censure in the politically correct climate of the 1990s. To criticize the watchdogs was tantamount to endorsing discrimination, Wilcox explained: “Any criticism of so-called anti-racist ‘Watchdog’ organizations and activists is not without its dangers. In the ‘either/or’ and ‘good guys versus bad guys’ mentality that characterizes the moral absolutism of the anti-racist milieu it’s easy to be misunderstood.”²⁷ In short, the watchdog groups enjoyed a public reputation that buffered them against attacks on their motives or methods.

The watchdog community benefited from the militias’ excesses in some respects. They depended on significant opposition forces—threatening foes—to justify their continued existence, not to mention their fund-raising efforts. In their book *White Power, White Pride!: The White Supremacist Movement in the United States*, Dobratz and Shanks-Meile concluded: “What the ‘watchdog’ groups focus on is at least partially influenced by the fact that these organizations depend on public financial support, and the

public is likely to contribute to groups that they perceive are struggling against some major threat to America.”²⁸

By the mid-1990s, the watchdog groups were in a good position to respond to a new nemesis: the Militia Movement. The usual targets of the watchdog groups were disappearing, as racism and anti-Semitism became increasingly unacceptable in mainstream culture. The SPLC’s main adversary, the Ku Klux Klan, for example, had shrunk from a nationwide membership of four million in the 1920s to an estimated two thousand by the 1990s—with as many as ten percent of those estimated to be FBI informants.²⁹ Another highly visible and easily maligned opponent was needed if the watchdog groups hoped to remain visible and relevant.

Long-time opponents of hate in its various forms, the veteran watchdog groups had the motivation, experience, and resources to wage a formidable campaign against the Militia Movement. Together, the SPLC and ADL would play a significant role in the public debate over the character and motives of the militias.

A Dangerous New Movement

Published in April 1994, the ADL’s *Armed & Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government* was the earliest effort to alert mainstream America to the emergence of a “dangerous” new movement festering in the heartland. The document laid the foundation for the watchdog groups’ crusade against the militias over the next few years.

Armed and Dangerous introduced the militias as a menacing social movement by employing two classic means of vilification. One strategy entailed magnifying the power of the enemy to establish the groups as a legitimate threat.³⁰ The second strategy involved attacking the motives of the militias and producing a damaging psychological profile of its members, or attacking what rhetorician Martha Solomon has labeled the “psychological” aspects of a movement.³¹

Armed and Dangerous announced the formation of militias in ominous tones. Readers were greeted by a three-page introduction warning that “bands of armed right-wing militants, most calling themselves ‘militias’ are cropping up across America.”³² The twenty-three pages that followed chronicled militia activity on a state-by-state basis in thirteen states. The synopses named the militias, provided information on the militia unit leaders, offered estimates of the size of the militias, described their beliefs, listed other militias and extremist right groups with which they were connected, and delineated the type of activities in which they engaged. The document’s short conclusion served as both a final warning about the danger posed by the militias and as an appeal for the adoption of “paramilitary training statutes” to combat the groups.

Armed and Dangerous fashioned the disparate militia groups into a formidable and unified foe. The effort to present the militias as a large uprising began in the introduction of the document where the ADL suggested that militia members “numbered in the thousands.”³³ Throughout the rest of the document, the ADL expanded upon the threat posed by the groups.

The layout of the document encouraged readers to recognize the extent of militia activity. Beginning with Arizona, militia activity was summarized in one to three pages

for each of thirteen states. The synopses were specific, listing multiple militia units and leaders within most states. Even “suspected” militia activity was listed, contributing to the impression of a massive uprising. The state synopses were vague regarding membership numbers, but each listed cities or counties where a militia or “militia activity” had been identified. They also drew specific attention to the recruiting efforts of the individual militia groups. For example, the report indicated that the Florida State Militia sponsored an “Information Fair and Campout” that drew approximately one hundred people. Although the report suggested that the Michigan Militia’s claim to have ten thousand members in sixty-six of the state’s eighty-three counties was “probably exaggerated,” it noted that the groups’ meetings typically drew fifty to one hundred people.³⁴

Though scattered throughout the nation, militia units were portrayed as a tightly connected network of extremists. This effort began in the first paragraph of the document that asserted there were “linkages” among some of the “bands of armed right-wing militants.”³⁵ The individual state synopses also emphasized the supposed “ties” between militia units. Although independent units, the militias were interconnected and influenced by one another, the ADL maintained. *Armed and Dangerous* noted that national opinion leaders within the movement often served as guest speakers for local militias, and that the militias shared literature. This further suggested that local militias were, in fact, part of a unified national movement.

Making the explosive growth of the militias even more alarming, *Armed and Dangerous* asserted that the deviant belief system of the movement’s adherents made it especially dangerous. According to the report, the militias were united by rabid anti-

government beliefs, bizarre conspiracy theories, and a desire to roll back gains made on important social issues. Deriding militia members as “obsessed” and “ideologues,” the report insisted that the militias’ opposition to gun control was an attempt to lay a foundation for “massive resistance to the federal government and its law enforcement agencies.” The militias hated the federal government, the ADL maintained, characterizing their beliefs as bizarre and paranoid: “America’s government is the enemy, now widening its authoritarian control and planning warfare against the citizenry.”³⁶

The ADL used the militia leaders’ own words, along with passages from militia literature, to support their claims about the militias’ bizarre ideology. The chosen comments were inflammatory, in the vein of that from Michigan Militia leader Ray Southwell. According to *Armed and Dangerous*, “Southwell speaks as though he regards confrontation with law enforcement as inevitable. His militia is preparing for the day ‘when martial law is declared.’ ‘We are taking a stand,’ he says, ‘and are prepared to lose everything.’”³⁷ Such provocative words from militia leaders were regularly featured, apparently to establish the authenticity of the threat and to shock readers. The strategy was one that the watchdog groups would use repeatedly throughout their battle with the militias.

Finally, *Armed and Dangerous* established the nefarious nature and dangerous potential of the militias by noting their racist and anti-Semitic views. According to the report, “A further and vexing problem uncovered by investigation of the growing militias is the presence of some of them—even in leadership roles—of persons with histories of racial and religious bigotry and of political extremism.”³⁸ While there was but a single

paragraph dedicated to this theme in the introduction of the report, the synopses reinforced the image of the militias as but the latest manifestation of racially-motivated hate groups in America.

The watchdog groups' first publication about the militias thus rhetorically portrayed the groups as a widespread and menacing movement. This magnified the power of the militias, transforming a number of small, isolated groups into a national threat. Furthermore, the watchdogs began the process of maligning the beliefs of the militia members by suggesting that they were motivated by bizarre conspiracy theories and perhaps influenced by anti-Semitism. Together, the strategies suggested a frightening new menace that was both growing and dangerous.

The publication of *Armed & Dangerous* was the watchdog groups' most public effort to announce the arrival of the militias, but it was not the only attempt. At about the same time, the SPLC's co-founder Morris Dees also sent a private letter expressing the organization's growing alarm about the militias to Attorney General Janet Reno and various law enforcement agencies.³⁹ Despite these efforts, little attention was paid to the groups. As fellow watchdog author Kenneth Stern would later write, "Law enforcement and the media were still silent and seemingly blind."⁴⁰ They were blind, that is, until an alleged soldier of the far right was arrested for the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

The Watchdog Groups and the Oklahoma City Bombing

While the news media speculated publicly that terrorists from the Middle East were responsible for the bombing in Oklahoma City, the watchdog groups immediately suspected that the act was the work of domestic anti-government forces.⁴¹ Two factors influenced their assessment. First, the date—April 19—was significant in far-right circles as the anniversary of the federal government’s showdown with the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Moreover, the bombing was a nearly perfect enactment of an event that watchdog representatives recognized from their study of *The Turner Diaries*, a sacred fictional tome of the far right.⁴² The watchdog groups reportedly informed the FBI of their suspicions but waited to comment publicly until authorities had arrested Timothy McVeigh and announced his alleged militia connections.⁴³

The Oklahoma City bombing, and the association of the militias with the attack, provided the watchdog groups with a potent new enemy for its direct mail appeals. The SPLC, for example, sent three letters to its list of donors in the month following the bombing, introducing the Militia Task Force and imploring them to help fund the venture.⁴⁴ “I know that you have been very generous with your annual renewal support, but times like these call for an extra effort on all our parts,” Morris Dees wrote in letter dated May 17, 1994.⁴⁵ Further, he implored his readers: “We need your help now with the most generous special gift you can make to help us expand our Militia Task Force.”⁴⁶ The militias thus provided an enticing new “hook” for the watchdog groups’ fund-raising efforts.

The Oklahoma City bombing and the emergence of the militias also provided watchdog groups with a new opportunity to push their legislative agenda. The ADL had been working for more than ten years to convince states to pass statute that prohibited paramilitary training. By 1995 twenty-four states had enacted such legislation, but the watchdog groups considered the legislation to be imperative to their battles against extremism and pushed to get the law on the books in all fifty states.⁴⁷ The Oklahoma City bombing clearly bolstered the efforts of the watchdog groups to push such legislation through more of the “unprotected” states.

Most importantly, the attack on the Murrah Federal Building brought the watchdog groups national attention as the foremost “experts” on this new threat to America’s domestic security. Caught essentially off guard by the bombing, the federal government and news media had little information on the militias. The watchdog groups, with their ongoing research on hate groups, stepped in to fill the information vacuum. Indeed, the watchdogs’ accurate prediction of a violent attack had bolstered their credibility and rendered their opinions valid.

Representatives of the watchdog groups came out in force to spread their message after Timothy McVeigh’s arrest. Between the bombing and the end of 1995, representatives from the ADL and the SPLC appeared on television interview programs, testified before several congressional committees, and published new reports on the militias. Four recurring themes emerged in the watchdog groups’ rhetoric, each of which advanced the groups’ efforts to vilify the militias. First, they maligned the militias by blaming them for the Oklahoma City bombing. Second, they associated them with white

supremacists. Third, they derided the militias' grievances as mere "conspiracy theories." And finally, they emphasized the dangers posed by the militias' paramilitary training.

Assigning Blame: Militia Complicity in the Oklahoma City Bombing

The watchdog groups could not definitively prove that any particular militia was behind the bombing. The FBI cleared the Michigan Militia of any direct involvement less than two weeks after the attack, and militia leaders were quick to denounce the bombing and deny any involvement by the groups. Nonetheless, the lack of hard evidence did little to prevent the watchdog groups from insisting at every turn that the militias were, in fact, responsible for the bombing.

The very fact that the news media turned to the watchdog groups for "expert" opinion on the Oklahoma City bombing reinforced the link between the alleged bombers and the militias. For example, Morris Dees of the SPLC appeared on *This Week with David Brinkley* the Sunday after the attack. Brinkley noted in the introduction that "the evidence now is that the Oklahoma City bombing was done by members of this group [the militia]." ⁴⁸ The testimony of watchdog representatives before congressional committees was framed in a similar manner. The House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Domestic Terrorism heard testimony from ADL representative Thomas Halpern on May 3, 1995, in a hearing that investigated the cause of the bombing and "the sickness of domestic terrorism." ⁴⁹

The watchdog groups took advantage of these invitations to comment as experts and to bolster their claims that the militias were behind the bombing. Suggesting that the

militias secretly supported McVeigh and his actions, watchdog group representatives reported McVeigh's attendance at a Michigan Militia meeting in an effort to stress the ideological connections shared by the militias and the bombers. The ADL offered the most detailed explanation of the relationship in its follow up report to *Armed & Dangerous*, entitled *Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows*. Not only did the title of the document suggest the culpability of the militias, but the document's introduction made the charge explicit:

The Militia Movement came under intense national scrutiny after the deadly April 19, 1995, bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, when it was reported that two suspects in the bombing, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, had attended some militia meetings in Michigan. In addition, prosecutors have charged that McVeigh was motivated to commit the bombing out of anger at the federal government for its handling of the Branch Davidian confrontation in Waco, Texas—an issue that has been one of the chief rallying cries of the militia movement.⁵⁰

Another report published by the ADL also presented the bombing as the work of the Militia Movement. *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute: A Response to Domestic Terrorism*, published in May, 1995, argued for the passage of anti-paramilitary training legislation by connecting the bombing to the militias: “In light of the recent tragedy in Oklahoma, which has in particular highlighted the threat posed by the militia movement, ADL is publishing this new report on our anti-paramilitary training legislation.”⁵¹

The watchdog representatives dismissed claims by militia leaders that the bombers had no formal affiliation with the militias. Confronted with reports that the Michigan Militia had removed McVeigh and his alleged co-conspirator Terry Nichols from a meeting due to their violent dispositions, Dees characterized the claim as merely an attempt to protect the image of the militias. “I don’t believe the leaders of the Militia of Michigan, who reported earlier on this program that they kicked out these individuals because they had too radical or militant beliefs,” the SPLC representative told journalist David Brinkley. “This is just a statement for the press.”⁵²

For the watchdog groups, the lack of hard evidence that directly implicated the militias in the bombing was of little consequence. There was enough circumstantial evidence to convict the militias in the court of public opinion. Moreover, the history and beliefs of the militias made it plausible that they would do such a thing. Most notably, of course, their racist views presumably revealed the anger and depravity of the militias—and, by extension, rendered them capable of committing such a heinous crime.

Vilification by Association: The Militias as Racist

The watchdog groups reprised their pre-bombing portrayal of the militias as racist in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. Even more vigorously than before, they emphasized the connections between the militias and the white supremacists. The militia leaders, of course, denied these charges of racism, emphasizing instead their resistance to attempts by the federal government to usurp the constitutional rights of the citizenry. The watchdog groups, however, insisted that the militias had a long history of racial bigotry.

For example, according to the testimony of ADL representative Thomas Halpern at a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime held in May 1995, the contemporary Militia Movement evolved from earlier groups such as the Posse Comitatus and a group called "The Order."⁵³ The Order, Halpern explained, was an "ultra right-wing revolutionary gang" that had issued a "Declaration of War" against the federal government in the name of the Aryan race. The Order also had engaged in a series of violent hate crimes, including the murder of the popular Jewish talk radio personality Alan Berg.⁵⁴

Indeed, the watchdog groups insisted, the militias were little more than a "front" for white supremacists. Morris Dees of the SPLC was especially adamant in making such charges. "In the last six months," he said on *This Week with David Brinkley*, there had been "white supremacist, neo-Nazis, people in the Aryan Nations infiltrating these groups and guiding their actions into something more dangerous."⁵⁵

The alleged white supremacist sympathies of *some* militia leaders were said to demonstrate the role of racism in *all* of the militias. John Trochmann, leader of the Militia of Montana, was a favorite example of the watchdog groups. The watchdog groups used Trochmann's visit to an Aryan Nations compound to bolster their claims that prejudice, not patriotism, drove the militias. In his testimony at the House hearing on combating domestic terrorism, the ADL's Thomas Halpern offered a typically vague example: "In the Northwest, for example, a prominent militia leader has in the past been a featured speaker at the Aryan Nations compound, and elsewhere we find other evidence of bigotry."⁵⁶ Likewise, a report published by the ADL concluded: "Individuals with

histories of racial and religious bigotry are involved in some militias, even in leadership positions.”⁵⁷

These efforts to portray the militias as racist relied upon two strategies of vilification common in social movement rhetoric. The first strategy Wilcox has labeled “links and ties.”⁵⁸ The strategy of links and ties involves denigrating one group by associating some of its members with another, already discredited group. The watchdog groups’ argument that the militias were motivated by racism relied in large part on the overlapping participation of some of its members in white supremacist groups. The other strategy, “blacktopping,” was directly related.⁵⁹ The watchdog groups generally identified a few militia leaders as white supremacists. In doing so, they invited the inference that rank-and-file militia members shared those views, even though they had no direct evidence that racism motivated most of the militias’ followers to join the movement.

Exposing the militias’ alleged racism enhanced the emotional force of the watchdog groups’ rhetoric. As Wilcox has pointed out, the terms “racism” and “anti-Semitism” have, by themselves, powerful connotations that elicit images of lynching and gas chambers.⁶⁰ By simply connecting the militias to the tradition of racial intolerance, the watchdogs capitalized on the public’s negative perceptions of the KKK, the skinheads, and the Aryan Nation.

A Maligning of Motives: The Militias as Paranoid

The third strategy of vilification used by the watchdog groups involved constructing a negative psychological profile of the typical militia member. In addition to racism, the watchdogs insisted that militia members were motivated by wild conspiracy theories. The charge was not new; even before the bombing the ADL had insisted in *Armed and Dangerous* that militia members had psychological problems. Nonetheless, both the ADL and the SPLC continued to emphasize the militias' conspiracy theories in their post-bombing rhetoric, even though the militia leaders themselves had backed off from conspiracy claims.

According to the watchdog groups, the militias were not motivated by efforts to “save” the country from its government, but were trying to save themselves from an imaginary plot. “In their conspiratorial world view, they have painted the central government, the federal government as the source of all evil,” ADL representative Jeffery Syninsky told National Public Radio (NPR) listeners soon after the bombing.⁶¹ The watchdog groups regularly framed the militias' belief system as nothing more than wild, irrational conspiracy theories. In his testimony before the House Subcommittee on Crime in May 1995, for example, Thomas Halpern of the ADL explained that, to the militias, gun control laws were motivated not by a concern for public safety, but by an irrational fear of a government plot: “To the militia ideologues, gun control legislation—especially the Brady Law and restrictions on assault weapons—are major stratagems in a secret government conspiracy to disarm and control the American people and abolish their constitutional right to keep and bear arms.”⁶²

To emphasize the extent of the militias' conspiracy theories, watchdog groups regularly noted the international scope of the cabals they described. In *Beyond the Bombing*, for example, the ADL indicated that, "Many militia supporters believe that the conspiracy involves not only federal authorities, but also the United Nations, foreign troops and other sinister forces."⁶³ Of special interest to the ADL was the apparent anti-Semitism of some of the conspiracy theories. "Sometimes mentioned among these sinister forces are Jews," the report continued.⁶⁴ It went on to note, "Some militia propaganda continues to exhibit an anti-Semitic strain that could well become more pervasive among militia groups as a result of the movement's obsessive conspiracy-mongering."⁶⁵

When the watchdog groups reduced their grievances to conspiracy theories, they painted the militias as irrational extremists. The charge that the militias were driven by conspiracy theories obscured all of the concerns that the militias had regarding government malfeasance as mere "paranoia." The designation also implied that the militias' motives were irrational and their behavior dangerously unpredictable. Caught up in bizarre conspiracy theories, the watchdog groups suggested, the militias' actions could not be predicted because they viewed the world through a twisted belief system. They posed a serious threat to the people and the government precisely because they could not be counted on to act rationally.

Engendering Fear: The Militias as Armed and Dangerous

Although the watchdogs' depiction of the militias as racist and paranoid might have been enough to alarm the public, it was the movement's paramilitary posturing that convinced the watchdog groups that the militias were truly dangerous. As Marsha Vanderford has observed, "an enemy with the means to achieve heinous goals provides a reason for alarm and action."⁶⁶ Thus, the watchdog groups were intent on revealing the danger posed by the militias' paramilitary training. The militia leaders fervently insisted that their paramilitary training was "purely defensive."⁶⁷ They had no intention of attacking the federal government, the leaders maintained; they were instead preparing to *defend* themselves in the case of attack *by* government forces. The watchdog groups, however, interpreted the militias' paramilitary training as proof that they intended to put their guns to use.

The watchdog groups maintained that the militias were preparing for an offensive against the federal government. As the ADL explained, the militias were convinced that an armed showdown with the government was imminent.⁶⁸ Their position was best expressed in Syninsky's interview on NPR: "They speak about the impending civil warfare and strife and rebellion that they feel has to take place in order to return the government and country on the correct path."⁶⁹ Morris Dees of the SPLC agreed in testimony before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, which held a hearing in April 1995 to investigate the nature, extent, and threat of domestic terrorism: "These organizations see themselves as embattled. Many are literally preparing for war."⁷⁰ "All too often," Dees told the Judiciary Committee, "paramilitary groups grow bored with

roaming the woods and shooting at paper targets.”⁷¹ Reminding the senators that the Ku Klux Klan had operated paramilitary camps in the 1980s, Dees noted that the Klan soon put their training to use: “Although the training was allegedly only ‘defensive,’ Klan members were soon playing a key role in harassing Vietnamese fisherman.”⁷² Dees offered a second example that was even more violent and struck closer to home for the SPLC spokesman: “Members of the White Patriot Party went from engaging in supposedly ‘defensive’ training to machine-gunning people in a gay bookstore, stockpiling weapons, and plotting to blow up the offices of the Southern Poverty Law Center.”⁷³

Watchdog groups extended their warnings about the militias’ violent behavior at another hearing—this one held by the House Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Crime in November, 1995.⁷⁴ Bill McCollum (R-Fl) chaired the inquiry to “get a better idea of the nature and the extent of the threat posed by violent anti-government groups.”⁷⁵ Representatives of both major watchdog groups testified before the committee, insisting that the militias posed an imminent danger to the federal government and the citizenry.

Testifying for the SPLC, Brian Levin told the subcommittee of a number of disturbing, violent behaviors engaged in by militia followers. According to Levin: “With disturbing regularity, suspected anti-government extremists have attacked police officers, plotted to blow up federal buildings, established armed compounds, and gathered weapons and material like poison and contagious bacteria.” What is more, he reported, members of the Tri-State Militia had recently declared war on the federal government. To make the danger tangible to the Representatives, Levin also offered this chilling

statement: “Sam Sherwood of the United States Militia Association told his followers to look their legislators in the face because ‘they may have to blow it off some day.’”⁷⁶

Michael Lieberman of the ADL took a slightly different approach in his testimony at the same hearing, warning members not to be fooled by the militias’ public relations efforts since the Oklahoma City bombing: “Many of the leaders have felt the glare of the media floodlights in the period since the Oklahoma City bombing,” Lieberman testified, and they were now “paying close attention to the impression they convey to the public, and especially the press.” Claims that the militias were becoming more politically respectful and less violent were misleading, he insisted. The militias’ most visible and “vociferous” leaders still maintained the importance of preparing for war with the government, while others were simply waiting for the *right time* to stage their armed revolt. According to Lieberman, the militias had become even more dangerous because of their concerted efforts to *appear* less threatening.⁷⁷

The watchdog groups’ portrayal of the militias as a violent movement allowed the watchdogs to accomplish two of their primary goals. First, it allowed the watchdogs to redefine the militias as not just peculiar, but dangerous. Second, the watchdog groups’ magnification of the threat posed by the militias justified their calls for a tougher governmental response. In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, the militias may have *talked* in less threatening ways, according to the watchdog groups—but that did not negate the urgent need for anti-terrorism legislation.

Ultimately, the rhetorical portrait of the militias produced by the watchdog groups after the Oklahoma City bombing justified an immediate, aggressive response by the federal government. The watchdog groups portrayed the militias as a large, ominous

force and constructed a disturbing psychological profile of militia members as dangerous paranoids. They blamed the militias for the Oklahoma City bombing, firmly associated them with the white supremacist movement, disputed their professed motives, and warned of the inevitability of an armed uprising. The public image of the militias offered by the watchdog groups was that of a large movement of dangerous fanatics, and that image rationalized their call for tough, anti-terrorist legislation.

Redefining “Patriot”

Between the last congressional hearing on the militias in November 1995 and the spring of 1996, public interest in the militias waned. The news media ran an occasional story on the militias, but the movement was no longer considered news. Militia leaders made occasional appearances when militia-related events took place, like the stand off between federal agents and the anti-government “Montana Freeman” in March and April of 1996. The watchdog groups, however, continued their assault on the militias’ public image throughout this period.

A year after the bombing, the watchdog groups challenged the militias’ depiction of themselves as “patriotic” in a direct and systematic manner. Extending on Lieberman’s testimony at the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime’s hearing in November 1995, the watchdog groups made the deceptive nature of the militias a central theme of their rhetoric. They professed to correct the misperceptions that the militias had propagated about themselves. In revealing the “real” militias, the watchdogs disputed the militia leaders’ contentions that their movement consisted of law-abiding, patriotic

citizens concerned with the misbehavior of the federal government. The watchdog groups charged that the militias' self-portrait hid a dangerous agenda. The full frontal attack on the militias' self-proclaimed status of "patriot" encouraged Americans to view all of the militia leaders' statements with skepticism.

False Patriots: The Threat of Antigovernment Extremists provides the best example of the watchdogs' evolving strategy.⁷⁸ The SPLC's Militia Task Force published the glossy, seventy-three-page report in April 1996. According to the Director of the Militia Task Force, Joe Roy, the purpose of the report was to warn the public about the anti-government Patriot movement. As Roy wrote in the introduction to the report: "It is critical that media, law enforcement and other public servants have a clear understanding of the danger these Patriots present, the myths they promote, and the most effective ways of combating them."⁷⁹ The report took the entire Patriot Movement as its subject, but it focused primarily on that movement's armed, militant subset—the militias.

The title of the publication—*False Patriots*—succinctly framed the document's argument. As biblical admonitions warned of "false prophets," *False Patriots* warned that these "patriots" who decried the end of America's days and offered their own means of salvation were imposters. The SPLC made its intentions clear as it challenged the militias: "If we are to preserve the democratic freedoms our Constitution grants all Americans, we must first arm ourselves with the truth about those who would destroy those freedoms. We hope this report will help unmask the menace of those who call themselves Patriots."⁸⁰ As the statement suggested, the watchdogs believed that the militias had been not only deceptive, but that they threatened the very freedoms that they purported to protect.

Directly challenging the movement's self-definition as "patriotic," the SPLC disputed the militias' interpretations of the U.S. Constitution. Militia leaders had always invoked the Second Amendment of the Constitution. However, *False Patriots* indicated that court rulings and legal authorities had denied that the Constitution authorized the militias. In fact, the SPLC argued, "the Second Amendment was written solely to ensure that the federal government would not interfere with the individual states' establishment of militias."⁸¹ According to the watchdog group, the Second Amendment did not protect the independent citizens' militias, but simply endowed states with the right to raise their own militias without interference from the federal government.

Furthermore, the "patriotism" of the militias bore little resemblance to traditional notions of the word, the SPLC argued. As the watchdogs described it, the militias had intermingled religion and racism to produce a particularly bizarre and virulent brand of "patriotism." The SPLC wrote: "Most Patriots believe that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are divine directives based on Biblical truths." According to the report, militia ideology held that America was the "new Jerusalem" and that "the Constitution was given to the white Christian Founding Fathers by God." This twisted brand of patriotism led many in the militias to seek a new America that *False Patriots* described as anti-democratic:

If hard-core Patriots had their way, the United States would become a nation hostile to democracy, a loose collection of independent jurisdictions where white men would govern according to their interpretations of the Bible and selected portions of the Constitution. Women and minorities would not vote. Protections for the environment and for the country's most vulnerable citizens would be

stripped away. People could own all the weapons they wanted and have their own private armies, and no one would have to pay federal taxes.⁸²

The patriotism of the militias was not the sort of patriotism mainstream Americans supported, the report implied.

The SPLC also reprised its argument that the militias' patriotism was a carefully constructed cover for white supremacists who aimed to project a more socially acceptable image.⁸³ As *False Patriots* explained: "The primary role models and martyrs for today's most militant Patriots are white supremacists who sought to overthrow the federal government and create an all-white homeland during the 1970s and 1980s."⁸⁴ The white supremacists manipulated the militias to their own ends, adopting the label of "anti-government" only because it was less provocative than "racist." "No one exploits the anti-government sentiment more effectively than white supremacist leaders who have long viewed government as the major threat to their agenda," the SPLC wrote.⁸⁵

Having explained the "true" nature of the militias' patriotism, *False Patriots* continued to insist that the militias were intent on destroying America, not protecting it. The document warned its readers to remember what the militias' patriotism was really all about: "These dedicated Patriots advocate nothing less than the dismantling—by force if necessary—of the entire U.S. government, and the repudiation of many constitutional rights."⁸⁶

To that end, *False Patriots* detailed the militias' preparations for war with specific examples of their substantial firepower and recruitment strategies. The SPLC indicated that the movement possessed significant military capability: "Among the weapons, explosives and other equipment stolen from military bases are Stinger missiles, LAW

rockets, plastic explosives, night-vision goggles, automatic rifles and pistols, hand grenades, blasting caps and military-grade ammunition.” Having pilfered or stolen such weapons from military installations, the militias were preparing to fight the federal government with the government’s own weaponry. What is more, according to the SPLC, “Vietnam and Gulf War veterans, mercenaries, active duty military and law enforcement personnel” had all provided the groups with paramilitary instruction.⁸⁷

According to the watchdog groups, ordinary people, not just the government, were at risk from the militias, as threats and intimidation were regular tools of the militias. *False Patriots* provided examples of the militias’ willingness to commit violence in a section of the report entitled “Public Servants in Danger.” Putting a human face on the threat, the section profiled six public officials who had been “threatened, harassed or attacked” by those in the Patriot movement.⁸⁸ Examples included Karen Mathews, a court reporter from Stanislaus County, California, who was pistol-whipped and had a knife held to her throat when she refused to file bogus legal documents for some Patriots. Another account told of a Hamilton, Montana, city judge who received death threats from members of the movement. “I lay awake at night and wonder if they are going to come and get me. I hope blood is not shed before someone takes them seriously,” she was quoted as saying.⁸⁹ Through a collection of similar examples, the watchdogs alerted the public that the militias’ war would not be with the amorphous federal government, but that their targets had been, and would continue to be, hardworking civil servants.

As a final reminder of the false representations of the militias’ patriotism—and the danger that it still posed—the SPLC let the militia leaders speak for themselves. Bob

Fletcher from the Militia of Montana is quoted as saying: “Expect more bombs.”

Michigan Militia leader Norman Olson is quoted as saying: “If this country doesn’t change armed conflict is inevitable. Who is the enemy? Anyone who threatens us.”

According to Mark Reynolds of the Unorganized Militia of Stevens County, Washington:

“The reason the Second Amendment was put into the United States Constitution . . .

(was) so that when officials of the federal and state and local governments get out of hand, you can shoot them . . . eventually people like Janet Reno will be . . . summarily executed.”⁹⁰ These statements and others were printed over the indelible image of the

bombed-out Oklahoma City federal building on the last two pages of *False Patriots*. The image served as a final reminder for those who would dismiss the watchdog groups’ warnings about the militias as exaggerated.

Conclusion

Like all public images, the watchdog groups’ depiction of the militias emphasized some features while remanding others to the background or discarding them altogether. The watchdog groups’ public portrayal of the militias was designed to emphasize the size, strength, and violent nature of the groups. The watchdog groups created an alarming psychological and behavioral portrait of the militias through various strategies of vilification. The watchdogs portrayed the militias as paranoid conspiratorialists, a front for white supremacists, and—literally—armed revolutionaries preparing for war. The resulting image represented the militias as devious, deranged bigots who were not above using violence to impose their ideology on mainstream America. Far from being

the patriots that they claimed to be, the militias were characterized by the watchdog groups as imposters—domestic terrorists—who threatened the very nation that they claimed to defend. The portrayal was designed less to provide an accurate and complete picture of the militias than to frighten the American public into opposing these “renegades.”

This analysis echoes the concerns of other scholars that watchdog groups not be treated as unbiased “experts.” As the rhetoric of the watchdog groups demonstrated, they do tend to provide information in concert with their own values and goals. Scholarship that relies on information from watchdogs deserves careful scrutiny with an eye toward detecting the bias resulting from heavy reliance on information from these groups.

The power of established and entrenched “countermovements,” such as these watchdog groups, should not be overlooked. The watchdog groups had the resources, experience, and media access to mount a substantial campaign against the militias. In fact, mounting such campaigns against extremists was the expressed purpose of these groups. In doing so, the groups functioned more as agents of the “establishment” than as a true countermovement. The watchdog groups had many of the advantages traditionally enjoyed by the establishment, including the presumption that comes with protecting the status quo, substantial funding, media access and respect, and seasoned professionals to run the campaign. However, it was saddled with few of the responsibilities and hindrances traditionally associated with authority figures. For example, the watchdogs did not need to worry about alienating voters, angering the movement, dealing with backlash for the way that it treated the movement, or negotiating with the movement. These professional countermovements, then, are in an enviable position, as they are not

subject to many of the traditional constraints faced by authorities dealing with resistance groups.

The vociferous rhetoric of the watchdog groups was protected somewhat by the politically correct climate of the mid-to-late 1990s. It was also encouraged by the nation's need to both identify reasons for the bombing and to find a scapegoat. To regain its equilibrium, the country needed to direct its outrage at some party. The alleged bombers were the obvious choice, but watchdog groups provided the militias as a villain that could sustain the issue long after the perpetrators were caught. Few questioned, then, the motives or the methods of those advocates who were "saving" the nation from those "crazy" men in camouflage.

Notes:

1. Joseph T. Roy Sr., director, *False Patriots: The Threat of Anti-Government Extremism* (Montgomery: Klanwatch Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, 1996), 4.
2. Robert S. Cathcart, "New Approaches to the Study of Movements: Defining Movements Rhetorically," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 36 (Spring 1972): 87.
3. David S. Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity," *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (May 1996): 1630.
4. Irwin Suall, *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1994), 1.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Kenneth S. Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 13.
7. David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to Militia Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), x.
8. See, for example: John Keith Akins, "God, Guns, and Guts: Religion and Violence in Florida Militias" (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1998); William Chaloupka, "The County Supremacy and Militia Movements: Federalism as an Issue of the Radical Right," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 26 (Summer 1996); Joshua D. Freilich, Nelson A. Pichardo Almanzar, and Craig J. Rivera, "Organizations Explicitly and Implicitly Promote Deviant Behavior: The Case of the Militia Movement," *Justice Quarterly* 13 (September 1999); Laura Leets and Peggy J. Bowers, "Loud and Angry Voices: The Insidious Influence," *Communication Monographs* 66 (December 1999); Sarah Elizabeth Mahan, "A Dramatistic Analysis of the Video Rhetoric of the Militia of Montana" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 1997); Sean P. O'Brien and Donald P. Haider-Markel, "Fueling the Fire: Social and Political Correlates of Citizen Militia Activity," *Social Science Quarterly* 72 (June 1998).
9. Laird Wilcox, *The Watchdogs: A Close Look at Anti-Racist "Watchdog" Groups*, 2nd ed. (Olathe, Kan.: by the author, 1999), 25.

10. Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, "*White Power, White Pride!*": *The White Supremacist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 3.
11. Marsha L. Vanderford, "Vilification and Social Movements: A Case Study of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (May 1989): 166.
12. Martha Solomon, "The Rhetoric of STOP ERA: Fatalistic Reaffirmation," *Southern Speech Journal* 44 (Fall 1978): 44.
13. Bernard K. Duffy, "The Anti-Humanist Rhetoric of the New Religious Right," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 49 (Summer 1984): 354. Ironically, Duffy was referring to the anti-humanistic rhetoric employed by the new religious right.
14. Ibid.
15. Suall, *Armed and Dangerous*, 2.
16. Ibid., 3.
17. Anti-Defamation League, "History of the Anti-Defamation League, 1913-2000," Anti-Defamation League, http://www.adl.org/ADLHistory/pring_adl_history.html (accessed January 29, 2002).
18. Ibid.
19. Jon Ronson, *Them: Adventures with Extremists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 143.
20. Donald Haider-Markel and Sean P. O'Brien, "Creating a 'Well Regulated Militia': Policy Responses to Paramilitary Groups in the American States," *Political Research Quarterly* 50 (September 1997): 554.
21. Ibid.
22. "25 Years of Seeking Justice," *SPLC Report*, March 1996.
23. Barbara Dority, "Is the Extremist Right Entirely Wrong?" *The Humanist*, November/December 1995, 13.

24. Andrea Stone, "Morris Dees: At Center of the Racial Storm," *USA Today*, August 3, 1996, 7A; Ken Silverstein, "The Church of Morris Dees: How the Southern Poverty Law Center Profits from Intolerance," *Harpers Magazine*, November 2000, 54.
25. Dan Morse, "Marketing the Militias," *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 26, 1995, 1A.
26. "Militia Task Force Established in 1994," *SPLC Report*, March 1996, 13; Morse, "Marketing the Militias," 1A.
27. Wilcox, *The Watchdogs*, 1.
28. Dobratz and Shanks-Meile, "*White Power, White Pride!*" 2-3.
29. Silverstein, "The Church of Morris Dees," 54.
30. Vanderford, "Vilification and Social Movements," 167.
31. Solomon, "The Rhetoric of STOP ERA," 44-47.
32. Suall, *Armed and Dangerous*, 3.
33. Ibid., 1.
34. Ibid., 8, 14.
35. Ibid., 1.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 15.
38. Ibid., 3.
39. Morris Dees with James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 105.
40. Stern, *Force Upon the Plain*, 12-13.
41. Dees, *Gathering Storm*, 145-147.
42. Ibid. *The Turner Diaries* was written by William Pierce under the pseudonym of Andrew MacDonald. Set in the 1990s, it described a race-war from the perspective of an Aryan soldier who fought for "The Resistance."

43. Ibid., 145.
44. John George and Laird Wilcox, *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists, and Others* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 256.
45. Morse, "Marketing the Militias," 1A.
46. Ibid.
47. Steven M. Freeman, *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1995), 2.
48. ABC News, *This Week With David Brinkley*, April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *This Week With David Brinkley*.
49. House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, *Combating Domestic Terrorism* 104th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 1995, 3.
50. Thomas Halpern, *Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows; An Update of Armed and Dangerous* (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1995), 1.
51. Freeman, *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute*, 1.
52. *This Week With David Brinkley*, April 23, 1995.
53. House, *Combating Domestic Terrorism*, 89.
54. Ibid.
55. *This Week With David Brinkley*, April 23, 1995.
56. House, *Combating Domestic Terrorism*, 90.
57. Freeman, *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute*, 2.
58. Wilcox, *The Watchdogs*, 16.
59. Bonnie McD. Johnson, "Images of the Enemy in Intergroup Conflict," *Central States Speech Journal* 26 (Summer 1975): 86.
60. Wilcox, *The Watchdogs*, 12.

61. Jeffrey Syninsky, interviewed by Robert Siegel, *All Things Considered*, NPR, April 24, 1995.
62. House, *Combating Domestic Terrorism*, 3
63. Halpern, *Beyond the Bombing*, 2.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Vanderford, "Vilification and Social Movements," 167.
67. Multimedia Productions, *The Phil Donahue Show*, December 27, 1994 [videotape].
68. Halpern, *Beyond the Bombing*, 3.
69. Syninsky, *All Things Considered*, April 24, 1995.
70. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Terrorism in the United States: The Nature and Extent of the Threat and Possible Legislative Responses* 104th Cong., 1st sess., April 27, 1995, 72.
71. Ibid., 71.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, *Nature and Threat of Violent Anti-Government Groups in America* 104th Cong., 1st sess., November 2, 1995, 2.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 60, 61.
77. Ibid., 39, 41.
78. Other efforts included: *Paranoia As Patriotism: Far-Right Influences on the Militia Movement*, by David H. Strassler, Chair (New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1996); Morris Dees, "Rise of the Militia Movement," Speech at the National Press Club, April 16, 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript; Dees, *Gathering Storm*.

79. Roy, *False Patriots*.

80. Ibid., 5.

81. Ibid., 12.

82. Ibid., 13, 11, 42.

83. See Chapter 2 of this document. For a defense of themselves see also the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information, *The Militia Movement in the United States* 104th Cong., 1st sess., June 15, 1995.

84. Roy, *False Patriots*, 47, 9.

85. Ibid., 9.

86. Ibid., 3.

87. Ibid., 25, 25, 20-21.

88. Ibid., 27.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid., 71-72.

Chapter Five

“Feeding Frenzy”: The News Media’s Depiction of the Militia Movement

If you wonder how they could think what they think, so did we.

--Reporter Diane Sawyer¹

In the final analysis, the public image of a social movement is the product of news media coverage. “We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues,” as sociologist William Gamson and his co-authors have written. “The special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.”² As sociologist Gaye Tuchman has argued, accounts provided by the media are generally accepted as both objective and factual.³ Given that the news media is the primary, and often the only, point of contact between much of the general public and a social movement, the *image* that the news media presents of a social movement *becomes* the movement for the majority of the public. Those definitions stick. “To put it simply,” as rhetorician Elisabeth van Zoonen has written, “once you have a media image it is quite hard to get rid of.”⁴

The militia leaders, the Clinton administration, and the “anti-hate” watchdog contingent all recognized the power of the news media to either legitimize or undermine their preferred portrayals of the militias. The rhetorical battle that ensued located the news media as the arbiter of the contest to define the militias’ public image. This chapter is concerned with the way that the media negotiated rival images to construct one of its

own. Specifically, it takes into account the media's response to the competing images promoted by militia leaders, the Clinton administration, and the watchdog groups in the year before and the year following the Oklahoma City bombing. It reveals how the media's portrayal of the militias evolved over time and the lines of rhetorical influence that shaped the media's portrait of the militias.

Scholars have generally agreed that the news media's coverage of the militias functioned to vilify the movement and distance them from the mainstream. Gregory Baym, for example, concluded that television news stories on the militias in Salt Lake City, Utah, were essentially efforts to assign blame for the Oklahoma City bombing and "re-establish the boundaries of moral propriety."⁵ In *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement*, Steven Chermak examined the framing of the militias in newspaper coverage, and he concluded that the media depicted the militias as deviants. They did this, Chermak concluded, by framing them as terrorists and political and social outsiders.⁶

This inquiry investigates the news coverage of the militias in greater depth, illuminating additional factors that influenced the news media's depiction of the militias. It focuses specifically on broadcast news magazines, including *Dateline NBC*, *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, *48 Hours*, and *Day One*. The format of these programs allowed the media to develop more complete and nuanced portraits of the militias than was possible on the nightly news. As print versions of their broadcast counterparts, mainstream weekly news periodicals, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, were also investigated in an effort to determine the militias' media image.

According to sociologist Herbert Gans, a set of enduring social values governs what the media deems to be newsworthy—and how it portrays events.⁷ The portrayal of the militias was thus a product of the news media's self-defined role as guardian of the nation and its commitment to protect the "social order." Before the Oklahoma City bombing, most reporters viewed the Militia Movement as an essentially harmless manifestation of rural discontent. At the time, the militias appeared to pose no threat to larger society. After the bombing, however, the media re-cast the militias as a genuine threat. Treating the militias as the ideological force behind the bombing, the media turned to the watchdog organizations for "expert" information on the groups, and as a result they began to portray the militias as dangerous revolutionaries. One year after the bombing, the news media continued to depict the militias as a genuine threat to the nation, repudiating the militia leaders' efforts to re-cast their movement in a more favorable light.

The Militias as Harmless

Despite the efforts of the militia leaders to draw attention to their movement, the mainstream national news media largely ignored the militias before the Oklahoma City bombing. Prior to the bombing, only brief articles in *U.S. News & World Report*, *The New York Times*, and *Time* explored the budding movement.⁸ Chermak attributed the scarcity of coverage to the media's failure to perceive the militias as a sufficiently menacing: "They were defined as insignificant 'wackos' and not yet considered a real threat."⁹ Instead, the militias were viewed as manifestations of fear and alienation among

rural Americans who were having difficulty coping with the changing political, social, and economic landscape. The reports dismissed the militias' beliefs as the ranting of conspiracy freaks and mocked their paramilitary training exercises, describing the participants as "big-bellied men in uniforms" who grunted their way through crude obstacle courses.¹⁰

"The Rise of Citizen Militias" appeared in the August 15, 1994, issue of *U.S. News & World Report*. Reporter Mike Tharp suggested that militias' supporters varied widely, from "ordinary citizens" angered by what they perceived to be the government's growing intrusion into their lives, to white supremacists and conspiracy theorists who believed that "a secret cadre of leaders hope to rule the world through one global government." The focus of the article, however, was the militias' fervent opposition to gun control and the obsession with One World Government conspiracy theories. Tharp dismissed the theories as "apocalyptic allegations." The conclusion of the article served as a reminder of the paranoid nature of the militias by quoting Militia of Montana leaders Randy, David, and John Trochmann: "They've perverted the intent of the Constitution and come up with a bastardized form of illegitimate government," Randy proclaimed. "Three hundred families run the world and plan global conquest," David insisted. "We don't want to go to the cartridge box. But we will if we have to," John concluded.¹¹

After accompanying the Michigan Militia on a training exercise, Keith Schneider introduced readers of the *New York Times* to these "middle-aged self-styled warriors" on November 14, 1994. Like Tharp, Schneider focused on the militia's conspiracy theories and paramilitary training efforts, dismissing both as odd but generally harmless. Despite

what was likely a genuine effort by the Michigan Militia to impress Schneider with their training, his assessment was uncomplimentary:

One hundred members of a group calling itself the Michigan Militia have convened amid the scrub pine to practice military techniques many long ago forgot. Although the training is unsophisticated and the breathing ragged for the middle-aged self-styled warriors, the purpose of the assault maneuvers and target practice is deadly serious, they say.

Schneider expressed little concern about the militia, which he found to be mostly talk. Many of the members had difficulty even describing their own amorphous grievances, he contended. Schneider dismissed the watchdogs' warnings that the militias were driven by racism and posed a serious threat to the nation. He cited experts who denied that the militias were under the influence of white supremacists, and dismissed the movement's "tough talk" as bravado.¹²

Christopher John Farley also accompanied the Michigan Militia on maneuvers for his December 19, 1994, article in *Time*, "Patriot Games." Like his journalistic colleagues, Farley took neither the militia's conspiracy theories nor its paramilitary training very seriously. He ridiculed the militia's concerns and beliefs as "wild accusations" leveled by "the armed, militarized edge of a broader group of disgruntled citizenry." He dismissed the paramilitary training as "wilderness training excursions" by men he pejoratively called "weekend warriors" and "would-be warriors." Farley was more receptive to the watchdogs' allegations that the militias had dangerous ties to "hatemongering groups," including white supremacists. In general, however, Farley, like other reporters, portrayed the militias as essentially harmless.¹³

Before the Oklahoma City bombing, the news media thus did not take the militias seriously, either as a social movement or as a threat to the nation. The only three articles on the militias published in mainstream news sources before the Oklahoma City bombing appeared to be based largely on the public relations efforts of the militia leaders themselves, yet they were dismissive and unflattering to the movement. The reports were skeptical of the militias' beliefs and behaviors, but they did not portray them as a genuine threat. When the FBI arrested Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995, however, the news media radically changed its assessment of the militias.

The News Media Goes on the Attack

In the hours and days following the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, reports of the ongoing rescue efforts shared the airwaves with speculation about the identity of those who had perpetrated the heinous act. April 19 through 21 brought wide speculation from the news media that Middle-Eastern terrorists were responsible. CNN broadcasted a press conference on April 20 by Attorney General Janet Reno in which reporters questioned Reno about two Arab brothers arrested in Oklahoma City and Dallas, respectively. On April 21, reports that federal agents had charged Timothy McVeigh with the bombing, and that the FBI continued its hunt for brothers Terry and James Nichols in connection with the bombing, publicly established the first connection between the suspects and the militias.¹⁴

Critics have charged that the media coverage of the militias after the Oklahoma City bombing was misguided and unduly sensationalized. Political Scientist John George

and independent researcher Laird Wilcox went so far as to describe the coverage as “an incautious and generally misdirected feeding frenzy.”¹⁵ Former diplomat Mack Tanner agreed, claiming that the militias’ “motivations, members, attitudes, and tactics” had been “grossly mischaracterized by culturally ignorant reporters more concerned with telling sensational stories than with explaining the more-complicated truth.”¹⁶ Sociologist Joshua Freilich and his co-authors likewise observed that some stories published by the media were “sensationalized and put a negative spin on the militias, despite these sources’ purported objectivity.”¹⁷ Even the FBI was critical of the media’s portrayal of the militias. Agents James E. Duffy and Alan C. Brantly warned readers of the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*: “The militia movement is far from the monolithic terrorist conspiracy that some media accounts have portrayed it to be.”¹⁸

The “desirability of social order,” Gans suggested, is a primary value that influences the media’s interpretation of what counts as news.¹⁹ Perhaps that explains why the news media so quickly assumed the posture of what media scholar George Donahue and his colleagues have termed the “guard dog,” protecting society against this new threat and restoring a sense of social order.²⁰

Defining the Oklahoma City bombing as a “terrorist attack,” the news media almost overnight transformed the militias from harmless reactionaries into a serious source of social disruption.²¹ As rhetorical scholar Bethami Dobkin explained, “Terrorism plays on our most basic fears of the unknown and of dying; calling an act a terrorist one heightens our appreciation and fear of the perpetrator.”²² The domestic nature of the terrorism compounded the problem and confused the nation. “What seemed incomprehensible was not the act itself, but that Americans were responsible for it,” as

public memory scholar Edward Linenthal observed.²³ When the militias were connected to the bombers, the news media sensed a new and unprecedented threat to domestic security.

The news media was quick to blame the militias for the bombing. News outlets reported on the militias as a part of their coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing story, and they explored the bombers' possible motives in reports on the militias' ideological views. Reporter Leslie Stahl's introduction to the Michigan Militia on *60 Minutes* the Sunday after the bombing was typical:

The first thing they will tell you when you arrive at the headquarters of the Michigan Militia is that whatever you've heard about a connection between them and the Oklahoma City bombing, it's not true. Still, reports persist that a suspect who has been charged once attended militia meetings . . . and when you go on maneuvers with them, as we did this weekend, it certainly appears that they and the suspects have a lot in common.²⁴

Here Stahl made it clear that her report on the militias was part of the larger investigation into the Oklahoma City bombing. And while she acknowledged the militia leaders' denial of responsibility for the bombing, she discounted their statements in favor of her own assessment. The bombing, in short, framed this and nearly all other stories on the militias.

Reporters occasionally reminded the audience that the militias had yet to be connected directly to the blast. Yet they nullified their own disclaimers by framing their stories as "investigations" into the militias' complicity. News reports on the recovery efforts and the plight of victims and their families surrounded reports on the militias.

Features on the militias were sandwiched between grim casualty statistics, heart-wrenching interviews with the grieving families of dead children, and close-up images of the bombed-out Murrah Federal Building.

In their reports after the Oklahoma City bombing, the news media thus clearly associated the militias with the bombing. Moreover, they suddenly portrayed the militias as dangerous domestic terrorists motivated by conspiracy theories and, to a lesser extent, racism. The media's characterization of the militias as "odd, but harmless" gave way to depictions of the militias as dangerous, irrational, gun-toting radicals bent on overthrowing the government. In short, the militias became—literally overnight—domestic "terrorists" and the number-one threat to the nation's domestic security.

Revealing Untenable Motives: The Militias as Paranoid and Racist

Diane Sawyer was perplexed. The well-respected reporter's reaction to the militias' claims of governmental oppression and One World Government conspiracy theories was typical of mainstream reporters. Sawyer set out to explain away the militias' conspiracy theories on the April 25 edition of *Primetime Live*. Sawyer said she wanted her audience to genuinely understand the militias. "If you wonder how they could think what they think," she began, "so did we."²⁵ "So we begin our next report remembering that a good conspiracy theory must be rooted in fragments of the truth," she told her viewers, before turning to video clips of various militia leaders explaining their views. Sawyer let the militia leaders speak, then revealed the "truth" of the matter. First she took on the militias' contention that federal authorities had set fire to the Branch

Davidian's compound in Waco, killing most of its inhabitants.²⁶ Airing a video produced by the militias, viewers first heard the voice of the tape's producer, Linda Thompson: "The following footage proves beyond any doubt that the tanks intentionally set the house on fire. It proves that the Branch Davidians were murdered. Watch carefully as the tank backs out of the house. You can see that this tank has a gas jet on the front that shoots fire. You can also see the fire quite plainly." Sawyer, however, cut in with contradictory analysis: "Initially it does look as if there could be fire coming out of the tank, but watch now as the tank pulls back. What seems to have been flame now appears to be a piece of the wreckage hanging off the tank and reflecting the sun." Having revealed the truth, Sawyer concluded by suggesting that all conspiracy theories were the products of troubled minds: "So it seems the world can always supply fresh evidence of conspiracy for minds intent on believing it."²⁷

News periodicals issued in the weeks after the bombing likewise exposed the irrationality of the militias' conspiracy theories. Drawing on information from the watchdog groups, the periodicals emphasized the militias' belief in a conspiracy to establish One World Government.²⁸ Judging by their prevalence within the press coverage, the media's favorite narratives were the theories that Russian troops were being housed in salt mines beneath Detroit in preparation for the takeover of the U.S., that Nepalese Gurkas were training in Montana for the same purpose, and that the new paper currency being issued by the government was embedded with a bar code to enable the government to scan a house and detect the amount of cash on hand.²⁹ Apparently the more ludicrous the conspiracy theory, the more newsworthy it became.

Mark Koernke, or “Mark from Michigan” as he was better known, was the man selected by the media to give voice to the militias’ conspiracy theories. Journalists routinely assign faces to the otherwise amorphous groups in an effort to personalize their news stories,³⁰ and Koernke’s flamboyant style made him an obvious choice to serve as a media spokesman. The janitor-turned-conspiracy guru had long been a popular figure in the more extremist corners of the Militia Movement, but only after the Oklahoma City bombing did he become known to the rest of the nation. He was the “darling of the militia movement” one report said, establishing his credentials to speak for the whole movement.³¹

David Van Biema wrote the most comprehensive profile of Koernke in an article published in *Time* on June 26, 1995.³² The article portrayed Koernke as a social misfit who was obsessed with guns and who had found salvation in the gospel of conspiracy theory. According to Van Biema: “From his teens, Koernke has exhibited a fascination with guns and guerilla warfare, an intense dislike of authority, a grandiose vision of himself with an attraction to the idea of martyrdom, and as one ally puts it, the ability to ‘talk until most people have turned to sand.’” Koernke’s ability to spin compelling conspiracy theories had elevated him above his menial jobs as a janitor of a women’s dormitory at the University of Michigan and “glorified clerk” in the National Guard, Van Biema suggested. Through his theories he became “Mark from Michigan,” a celebrity who packed militia meetings and drew scores of radio listeners, all of whom wanted to learn the Truth according to Mark.³³

By emphasizing the militias’ conspiracy theories, the news coverage portrayed the militias as fringe groups driven more by paranoia than by principle. Ironically, the media

itself seemed obsessed with conspiracy theories, ignoring their broader ideological commitments and putting only the movement's most extreme adherents on display. In doing so, they may have exaggerated both the irrationality of and the threat posed by the militias.

A second major theme in media analyses of the militias' motivations was racism. The media rejected the militia leaders' claims to be the ideological descendents of Revolutionary-era patriots and instead embraced the watchdog groups' portraits of the militias as descendents of the racist right. Reporter Tom Morganthau, for example, supported his conclusion that the militias "may now constitute a threat to law and order" with an observation about the militias' lineage. The militias' "political genealogy can be traced in part to notorious white-supremacist groups like the Aryan Nations, The Order and the Ku Klux Klan" he wrote in *Newsweek*.³⁴ Joseph Shapiro made similar observations in *U.S. News & World Report*: "Armed extremism has many fathers, including the Aryan Nations, Ku Klux Klan, survivalists, tax protesters and property rights radicals."³⁵ A picture of a Klansman dressed in his robes and raising his right hand in a recognizable Nazi salute reinforced the observation visually. As if to solidify the connection between the racists and the militias, Michigan Militia leader Norman Olson—perhaps the most recognizable and radical militia leader—stared menacingly at the reader from the facing page.

In addition to reporting the watchdog groups' allegations of racism, reporters implied the racist motives of the militias by describing the movement as primarily "white" and locating its strength in "isolated white communities in economic decline."³⁶ Similarly, the militias' racism was implied by the media's accounts of the famous

showdown between federal agents and militia supporters at Ruby Ridge. Randy Weaver, the man at the center of the raid and a martyr to militia-types, was typically identified as a “white separatist,” as if the designation was some sort of official title.³⁷ Finally, the reports indicated that the “Godfather of the Militia Movement,” John Trochmann of the Militia of Montana, had been “linked to the Aryan Nations.”³⁸ No proof of those links was offered, nor did the stories claim that all militia supporters held the same views as Trochmann. But it did serve as a reminder of the type of people attracted to the militias and implied that all militia supporters were motivated in some measure by racial bigotry.

Establishing the Threat: The Militias as Armed and Dangerous

Conspiracy theories and racism may have motivated the militias, media reports suggested, but it was their firepower that made them truly dangerous. The media made paramilitary activities the defining attribute of the militias. Most reports suggested that the militias did not really pose a serious military threat to the U.S. government. Nonetheless, the media expressed concern that the militias’ paramilitary training might attract the type of individual who would eventually turn violent.

Michigan Militia leader Norman Olson was news media’s choice as the iconic paramilitary leader, and most of the media’s images of the militias as paramilitary entities came courtesy of Olson and his followers. Olson regularly invited the media to observe his militia’s training exercises, and the depiction of Olson and the Michigan Militia encouraged audiences to view the militias not merely as loose cannons, but as angry radicals capable of putting their training to use.

With his strident proclamations and colorful language, Norman Olson was the militia personified—at least according to the news media. Olson was a hard-nosed, “true believer” who resolutely prepared for war. Indeed, the Michigan Militia leader *cultivated* an image of himself as a militant revolutionary. He regularly gave interviews in full camouflage battle dress. He openly trained his troops in paramilitary techniques to resist the federal government. A recruitment tape played during an ABC *20/20* report on the militias clearly displayed Olson’s attitude and rhetorical style. Directly addressing potential recruits, Olson barked: “But we can’t use you if you’re sniveling and afraid to take back liberty! You’ve got to want it so badly that you’re willing to die for it!”³⁹

Reporter Leslie Stahl’s profile of the Michigan Militia on the April 23 broadcast of *60 Minutes* most directly established Olson’s image as a revolutionary. Stahl made it clear from the beginning that Olson and his militia were primarily about guns. To introduce her segment, Stahl sat in front of a shadowy image of three men dressed in camouflage and carrying high-powered weapons. Stahl’s formal interview with Olson took place in what was apparently his gun shop. Both parties were situated against backdrops of guns and other weapons. An American flag and a row of rifles were visible behind Stahl, and two automatic weapons and a bayonet framed Olson. All of the Michigan Militia members Stahl talked with on camera were visibly armed.⁴⁰

Stahl clearly was intent on exposing Olson as an angry radical—and typical of the militia mindset. This was most clearly demonstrated in Stahl’s interview with Olson. Her questions—or at least the ones that were used in the edited program—were designed to illustrate Olson’s militant attitude and hostility toward the federal government. Stahl’s line of questioning began with accusations that Olson’s own rhetoric had served

as a call to avenge the government's conduct at Waco. Olson, of course, denied the charge, stating that he had "never asked anyone to avenge or to seek retaliation or retribution for the wrongs of the federal government." But when Stahl pressed, asking Olson if he was not indeed "whipping up the rage," Olson responded ambiguously: "the military response is only a last-ditch response."⁴¹

Stahl used the Oklahoma City bombing to demonstrate the depth of Olson's cold rage and resolve. She began by reading a portion of a statement issued by Olson after the bombing in which he deemed it "rational" that someone might want to avenge "the horror of Waco." Stahl then objected: "You almost seem to be explaining it. You're not horrified. You're explaining. You understand." Olson admitted that he did understand "the rage," but denied that he condoned the act. When asked why it failed to make him "sit back and take stock," Olson replied that, "hand-wringing does not accomplish anything." To impart the intensity of his alienation and anger, Stahl let Olson speak for himself:

If we do not change our attitude in this country and if the government continues to distance itself from the people and it continues to alienate the people from it, then war is inevitable. Revolution is inevitable, and we're not going to be enslaved. We're not going to be marched down into pits and be machine-gunned. We're not going to be put into cages.

Olson's anger and apocalyptic tone, along with his camouflage baseball cap proclaiming, "Enough is Enough," clearly communicated that Olson was an angry revolutionary.⁴²

While the mainstream news portrayed Olson as a radical revolutionary, it never took him, or the militias, very seriously as an organized military force. Olson was not a

“real” military man, the media was quick to point out. His rank of “Commander” was “self-appointed,” several reports noted.⁴³ “When he was in the Air Force, Norman Olson never got above the rank of master sergeant, but he has now made himself a general,” Brian Ross reported on the ABC news magazine *20/20*.⁴⁴ Together such identifiers reminded the audience that Olson was not a genuine military leader, but something of a crackpot who liked to “play” war.

Even Stahl’s footage of the Michigan Militia’s paramilitary training seemed to confirm that they were not a real military threat. The images broadcast on *60 Minutes* showed men in camouflage scattered about in small groups merely talking or traversing a crude obstacle course.⁴⁵ Other journalists depicted the militia’s training similarly. Journalist Jill Smolowe, who also witnessed Olson’s exercises, indicated that despite taking their training seriously, the “troops” were ill prepared for actual conflict. As Smolowe saw it, the participants were “middle-aged, white, family men who must struggle to support their families and struggle even harder to catch their breath during Olson’s exercises.”⁴⁶ The training, the report suggested, revealed nothing to suggest that the militias could pose a genuine threat to the federal government.

Yet that did not mean that the militias posed no threat to the nation. While they may have been inept fighting forces, the individual fanatics motivated by hatred could be dangerous, as demonstrated by the bombing in Oklahoma City. It was impossible to predict the behavior of such people, the media suggested. Furthermore, the media suggested that the militias’ obsession with guns drew the *type* of people who were inclined toward violence. Timothy McVeigh served as the obvious example, but there were others still out there, the press reports suggested. Reporter David Van Biema cited

the SPLC's Michael Reynolds warning of that threat: "Many of the people attracted to them are weekend warriors, but you are talking about weapons training here, and you are also attracting people who are sociopaths, some of the same sort of bozos who made up the terrorist left in the '60s and '70s."⁴⁷ Other "experts" also testified to the inevitability of violence. ABC news consultant and watchdog group researcher Leonard Zeskind told viewers of *Day One*: "Once you form a large group of people who have weapons, some of them are going to decide, 'Well, it's time to stop marching around in the muddy field and let's start shooting.'"⁴⁸

To underscore the threat, some media reported as a fact a seemingly unbelievable story about Mark Koernke and the Michigan Militia—a story that came to be called "the Fowlerville incident."⁴⁹ In September of 1994, according to the story, police in Fowlerville, Michigan arrested three men in camouflage who claimed to be Koernke's bodyguards on "night patrol."⁵⁰ Police found a .357 magnum revolver, three semi-automatic pistols, three loaded assault rifles, three gas masks, seven hundred rounds of ammunition, and other military gear. Officers also confiscated notes that indicated that the trio had been monitoring the police. The men skipped bail, but forty other militia members reportedly appeared in their stead at the hearing. They allegedly warned the police chief that, "the next time you try to take our guns away, we'll shoot you."⁵¹

The media's portrait of the militias thus had little nuance, depicting the militias as uniformly obsessed with conspiracy theories and guns and influenced by white supremacists. Attracted to the militias' most flamboyant leaders, reporters attributed the extreme view of a few to the entire movement, ignoring its broader ideology of limited government and strict construction of the Constitution. In the media coverage, the Militia

Movement represented nothing more than a few “gun nuts” driven by irrational fears and hatred rather than legitimate concerns with the power of the federal government.

Sources that Shaped the Media Coverage

The media provides the arenas in which “symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning,” as William Gamson and his co-authors have argued.⁵² As the arbiter of a contest over the public image of the militias, the media negotiated the competing images promoted by the militia leaders, the Clinton administration, and the watchdog groups to produce its own portrait of the movement. Ultimately, it was the watchdog groups—the militias’ most zealous opponents—who had the greatest impact on images of the militias in the mainstream news media. The news media rejected the militia leaders’ representations of their own cause in favor of those of the watchdog groups. The media provided the watchdog groups as “experts” and adopted much of the their rhetoric as its own.

Desperate for information on the shadowy Militia Movement, the news media turned to the well-prepared watchdog groups to fill the information vacuum. According to media scholar Daniel Hallin, “once it is accepted that the task of journalism is to provide the public not with opinion but with information, the crucial journalistic choice becomes the choice of sources.”⁵³ As seasoned warriors in the battle against hate and intolerance, the watchdog groups provided the news media with articulate spokespeople. They also provided an image of the militias consistent with the media’s own vision for America.

Ordinarily, for information about the militias, one might have expected journalists to turn first to such “official” sources as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). According to Tuchman, rules requiring “unimpeachable sources” often lead reporters to more conventional or official sources.⁵⁴ As media scholar Lawrence Soley has argued, those rules are institutionalized and enforced: “Not only are reporters taught that using conventional sources is the standard practice of journalism; they also know that editors serve as enforcers of this practice.”⁵⁵ In this case, however, the FBI was a poor source of information on the militias. As reporter Brian Ross reported on the ABC news magazine *Day One*, “The fact is, the FBI knows very little about these groups. Very little attention has been paid to them until now.”⁵⁶ With the militia leaders themselves discredited as biased and self-serving, the watchdog groups became the media’s authoritative sources on the militias.

The news media presented the watchdog representatives as experts on the militias, and their observations carried the weight of fact. Representatives of the watchdog groups were never pressed to verify their statements, never questioned as to how they came by their information, and never had their assertions questioned during interviews. The watchdog representatives were often featured at the beginning of stories on the militias, and views were then woven throughout the feature. They commented on the militias’ claims, and they provided final assessments of the militias’ motivations and the threat posed by the groups.⁵⁷

Although the media initially ignored the watchdog groups’ warnings about the militias, the Oklahoma City bombing changed everything. Suddenly, the ADL and the SPLC became the primary sources of “expert” information about this new domestic

threat, and stories about the conspiracy theories and paramilitary training of the militias came straight out of the watchdog groups' publications. The news media, not surprisingly, especially emphasized the threat of more violence from the militias.

The news media did not rely entirely on the watchdog groups to construct their image of the militias. Following journalistic conventions, for example, they selected different people to represent the movement, paying little attention to such figures as John Trochmann, the face of white supremacy in much of the literature of the watchdog groups. While the news media's treatment of the militias was generally consistent with that of the watchdog groups, the two sources had slightly different agendas. Whereas the SPLC was most concerned with exposing racism in the militias, the media was more interested in presenting compelling stories. Thus, they tended to feature charismatic militia leaders who appeared and sounded like radical revolutionaries. Trochmann, despite his stature in the movement, was not especially charismatic, refused to speak in convenient sound bites, and was often vague.⁵⁸ Furthermore, he did not carry a gun or train with a paramilitary regiment. He did not capture the news media's imagination with his oratorical style, nor did he "look the part" of a violent revolutionary. Despite figuring prominently in the watchdogs' rhetoric, Trochmann played a much smaller role in the media's portrayal of the militias.

The militia leaders' descriptions of their own movement were not merely ignored, but indeed were actively disputed in the media coverage. Militia leaders were given voice, but not authority. They had little, if any credibility in mainstream news sources. Interviews of militia leaders regularly took on the tone of interrogations, with reporters openly expressing their skepticism about the claims made by militia leaders. The press

situated commentary by militia leaders between observations by its watchdog experts, as if the latter provided tests of their veracity. The militia leaders' claims that they bore no responsibility for the bombing fell on deaf ears, as did their charges that the federal government was overstepping its constitutional bounds and becoming increasingly oppressive. It seems that their "facts" simply had no credibility. As sociologist Charlotte Ryan, has argued, all facts are not considered equal: "Facts critical of government do not have the ready credibility of those which support official sources."⁵⁹ This seems to have been the case in the media coverage of the militias, especially after the Oklahoma City bombing.

The Clinton administration's rhetorical portrait of the militias seems to have had some influence on the media coverage. References to the administration and its handling of the bombing most often were featured in news periodicals. Brian Duffy, in *U.S. News & World Report*, recounted Clinton's reassurances that "we're going to get through this," and praised the president for his steady and decisive response to the bombing.⁶⁰ In addition, some media picked up on the administration's theme that extremist talk played some role in the bombing.⁶¹ Ultimately, the Clinton administration's and the news media's portraits of the militias were complementary.

In the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, news media coverage of the militias thus largely echoed earlier reports by such watchdog groups as the ADL and the SPLC. Replying heavily upon these watchdog groups as expert sources, the news media went from dismissing the militias as harmless eccentrics to sounding the alarm about a dangerous new threat to national security. Downplaying the racism emphasized by the watchdogs, the news media emphasized instead the militias' paramilitary training

and stockpiling of weapons. More violence was inevitable, the coverage seemed to suggest.

News Media Coverage of the Militias One Year Later

One year after the news media had, in effect, blamed the militias for the Oklahoma City bombing, the groups had passed almost completely from public attention. Only *48 Hours* revisited the militias upon the one-year anniversary of the bombing.⁶² The program opened with an update on survivors of the bombing and the prosecution of McVeigh, reacquainted the audience with John Trochmann, the “white supremacist” leader of the Militia of Montana, and closed with an interview of the SPLC’s representative Morris Dees.

At first glance the decision to interview Trochmann may appear odd, as he had always received less press attention than Koernke or Olson. The intervening year, however, had found Koernke and Olson both stripped of their high-profile positions. Koernke’s radio program had been pulled from the air, and Olson had been forced to resign his position as Commander of the Michigan Militia when the group objected to a bizarre fax that he sent to media outlets blaming the Japanese government for the Oklahoma City bombing. Trochmann was one of the few militia leaders who still gave interviews and who had retained his status within the movement. In effect, he became the media spokesperson for the militias by default.

The *48 Hours* segment demonstrated the media’s continued reliance on the watchdog groups. It not only echoed the watchdog groups’ themes in the SPLC’s

recently published report *False Patriots*, but also emphasized that report's claim that the militias had hidden their true nature. Erin Moriarty hosted the *48 Hours* segment that trailed Trochmann in what Moriarty referred to as the militia leader's campaign to "repair" the damage inflicted on "the reputations of militias everywhere." The piece began as Trochmann gave a radio interview declaring that he wanted to "set it straight." The majority of the segment, however, took place at a "preparedness expo" in Las Vegas, Nevada. Moriarty followed Trochmann as he sold survivalist literature and gear, visited with friends, and spoke to the crowd.⁶³

The militia leader's goal may well have been rehabilitation of the militias' image, but *48 Hours* warned that beneath the new packaging were the same old militias. Structuring the story around Trochmann's public relations efforts, Moriarty invited the audience to be skeptical. The story framed the militia leader's rhetoric as suspect by suggesting that Trochmann's representations of the militias were not genuine and by contrasting the man's rhetoric with his actions.

In Moriarty's report, the militias remained the crazy, conspiratorial fanatics that they had always been. To demonstrate, she enticed Trochmann and other attendees at the preparedness convention to recite their conspiracy theories. They spoke of vehicles on U.S. soil painted with United Nations' insignia as evidence of the plot to establish One World Government. Moriarty dismissed these concerns in a "voiceover," adding in post-production, "According to the U.N., it's no secret. Officials say they routinely lease American military vehicles for UN missions and then return them." Moriarty then reflected upon the unwillingness of the militias to see the "truth." "Still," she intoned, "distrust of the government has increased considerably, says Trochmann."⁶⁴

Moriarty's report also demonstrated the militias' continued commitment to paramilitary action. Despite Trochmann's efforts to present the militias as "wholesome, law-abiding people that love our country," Moriarty suggested, the literature of the Militia of Montana verified its commitment to violence. To illustrate, Moriarty purchased a pamphlet entitled "The Road Back to America." Trochmann claimed that it was a guide to citizen's defense against foreign invasion. "In fact," Moriarty countered, the book was "a guide to making weapons and building bombs." During the exchange that followed, Trochmann denied that his group advocated violence but insisted that Americans needed such information to defend themselves. "What if they won't back off? What if enemy forces come in? Would you want us defenseless?" Trochmann asked Moriarty. As he became more agitated, Trochmann insisted that Moriarty should be concerned about the aggressors, not those who had prepared to resist them: "What if we've got twenty tanks in an area that need to be taken out, that are coming to destroy your neighborhood? Don't you want your people to be defending [*sic*]? How are you going to take care of your children if you don't know how to defend yourself? Shame on you."⁶⁵

More dramatically, Moriarty baited Trochmann into a confrontation that revealed the depth of his hostility toward those who had defamed the militias, as well as his deeply conspiratorial mindset. Upset by Moriarty's purchase of the aforementioned pamphlet, Trochmann angrily accused her of planning to use the book to depict the militias in a negative manner. When Moriarty asked, "Why are you so angry at me?" Trochmann replied: "Because of your evil intent—your evil intent to destroy my country. Why don't you go back to Britain where you belong?" "Why Britain?" asked Moriarty. "Because

you work for them. Don't you?" he replied. Later Trochmann called Moriarty a "treasonous woman" and declared the interview over. The exchange provided a dramatic end to the segment. Finally, film rolled of Trochmann driving away in his battered old truck. The last voice-over was also his: "It doesn't stop. While we're given the time to get the message out, us law-abiding citizens, I guess we'll keep on keeping on."⁶⁶

To conclude the program, Dan Rather interviewed Morris Dees about the SPLC's latest publication, *False Patriots*. In the short interview, Rather again treated Dees as an expert as he asked about the size of the Militia Movement and about the connections between the militias and Timothy McVeigh. Dees responded that the SPLC had identified some 411 actual militia groups in the country, supported by approximately 800 "more general and anti-government groups." The "secret cells," which were untraceable, were especially dangerous, he added. As for the bombers, they were "very much connected to this whole kind of patriot, anti-government movement," Dees insisted. The short discussion concluded with Dees' warning that the militias remained a "clear and present danger to the nation."⁶⁷

Conclusion

"Underlying the news," as Herbert Gans has argued, is "a picture of nation and society as it ought to be."⁶⁸ The news media's unflattering portrait of the militias, both before and after the Oklahoma City bombing, suggests that the movement dramatically violated the news media's vision of America "as it ought to be." Even before the bombing, the media portrayed the militias as out-of-touch with the mainstream of

America—perhaps even a little mentally unbalanced. After the bombing, of course, that coverage took on a more ominous tone. Echoing the warnings of the watchdog groups, the news media warned the nation of a dangerous new threat to domestic security: a heavily armed and deranged network of right-wing extremists bent on violent overthrow of the federal government.

This study of news media coverage of the militias shed light on two issues of concern to social movement researchers. First, it suggests that, despite their celebration of many “grassroots” movements,⁶⁹ the media does not look favorably upon *all* protest movements. Whether a critic contends, as Gans has, that the news media is essentially “reformist” in tone, or that it pursues a “liberal” agenda, as rhetorical scholar Jim Kuypers has suggested, the media’s coverage could be cited in support of the claim.⁷⁰

Second, media coverage of the militias shows the importance of dramatic events in shaping the character and tone of media coverage. Despite the fact that the FBI cleared the Michigan Militia of any direct involvement in the bombing, the news media clearly blamed the militias for the atmosphere of hatred and violence that led to the event. The bombing served as the “news peg”⁷¹ for reporters to “hook” subsequent reports on the militias. Using the bombing as the exigence for their news reports on the militias ensured that the groups would continue to be associated with the bombing. Moreover, the news media’s “framing” of the bombing as a “terrorist attack” clearly influenced its depictions of the militias. As communication scholar Robert Entman has pointed out: “texts can make bits of information more salient by placement or repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols.”⁷² The media’s repeated placement of

the militias' ideology in proximity to that of the bombers, and its focus on the militias' extreme rhetoric, effectively framed the militias as terrorists.

The rhetorical battle to define the militias was fought in the media. Some militia leaders initially welcomed all the media attention as a useful means of disseminating their message. According to one leader, "We found the means whereby the world would know who we are and what we are doing. We prostituted the militia in the media, using them as our mules to carry our message around the world."⁷³ But the media did not carry their message around the world unedited and unadulterated. Initially, the media portrayed them as "just dumb white guys who like to fantasize about guns and guerrilla war."⁷⁴ After the Oklahoma City bombing, they followed the lead of the watchdog groups and cast the militias as a serious threat to national security. Considering journalistic ethics scholar Deni Elliot's contention that the media is "unavoidable" and provides "the lion's share of our knowledge and beliefs concerning life outside of our direct experience," news media images of the militias likely defined the militias for most Americans.⁷⁵ Unfortunately for the militias' leaders, as Linenthal pointed out, the groups came across not as patriots, but as the "harbingers of a new domestic threat"—the "post-Vietnam American Freikorps."⁷⁶

Notes:

1. ABC News, "Believers See Government Actions as War-Provoking," *Primetime Live*, April 25, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as "Believers See."
2. William A. Gamson and others, "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 374.
3. Gaye Tuchman points out that a reader may challenge the truth-value of a specific story, but does not "challenge the very existence of news as a social phenomenon." Therefore, while a reader may not appreciate the slant of a story, the news itself still appears as "objective givens." Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 186.
4. Elisabeth A. Van Zoonen, "The Women's Movement and the Media: Constructing a Public Identity," *European Journal of Communication* 7 (1992): 457.
5. Geoffrey Baym, "Constructing Moral Authority: *We* in the Discourse of Television News," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (Winter 2002): 93.
6. Steven M. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2002), 116. Chermak combined a social-scientific "frame analysis" of newspaper stories about the militia with interviews with militia participants to discern, among other things, how the media helps to shape the boundaries of community.
7. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, 1980 ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). Gans suggests that the following are enduring news values: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership.
8. Mike Tharp, "Rise of the Citizen Militias," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 15 1994, 34-35; Keith Schneider, "Fearing a Conspiracy, Some Heed a Call to Arms," *New York Times*, November 14, 1994, A1; Christopher John Farley, "Patriot Games," *Time*, December 19, 1994, 48-49.
9. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon*, 61.
10. Schneider, "Fearing a Conspiracy," A14.
11. Tharp, "Rise of Citizen Militias," 34-35.

12. Schneider, "Fearing a Conspiracy," A1, A14.
13. Farley, "Patriot Games," 48, 49.
14. CNN, "Sources Say Radical Paramilitary Group Being Sought," April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript.
15. John George and Laird Wilcox, *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists and Others* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 246.
16. Mack Tanner, "Extreme Prejudice: How the Media Misrepresent the Militia Movement," *Reason*, July 1995, 43.
17. Joshua D. Freilich, Nelson A. Pichardo Alamanzar, and Craig J. Rivera, "Organizations Explicitly and Implicitly Promote Deviant Behavior: The Case of the Militia Movement," *Justice Quarterly* 13 (September 1999): 663.
18. James E. Duffy and Alan C. Brantley, "Militias: Initiating Contact," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1997, 23-4
19. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 52.
20. George A. Donohue, Phillip J. Tichenor, and Clarice N. Olien, "A Guard Dog Perspective of the Role of Media," *Journal of Communication* 45 (Spring 1995), 116.
21. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon*, 66.
22. Bethami A. Dobkin, *Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 41.
23. Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.
24. CBS News, "The Michigan Militia," *60 Minutes*, April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as "Michigan Militia."
25. "Believers See," *Primetime Live*. "Believers See," *Primetime Live*.
26. The federal government maintains that the Branch Davidians set fire to the compound in an attempt at a mass suicide.
27. "Believers See," *Primetime Live*.

28. Steven Shabad, "Beyond the Fringe," *Newsweek*, May 1, 1995, 38; Joseph Shapiro, "An Epidemic of Fear and Loathing," *U.S. News & World Report* May 8, 1995, 38.
29. Jill Smolowe, "Enemies of the State," *Time*, May 8, 1995, 62-63; David Van Biema, "A Message from Mark," *Time*, June 26, 1995, 56.
30. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and the Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkley: University of California, 1980), 154.
31. Van Biema, "A Message from Mark," 56.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 58.
34. Tom Morganthau, "A View From the Far Right," *Newsweek*, May 1, 1995, 36.
35. Shapiro, "An Epidemic of Fear and Loathing," 38.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid; Smolowe, "Enemies of the State," 62.
38. CBS News, "Enemy Within," *48 Hours*, April 18, 1996. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as "Enemy Within." Shabad, "Beyond the Fringe," 38.
39. ABC News, *20/20*, April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript. Hereafter cited as *20/20*.
40. "Michigan Militia," *60 Minutes*.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid; *20/20*, April 21, 1995.
44. *20/20*, April 21, 1995.
45. "Michigan Militia," *60 Minutes*.
46. Smolowe, "Enemies of the State," 64.

47. Van Biema, "A Message from Mark," 57.
48. ABC News, "Militia Extremists," *Day One*, April 27, 1995. Lexis-Nexis online transcript. Hereafter cited as "Militia Extremists."
49. See: Van Biema, "A Message from Mark," 62; Morgenthau, "A View From the Far Right," 39.
50. Van Biema, "A Message from Mark," 62.
51. Morgenthau, "A View From the Far Right," 39.
52. Gamson and others, "Media Images," 385.
53. Daniel C. Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," *Journal of Politics* 46 (February 1984): 13.
54. Tuchman, *Making News*, 85.
55. Lawrence C. Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 23.
56. "Militia Extremists," *Day One*.
57. See, for example: 20/20, April 21, 1995; "Militia Extremists," *Day One*; "Enemy Within," *48 Hours*.
58. Trochmann's testimony at the Senate Hearing is evidence of this, as was this author's personal communication with him. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information, *The Militia Movement in the United States* 104th Cong., 1st sess., June 15, 1995, 83.
59. Charlotte Ryan, *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 177.
60. Brian Duffy, "The End of Innocence," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 1, 1995, 40.
61. Smolowe, "Enemies of the State," 58; Shapiro, "An Epidemic of Fear and Loathing," 44.
62. CBS News, "John Trochmann," *48 Hours*, April 18, 1996.
63. Ibid.

- 64. Ibid.
- 65. Ibid.
- 66. Ibid.
- 67. Ibid.
- 68. Herbert J. Gans, "The Messages Behind the News," *Columbia Journalism Review* 17 (February 1979): 40.
- 69. J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1994), 141.
- 70. Gans, "The Messages Behind the News," 45; Jim A. Kuypers, *Press Bias and Politics: How the Media Frame Controversial Issues* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), 202-203.
- 71. Ryan, *Prime Time Activism*, 32.
- 72. Robert Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43 (Autumn 1993): 53.
- 73. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon*, 98.
- 74. Morganthau, "The View from the Far Right," 39.
- 75. Deni Elliot, "Ethical and Moral Responsibilities of the Media," in *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Paul Martin Lester, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 6.
- 76. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing*, 24.

Chapter Six

Crackpots and Terrorists: Representations of The Militia Movement in Popular Fiction and Film

The point is that these guys are screwballs and outlaws,
and they're now armed to the teeth.

--Chris Craven in *Brothers*¹

In a post-Cold War America, the dramatists of popular culture could hardly resist the story of the “paranoid,” camouflage-clad American men who carried M-16s and trained for war against their government. The militias thus moved fairly quickly from news stories to popular novels and films. By the late-1990s they had assumed limited, but recurring, roles as the foils of both print and celluloid heroes.

Popular culture both reflects and refines the ways that people view the world. According to media scholar Steven Chermak, “People who create public culture purposefully and knowingly create or solidify stereotypes. The public cannot resist borrowing from the exaggerated realities presented in fictional accounts when viewing factual accounts of events.”² Thus, representations of the militias in popular culture provide not only a sense of the characteristics that came to be associated with the movement, but also which images ultimately prevailed in the contest over the militias’ public identity.

The militias made their first appearance in popular culture two years after the Oklahoma City bombing in Ian Slater’s 1997 novel, *Showdown: USA vs. Militia*. The

paperback (the first in a series of four) pitted “the militia” against “the federals” and brother against brother in the “new American Civil War.”³ In the year that followed at least two more authors brought their images of the militias to print. Comic-mystery writer Joan Hess and adolescent-fiction writer Julian F. Thompson both found the militias to be fitting antagonists for their heroes to ridicule and defeat. In 1999, two Hollywood films cast the militias as terrorists. Jay Andrews’s (the pseudonym used by Jim Wynoriski) low-budget action-adventure movie, *Militia*, starring Dean Cain and Jennifer Beales, aired on the HBO cable network and was released straight-to-video.⁴ Mark Pellington’s more nuanced conspiracy thriller, *Arlington Road* (starring Jeff Bridges, Tim Robbins, and Joan Cusak), received better reviews than *Militia* and did well in theaters.⁵

This chapter explores the representations of the modern Militia Movement in these novels and popular films to locate the characteristics ascribed to the militias. The analysis reveals how each source adapted its portrayal of the militias to suit the requirements of their particular genre. The artifacts generally offered negative portrayals of the militias, depicting the groups as thugs who used anti-government ideology to disguise their own selfish—and decidedly unpatriotic—objectives. In pursuit of their nefarious goals, the militias trampled on the basic human rights of others. Ironically, even as they railed against the tyranny of the federal government, the militias failed to recognize their own actions as tyrannical. Only author Ian Slater broke from the script to produce a more sympathetic portrait of the militias.

The Militias in Popular Fiction: Criminals and Crackpots

As portrayed in popular fiction, “screwballs and outlaws” populated the militias.⁶ Joan Hess’s *Maggody Militia* and Julian Thompson’s *Brothers* both cast militias as menacing outsiders whose paranoid worldview was rendered dangerous by their affinity for guns. While the militia members in these novels claimed to be patriotic, Hess and Thompson invited readers to understand them as zealots who used patriotism as a convenient excuse for their own anti-social or criminal behavior. In the authors’ depictions, the militias encouraged disrespect for women and minorities, felt that the ends justified the means, and considered themselves to be above the law.

The Maggody Militia

Humor was Hess’s weapon and the militias her target in *The Maggody Militia*.⁷ She featured militia members as the primary suspects in the murder of one of their own in her tenth installment of the comic mystery series set in the small, quirky town of Maggody, Arkansas. The novel centered on a militia that had arrived in Maggody to recruit townsfolk and practice paramilitary maneuvers in a local widow’s cow pasture. When a participant (a suspected federal agent) was gunned down during the training exercise, it was up to Chief of Police Ariel “Arly” Hanks to track down the killer.

Joan Hess presented the militia members as credible, yet comic villains. Her portrayal of the militia depicted them as armed buffoons led by an anti-government zealot. The Maggody Militia was more offensive than it was dangerous, however, as the

group impeded Hank's investigation and behaved rudely. Hess' characterization of the militias served as a lesson against the danger of taking ideology to extremes. Although she occasionally poked fun at the militias' conspiracy theories, Hess generally ridiculed the militia members' personal shortcomings, not the group's collective values.

The militia was in constant conflict with Hanks. Suspicious of the militia from the beginning, heroine Hanks was unhappy when the group invaded her town in the opening week of hunting season. In her first encounter with the self-appointed hard-nosed General Pitts (highly reminiscent of Michigan Militia leader Norman Olson), Hanks warned him about the danger inherent in playing "G.I. Joe in the woods" during the first weekend of deer hunting season.⁸ Privately, she was concerned that some of the naïve townsfolk would be seduced by the militia's deviant and dangerous ideology. Nonetheless, Pitts brought his rag-tag band of would-be warriors to Maggody to recruit members and to practice paramilitary maneuvers with paintball guns. Dylan, a newcomer who some in the militia suspected of being a government infiltrator, was killed during the training session. Although initially assumed to have been the victim of a hunter's stray bullet, closer inspection revealed that the "accidental" shooting was a ruse to cover up a murder. Hank's efforts to investigate the murder were hindered by the militia's refusal to cooperate. She endured outright lying, sexist comments, and numerous lectures about constitutional rights while trying to solve the case. Hanks eventually identified Pitt's co-conspirator, Kathleen (the widow who had arranged for the militia to come to town), as the killer.

Hess drew Pitts and his militia in unlikable caricatures, ready-made for Hanks to ridicule. The arrogant, overbearing, and self-serving "General" was the most

developed militia character. Pitts was immediately recognizable as a fanatical, true believing militia leader. His camouflage clothing, Humvee military vehicle, “neat, controlled movement,” short hair, and jutting, belligerent jaw also physically marked Pitts as paramilitary. He had come to Maggody ostensibly to recruit new militia members and to train his citizen-soldiers. As Pitts repeatedly explained to Hanks, his group was filled with law-abiding citizens who just wanted to exercise their constitutional right to form a well-regulated militia: “We are preparing ourselves to fight back in the face of an invasion of foreign troops or even an attempt by the federal government to declare martial law and deprive us of our rights.” His habit of lecturing all within earshot about the government and the Constitution drove Hanks eventually to tell him to “can it, and market it as chicken noodle shit.” Pitts was later revealed to be a criminal, having conspired with Kathleen to kill her husband and use the man’s life insurance policy to fund their militia.⁹

The militia itself was comprised of uncivilized, gun-obsessed rabble who were motivated less by ideology than by the opportunity to drink beer and wield weapons. The group was enthusiastic about training, but hardly professional—or even competent. Their inability to remember each other’s code names was a continuing reminder of their ineptitude. As Pitts revealed to Hanks, the unit was even on probation because two members had displayed “gross incompetence” at a retreat with other militias. Kathleen admitted as much. “We’re all hot air and bravado,” she told Hanks. “None of us would ever find the nerve to do something illegal, much less dangerous.”¹⁰

Beyond being incompetent, Hess portrayed the militiamen as deeply misogynistic. This was demonstrated repeatedly through references to militia member Jake “Blitzer”

Milliford's wife: "Living with him for twenty-three years had thickened her skin. It had also etched some wrinkles in her pretty face and turned some brown hairs gray, as well as extinguishing a good deal of what had once shown through her eyes." While Milliford treated his own wife with disrespect, Reed "Red Rooster" Rondley demonstrated his bitterness and disrespect for women in an encounter with Hanks. His remarks during one interview with Hanks were typical: "What's your problem, honey? You having your period?" A few moments later he "leered" at her and asked, "What about you, baby? You got black silk panties on that firm little ass of yours?"¹¹

The militia's racism was rendered more subtly than its misogyny. A background check Hanks performed on General Pitts revealed that he had recently complained about "black" teenagers loitering in his parking lot. Another militia member complained about "half-breeds" moving into a neighborhood, and before he was killed, Dylan had told a Maggody resident who had joined the maneuvers that he would make a good WASP. As the man told Hanks, that stood for "White Aryan Superior . . . something or other. Patriot, mebbe."¹² The racism was less obvious than the sexism, but still a clear element of the portrayal.

Hanks' ceaseless derision of the militia invited the reader to laugh at the absurdity of the militia's beliefs and practices. For example, she dismissed the militia's concerns about foreign invasion by referring to the foreign armies as "mythical," and reduced them to absurdity when she asked one local resident, "Do you honestly believe this country is going to be invaded by a bunch of Swiss paratroopers armed with pocket knives?" Beyond that, Hanks attacked the militia's collective mental state, referring to one member as a "wacko in an army helmet." She asked two others if they were "bumbling idiots who

like to act out your anal-retentive impulses in the woods.” Hanks came to the conclusion that the militia members themselves were incapable of “anything more sophisticated than shooting paint pellets at each other.”¹³

Tongue-in-cheek, Hess titled her book *The Maggody Militia*. However, the militia was *so* far afield that even easygoing Hanks and the zany residents of Maggody rejected it. It was no wonder. The members themselves were racist, woman-hating scofflaws who harbored a passion for weapons and a disdain for taxes. They were led by a gung-ho self-appointed “General” who had conspired to kill a man purely for financial gain. While Hess painted the militia as more pathetic than sinister, her portrayal did not attribute any redeeming qualities to the militias. Ultimately, she suggested that while the militias were not a serious paramilitary force, they did attract the sort of people who *could* be dangerous and should be avoided.

Brothers

In the teen novel *Brothers*, author Julian Thompson cast the militias as a more menacing force. Thompson chronicled seventeen-year old Chris Craven’s rescue of his mentally ill older brother Cameron from the “Sons of Liberty Two” (SOL2) militia. The novel began with Chris’ mother revealing that Cameron had been removed from college and placed in a sanitarium. After Cameron fled the sanitarium, Chris set out to find him and bring him home. Michelle, a friend of Cameron’s from the sanitarium, and her younger sister Millie agreed to help. The trio found Cameron living with the SOL2 on a remote, guarded compound in the South Dakota wilderness. The isolated, backwoods

setting not only reflected the rural nature of the militia, but also signaled just how far Cameron's illness had taken him from "civilization."

The SOL2 welcomed the visitors warmly and invited them to stay a few days to visit with Cameron. The teens accepted, confident that they could lure Cameron away. Cameron, however, was reluctant to leave the members of SOL2, whom he admired as "wonderfully intellectual beings."¹⁴ At first, Michelle was also taken in by the wilderness and contemplated staying to make a life with Cameron. But the younger (saner) siblings had discovered that the SOL2 was only interested in Cameron's money to acquire weapons for a showdown with law enforcement. They worked to disabuse Cameron of the notion that their hosts were harmless recluses.

Ultimately, the teens escaped the compound into the waiting arms of the police, but not before the militia's evil nature had been demonstrated to Cameron. While Thompson did not reveal the ultimate fate of the militia, he did imply that the local authorities eventually overtook the compound. For the purposes of the storyline the official ending of the group was of little consequence. Cameron's rescuers had wrested him free from the SOL2's physical and psychological imprisonment, and their accomplishment was all the more impressive because the militia had been a violent, criminal gang.

The SOL2 militia was more akin to a cult than a political movement, and again it demonstrated the dangers inherent in ideological excess. It warned against those who camouflage their criminal inclinations with moralistic rhetoric. The characters were drawn as physical and ideological outsiders to be feared and rejected by reasonable people.

The SOL2 were clearly outside the ideological mainstream. The reader learned about the beliefs of the SOL2 through conversations between Cameron and the other teens. According to Cameron, the SOL2's main cause was the right to bear arms. The government's actions at Ruby Ridge and Waco, as well as the passing of the Brady Bill, had convinced them that the government was out to get the "little guys." They believed in One World Government conspiracy theories infused with racism. As Cameron reported, SOL2 thought that the United Nations was taking over, and that "the U.S. of A is going to end up being run by Jews and foreigners." The more reasonable characters pointed to alternative interpretations of the government's actions, as well as the racist implications and absurd logic of the conspiracy theories. Finally, even the unbalanced Cameron admitted that the militia's notions were bizarre and perhaps even dangerous.¹⁵

The SOL2 were drawn as self-serving, sexist, and dangerous. They were a band of armed thugs who would lie, steal, rape, and kill to satisfy their aims. Like the militia leader in the *Maggody Militia*, the SOL2 members were driven less by a desire to rescue the nation from its government than to achieve power and financial gain. The "militia" was an ideology that they had adopted to justify their intention to operate outside of the boundaries of society and the law. Their sexism was revealed by their expectation that Michelle and Millie would perform traditional female tasks, such as cooking and washing dishes. Primarily, they were represented as preying on those weaker than themselves. For example, the band had lied to Cameron throughout his stay at the compound. While pretending to accept him and value his ideas about the necessity of man being at one with nature, the group mocked him behind his back, and surreptitiously used the money that he gave them to stock their arsenal. When Chris,

Michelle, and Millie arrived at the compound, the SOL2 allowed them to stay not out of kindness, but so they could use them as hostages in the impending standoff—which they did. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the SOL2 preying on others was the attempted rape of Millie. Although Chris intervened and choked the perpetrator to near unconsciousness, the man later shot and wounded Chris in revenge.

The SOL2 militia was populated by uniformly contemptible characters who eschewed the law and morality in service of their nefarious goals. It was their perverted *form* of patriotism—the way that they *used* militia ideology to justify their criminal enterprises—that was significant, not their status as militia members.

The Militias in Hollywood Film: Dangerous Terrorists

Terrorists have become Hollywood's villains of choice. According to film scholar Joseph Reed, terrorists are “almost as customary to the movies as Nazis once were in films of the Forties.”¹⁶ To a large extent, Hollywood has portrayed terrorists as products of the Middle East.¹⁷ With the emergence of the Militia Movement, however, filmmakers added new terrorists to their repertoire. According to Chermak, “the post-Oklahoma City focus on militias helped to create a deviant that the community was concerned about, so it was inevitable that films would put the dominant understandings of the militias to work.”¹⁸

Popular film adapted the images of the militias found in news coverage to fit the films' genres. Jay Andrews' 1999 action-adventure movie, *Militia*, and Mark Pellington's 1999 conspiracy thriller, *Arlington Road*, both cast the militias as

professional bomber-terrorists. Unlike the militias featured in the novels, these militias did not skulk about in the woods playing “war” with paintball guns, nor were they content to live in isolated compounds. Instead, *Militia* featured the “Brotherhood of Liberty” militia stealing anthrax and affixing it to a nuclear warhead in an effort to kill world leaders and start a second American revolution. The “Liberty” militia in *Arlington Road* traveled around the country bombing federal buildings and framing innocent citizens. Both films not only demonstrated the depravity of the self-proclaimed “patriots,” but also portrayed them as serious threats.

The films characterized the militias as evil, destructive, and enemies of all “good Americans.” These militias were driven not by patriotism, but by a desire for power and revenge. Their motives were decidedly selfish, even as they claimed to be working for the larger good. The militias opposed rugged individualists who revealed themselves to be the *true* patriots. The true patriots, however, did not always defeat the militias. The “lessons” of these films thus remained somewhat ambiguous. The militia’s violent nature clearly made them villains, but their anger against the government was borne of genuine mistreatment. The militias were clearly evil, but good did not *always* prevail. Nonetheless, both served as cautionary tales of the dangerous nature of the militias.

Militia

Film scholar James M. Welsh has observed that action-adventure films are marked by complicated plots, “flamboyant and colorful characters, malignant villainy, dastardly deeds, and larger-than-life characters who will save the day.”¹⁹ To satisfy the

precepts of this high-octane genre, Jay Andrews, in *Militias*, developed a plot that pitted the diabolical “Brotherhood of Liberty” (the Brotherhood) against the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) and a *former* Brotherhood leader.²⁰ As Andrews told the story of the Brotherhood’s plot to attack a meeting of world leaders with an anthrax-laden warhead, he exploited the prevailing images of the militias in the news. At first he seemed to celebrate the militias’ constitutional principles, but then suggested that the “real” militias had been corrupted by power. In the end he exposed the corrupted militia’s evil motives and violent excesses, and presented the militias as ruthless terrorists.

The film opened as ATF agents raided the remote Brotherhood compound and arrested leader William Fain (Frederick Forrest) after a gun battle. Fain’s wife and son were apparently killed in the melee. The film picked up the story two years later when ATF agent Ethan Carter (Dean Cain) was assigned to infiltrate the revived and more virulent *new* Brotherhood and thwart its terrorist plot. Fain, a martyr-hero in the militia community, was released from prison to assist Carter in gaining entrée to the new Brotherhood.

The new Brotherhood militia was covertly led by extremist right-wing radio talk show host George Armstrong Montgomery (Stacy Keach). Montgomery planned to bomb a meeting of world leaders as a means of sparking a citizen’s revolt against the government and putting himself in power. Montgomery welcomed the return of his old friend Fain. When Fain identified Carter to the Brotherhood as a federal agent and turned him over to Montgomery’s henchmen, it appeared as though the ATF’s faith in Fain was unfounded and that the militia-terrorists would get away with their plan. Fain’s betrayal

of Carter, however, was only a ploy. Fain had faked the treachery to regain access to the Brotherhood. Before the militia could launch the stolen missiles, Fain—himself once a target of the government—donned ATF gear and rescued Carter. With only moments to spare, the duo destroyed the militia and saved the nation.

The task of the hero in action-adventure films is always the same: “avert the disaster, disarm the bomb, control the situation, thwart the villain, and save the day.”²¹ In Carter and Fain, Andrews concocted a hero-pair worthy of the genre. Once on opposite sides of the law, the success of the mission and their own survival depended on the mutual trust of these hard-nosed individualists. The tenuous relationship between the pair brought tension to the film and celebrated classic virtues: individualism, honor, and principled patriotism.

With his classic good looks and muscular build, Carter was the hero of the film. He embodied the traits of the classic American movie hero as rhetorician Thomas Benson has described him: “individualistic, instinctive, and governed by a code of personal honor.”²² Carter established himself as a man of honor in the first sequence of the movie when the ATF raided the original Brotherhood of Liberty compound to arrest Fain on illegal weapons charges. When a firefight broke out between the ATF and the militia, Carter’s commander ordered him to shoot Fain, even as Fain shielded his young son from the gunfire with his body. Carter refused and, when pressed, “accidentally” missed. He later did wound Fain in the shoulder, but only after the boy was safely out of range. Carter’s willful disregard of a direct order revealed him as something of a renegade. He was a man who followed his own code of honor even when ordered to do otherwise.

Establishing Fain as a second hero not only added interest to the plot, but also allowed the director to pit “Brother” against “Brother.” Fain represented the “good militia.” Early in the film, the director established the original Brotherhood as motivated by sincere concerns with governmental misconduct, and Fain as a sympathetic hero-martyr. Fain and the Brotherhood were defending their Second Amendment rights and protecting their families when they were raided by the ATF. As the viewer eventually learned, the ATF had faked the death of Fain’s wife and son in a plan to capture him. It had offered Fain a reunion with them in exchange for helping the ATF infiltrate the militia. His motives, then, were admirable—he was a committed family man who was also dedicated to his beliefs in the Constitution. Fain served as a touchstone for just how dramatically the new Brotherhood had debased the cause. Representing family values and principled patriotism, Fain provided a contrast to the new Brotherhood, which had abandoned all principles, gone on the offensive, and become terrorists. Ultimately, Fain proved himself to be the true patriot when he recognized the danger posed by the new Brotherhood and embraced the ATF's efforts to protect the nation. Fain was still a “patriot,” but was finally on the “right” side of the law.

The new Brotherhood militia fit the stereotype of villains and represented those features of the militias to be reviled.²³ In departing from its admirable predecessor, the new Brotherhood’s ideals were undermined by tyrants. The defining characteristics of the militia become those of evil terrorists: an unwavering drive for power and a complete disrespect for human life.

The new Brotherhood’s leader, Montgomery, was motivated only by the desire for power and revenge.²⁴ His obsession with high-powered weapons, disdain for the

federal government, and promotion of wild conspiracy theories on his talk radio program made him a recognizable zealot. He was driven by the desire to punish the government for its “misdeeds” at Ruby Ridge and Oklahoma City. He planned to set in motion a chain of events that he hoped would precipitate a massive federal government crackdown on the American people. The crackdown, in turn, would propel the citizenry to turn to the militia to protect them from their government, allowing Montgomery and his armies of militia members to seize control of the nation.

Montgomery’s disciples were depicted as professional terrorists. His militia was comprised primarily of “techies” who ran his computers and a pair of hired guns who stole the anthrax and took over the missile silo. The two primary operatives were driven by the thrill of the chase and the quest for power. The other members of the Brotherhood operated out of a secret, underground war room that was fully equipped with the latest in computer technology. They were clean cut, well dressed, and rarely spoke. It was impossible to tell whether the new Brotherhood was ideologically aligned with Montgomery or had simply been bought with his substantial bankroll.

Montgomery’s Brotherhood was the antithesis of its predecessor. Fain’s Brotherhood was primitive compared to Montgomery’s high-tech version. Fain’s group lived primitively in an old ghost town-like “compound;” the new Brotherhood operated from a high-tech mansion, with the computer command center safely hidden beneath the large swimming pool. Fain’s militia had battled the feds with shotguns and one grenade launcher; Montgomery’s men preferred fully automatic weapons, remote detonation devices, and stolen warheads. Although Fain’s men were willing to defend themselves,

they were ineffective warriors. Montgomery's militia, on the other hand, operated with military-like precision to execute complicated plans.

But the differences ran much deeper than technology. The *original* Brotherhood of Liberty had been purely defensive and highly principled. They respected the federal government, but wanted to prevent it from slowly eroding the Constitution and undermining their right to bear arms. The *new* Brotherhood was aggressive and motivated by unadulterated self-interest. Montgomery did not want to *save* the nation, he wanted to *rule* it.

Ultimately, *Militia* was less a social commentary than a B-grade movie with a timeless plot. Nonetheless, it perpetuated the image of the militias as potentially dangerous, paranoid terrorists who had abandoned the laudable tenets of the original militias to pursue their own selfish agenda. The movie was truly bad, but it nevertheless reinforced the image of the militias as potential threats to the nation.

Arlington Road

The enormous popularity of the 1990s conspiracy-based television series *The X-Files*, as well as films such as *JFK* (1991, Oliver Stone), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997, Richard Donner), and *Enemy of the State* (1998, Tony Scott), seem to confirm film scholar Ray Pratt's observations that Americans, at some level, are fascinated by conspiracies of all types. "For much of the past sixty years, Americans—feeling powerless and distrustful of government and experiencing social transformations and threats imperfectly understood—have looked to movies to exorcise their fears, which are

often dismissed as ‘paranoia,’” Pratt observed.²⁵ Director Mark Pellington tapped into the nation’s fascination with conspiracy theory, as well as its apprehension about the Militia Movement, in *Arlington Road*.²⁶ Adapting the militias to the conspiracy genre, Pellington presented a militia as a nearly invisible, ruthless, terrorist organization. Like *Militia*, this film warned against legitimate anger turning to vigilantism.

In *Arlington Road*, widower Michael Faraday (Jeff Bridges) mourned his late wife, an FBI agent killed in a botched raid at “Copper Creek,” as he raised his pre-teen son alone in the suburbs of Washington D.C.. He blamed the FBI for his wife’s death and remained haunted by the circumstances of the raid on a family wrongly suspected of illegally dealing arms. A professor of American history, Faraday was teaching a course on American terrorism as a tribute to his wife. The film audience learned along with Faraday’s students of his theory that the government and the media blamed the most obvious suspects in cases of terrorism to return a sense of safety to the American people.

Highly attuned to signs of domestic terrorism, Faraday soon began to suspect his new friends Oliver and Cheryl Lange (Tim Robbins and Joan Cusak) of being anti-government militia terrorists. Farraday connected a number of apparent coincidences, then embarked upon a single-minded effort to prove that the Langes were a part of a terrorist plot to bomb a building in Washington D.C.. However, since the Langes appeared normal to everyone else, Faraday appeared unbalanced in comparison. When Faraday’s suspicions were confirmed, it was too late. The “Liberty” militia had murdered his girlfriend and kidnapped his son. Despite threats to his son’s life, Faraday set out to stop the would-be bombers. Ironically, he had been set up. Through a convoluted chase scene that included a final confrontation with Lange, the militia planted

a bomb in Faraday's car and lured him to FBI Headquarters. Faraday realized a moment before the bomb exploded that he had delivered it. True to his theory that the press and law enforcement scapegoat the most obvious suspect, the media reported that Faraday had bombed the building and speculated that his motive was anger at the FBI over his wife's death. The Langes put their house up for sale, sent Faraday's son off to live with his relatives, and moved on to their next target.

Conspiracy thrillers often hinge on the seemingly paranoid hero's race to decode the plot and thwart the conspirators at the risk of grave personal danger. Faraday was no exception. He was affable, smart, tenacious, brave, and had reason to be suspicious. Nonetheless, his reliability as a narrator was questionable. The audience could not be sure if Faraday was recognizing legitimate signs, or if his rage, grief and conspiratorial bent had warped his ability to separate truth from fiction. Nonetheless, Faraday demonstrated the characteristics of a true patriot. Although angry at the government, he believed the government to be legitimate and its intentions generally laudable despite his fury at the FBI over the role that it played in his wife's death. He staunchly believed that citizens must vigilantly protect their civil liberties. Faraday taught his students about America's violent history of dissent, but maintained that even the imperfect government was worth protecting. When he suspected the Langes of plotting an attack, he even warned an old friend at the FBI and asked the Bureau for help. Ultimately he risked his son's life—and lost his own life—in his quest to protect the FBI headquarters and the people in it. In this way he was much like the William Fain character in *Militia*. Both distrusted the government deeply, but retained respect for it as

an institution. Both also eventually put themselves in danger to save it. The heroes, then, allowed the audience to contrast the true patriots against the false ones.

The Liberty militia, like the others in this study, demonstrated the dangers of overzealous actions taken in the name of ideology. Although the Liberty militia had reasonable grievances, their pursuit of vigilante justice rendered them terrorists.

Arlington Road did not initially mark the Liberty group overtly as a “militia.” By the end of the film, however, it was clearly identifiable as such. The film was set in a suburban neighborhood, not a rural, backwoods compound. The members dressed in conservative khakis and pastel cardigans, not camouflage. There were no visible weapons. To identify the militia so obviously would have sacrificed the viewer’s satisfaction at collecting the clues that the filmmaker had planted. It would have also undermined the suspense engendered by the questionable reliability of Faraday’s narration.

On the surface, Oliver Lange, a structural engineer, his stay-at-home wife Cheryl, and their three young children comprised a normal suburban family. Their son Brady was in a local “Young Discoverer” troop. The Langes hosted neighborhood barbecues and regularly had dinner with the Faradays. While Oliver Lange was warm, humorous, and generous, there were clues that his family’s normalcy was a façade. They were a bit *too* perfect. Their dress and demeanor suggested that they belonged in an earlier era. They lacked an element of real emotion. There was never any interpersonal interaction between family members. When his wife interacted with Faraday or Wolfe, her face exhibited a mask-like expression appropriate for the occasion. Even their two daughters were emotionless automatons.

However, there were enough signs for the attentive viewer to identify the Langes as anti-government militia types. Brady was injured by “fireworks” (explosives) in the unlikely month of October. What most children would call a “fort,” Brady referred to as his “compound.” Dinner parties erupted into angry tirades about the irresponsibility and deceit of the federal government. Furthermore, the repeated proximity of vans from the Liberty delivery company suggested a militia connection.

As the audience comes to suspect, Lange used the image of suburbanite father as a façade for a diabolical conspiracy. In his final confrontation with Faraday he was revealed as a ruthless terrorist-bomber. “You stand for blowing up families,” Faraday yelled at Lange, and told him that children would die if he continued with his plan. Lange calmly replied that, in war, children always die. The true extent of the militia was finally revealed to the viewer: “I am only a messenger—there are millions of us waiting to take up arms and spread the word. The government will pay,” Lange warned Faraday. Ultimately, Lange led his militia compatriots in successfully razing the FBI building.

The militia in *Arlington Road* was a complex organization that engaged in sophisticated terrorism. The Lange family served as the public point of contact for the militia but was only one element of a larger terrorist-militia team. Other members of the organization worked behind the scenes at Liberty, which allowed the militia both the access and camouflage necessary to pull off the complicated plot. Although a few odd faces make repeated appearances driving the vans labeled Liberty, no other militia members were featured as important characters. It was only important that the audience recognized them as legion. Furthermore, Cheryl’s musings about their next city/target

suggested that a complex network was in place that determined targets and moved the entire operation from city to city.

The militia *looked* different in this movie than it did in the rest of the popular culture artifacts. The movie allowed the director to explore some of the anti-government ideology of the militias without the distracting paramilitary baggage. In large part due to that, *Arlington Road* offered perhaps the most disturbing portrait of the militias. The appearance of the militia members reminded the audience that the militias are not necessarily recognizable based on dress or demeanor. The militia was also cold, calculating, and deadly effective. Furthermore, the movie reached beyond itself to trouble the audience's beliefs about terrorism. It accomplished that, in part, by incorporating fictionalized versions of actual events into the storyline. For example, Faraday's wife was killed at "Copper Creek," a clear allusion to Ruby Ridge. The fictional bombing of a federal building in St. Louis was a clear reference to the Oklahoma City bombing. Indeed, the photographs of the bombed out St. Louis federal building were nearly identical to the news images of the demolished Murrah Building. Although fictional, *Arlington Road* asked the audience to reconsider its own assumptions about the militias and terrorism and to replace them with more complicated and ominous questions about both.

The Militias in Military Fiction: Principled and Formidable Foes

In his 1997 novel, *Showdown: USA vs. Militia*, military fiction author Ian Slater imagined the war with the government that many in the modern Militia Movement

predicted. The depiction of the militia in this novel was more sympathetic to the movement than any of the other texts examined here. Slater presented the militia not as a terrorist group, but as a professional and highly skilled fighting force akin to the Civil War Confederacy. Slater was also more nuanced than his literary and Hollywood counterparts in his depictions of the movement's motivations. The militia retained its hate-filled underbelly, but in Slater's account the "haters" were only one branch of the movement. Other supporters were genuine patriots who fought to save their way of life.

Slater depicted the militia as a formidable fighting force. The resulting portrait of the militias was perfect for the type of detailed battle story Slater tells. Although the militia's beliefs were not always cast in the most flattering light, Slater suggested that the group was motivated primarily by a desire to protect its freedoms. Thus emerged a rhetorical portrait of the militias that even a militia member could appreciate.

As the title of the book suggests, *Showdown* pitted the United States Militia Corps (ironically referred to as the USMC) against the U.S. federal government (the federals) in "a war for the soul of America." "The new American civil war" had broken out in the northwest region of the United States after a number of confrontations, including the assassination of the U.S. Attorney General. A series of government missteps, including a botched raid in which federal agents killed militiaman Charlie Ames' wife and three small children, ignited the conflict. A rookie militia member's accidental shooting of a federal agent added to the tension.²⁷ Both the federals and the militia were expertly trained and equipped. The militia had the advantage of knowing the terrain and of fighting for their freedom. The federals had superior firepower and troop reserves. The engagement reached its climax as the two armies battle to control the four-mile long

Astoria Bridge. Ultimately, the federals blew up the bridge, cutting the militia's forces in two, and won the battle. The militia was defeated but not destroyed. It lived to fight again in subsequent *USA vs. Militia* books.

The militia was portrayed as competent and respected. As one federal airborne soldier observed, "Contrary to what the Pentagon had told the Airborne, the militia weren't a bunch of out-of-shape wannabes. They were fit, well armed, and from what he'd seen at the fort and here, well disciplined."²⁸ The militia repeatedly proved itself to be a formidable fighting force. With nearly 100,000 citizen-soldiers that it could count on to fight, it had broad support. Those troops were expertly trained and led by Vietnam veterans, most of whom had once served in the U.S. Special Forces. The militia was also well organized and prepared. The forces had long been preparing for the "inevitable" government attack. It had organized under a military-style command and recruited active-duty and reserve military personnel to its ranks. Between its purchases of military equipment financed by wealthy patrons, raids of National Guard armories, and moles in the federal Army, the renegades had firepower to rival the federal government.

Slater identified two types of militia members: "legalists" and "haters." The "legalists" believed that the Bible was the literal word of God and that the citizenry had been "empowered by God through the Founding Fathers." They were fed up with the federal government and bureaucrats "whose only allegiance was to themselves and not to the country" and "didn't even begin to understand the West." The "haters," on the other hand, "hated everything and anyone" who stood in their way. They were motivated by their desire to destroy those who opposed their utopian America. Members of the Aryan

Nations who came to the militia fell into this category. The “legalists” considered themselves better than the “haters” but fought along side of them out of necessity.²⁹

The federals hated the militias and were intent on putting down the insurrection, but they occasionally showed grudging respect for their foes. They were surprised, and somewhat impressed, by the militia’s high level of training, as well as by the militia leaders’ tactical ability. There was a grudging respect for their military prowess, if not their ideals. As the Federal’s Commander Freeman told his press secretary: “ ‘I’m *personally* going to shoot that McBride son-of-a-bitch. Prick’s become a symbol.’ He paused, fingers pressed together like a spire. He sat back against the seat. ‘By God, I admire him, whoever he is. Like to shake his hand. But I’ll shoot him instead.’” The government not only respected the military power of the militia, but believed it to be “capable of anything.”³⁰

Like others writing about the militias, Slayer molded the image of the militias to serve the dictates of the genre in which he worked. While the militias clearly were the antagonists in *Showdown*, they were portrayed as soldiers, not criminals or terrorists. Moreover, Slayer portrayed the militias as a strong, well-trained military force capable of putting up real resistance against the federal government. The individual motivations of his militiamen varied, but the movement itself was portrayed as a principled response to an overbearing government, making the showdown a battle between moral equals.

Conclusion

Popular culture found the militias to be a malleable villain. The sources sculpted the militias to fit the constraints particular to their genres, but the portraits remained almost uniformly critical. In the novels, for example, the militias were depicted as criminals and thugs. Joan Hess used the militias' beliefs and behaviors as a source of comedy while casting them as villains in *The Maggody Militia*. In her portrayal, the militia was not dangerous and possessed no redeeming qualities. The militia in *Brothers* was more menacing. As the villain and primary obstacle in a dramatic teen adventure novel, the militia was both detestable and dangerous. The news coverage that focused on the militias' affinity for conspiracy theories and reputation for violence made them plausible in the role of terrorists. *Militia*, an action-adventure film, featured the militias as fanatic revolutionaries attempting to overthrow the government. In the conspiracy-thriller *Arlington Road* the Liberty militia executed complicated plots to bomb federal buildings and positioned scapegoats to take the fall. Ian Slater presented an alternative view of the militias in his military-fiction novel, *Showdown: USA vs. Militia*. His United States Militia Corps was an ethically principled and militarily proficient rival of the federal government.

In large measure, the entertainment media's depiction of the militias paralleled those of the mainstream news media. The characterizations were more fully developed, but the basic components remained the same. The militias were portrayed uniformly as (1) forces to be battled and defeated, (2) repugnant personalities driven by misogyny and racism, and (3) frauds who disguised selfish motives with patriotic rhetoric. The threat,

in other words, stemmed from people who populated the militias, not the ideals that they espoused. The militias' professed concerns with the right to bear arms and governmental infringements on personal liberties were not treated seriously in the popular culture artifacts. For the purpose of the narratives, the militias' beliefs were secondary, and in most of the accounts, other groups would have served equally well as the villains. The militias appear to have been selected for their roles because they infused standard storylines with recognizable contemporary villains—not because the authors of popular culture objected to their specific beliefs. By relegating the militias' grievances to incidental pronouncements, these popular culture texts presented caricatures of the militias. They exploited cultural anxieties about the militias' beliefs, activities, and most importantly, their motivations, but they shed little light on the militias as a cultural phenomenon.

Notes:

1. Julian F. Thompson, *Brothers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 170.
2. Steven M. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2002), 181.
3. Ian Slater, *Showdown: USA vs. Militia* (New York: Fawcett Gold Metal, 1997), front cover.
4. Jay Andrews (pseudonym of Jim Wynoriski), *Militia* (Avalanche Home Entertainment, 1999).
5. Mark Pellington, *Arlington Road* (Culver City, California: Columbia Tristar Home Video, 1999).
6. Thompson, *Brothers*, 170.
7. Joan Hess, *The Maggody Militia: An Arly Hanks Mystery* (New York: Onyx, 1998).
8. Ibid, 29.
9. Ibid., 27, 28, 241.
10. Ibid., 148.
11. Ibid., 49-50, 138, 139.
12. Ibid., 133.
13. Ibid., 38, 143, 35, 138, 220.
14. Thompson, *Brothers*, 118.
15. Ibid., 133, 136.
16. Joseph W. Reed, *American Scenarios: The Uses of Film Genre* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 243.
17. Ibid. Reed called Mideast terrorists “the greatest gift to film since the Nazis.”
18. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon*, 203.

19. James W. Welsh, "Action Films: The Serious, the Ironic, the Postmodern," in *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 161.
20. Andrews, *Militia*.
21. Welsh, "Action Films," 170.
22. Thomas W. Benson, "Thinking through Film: Hollywood Remembers the Blacklist," in *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, ed. J. Michael Hogan (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 222.
23. Welsh, "Action Films," 169.
24. The obvious reference to George Armstrong Custer cannot be overlooked. The naming of Montgomery after a once-respected general whose overconfidence led to the slaughter of his men at Wounded Knee, reflected Montgomery's arrogance and foreshadowed demise.
25. Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 1.
26. Pellington, *Arlington Road*.
27. Slater, *Showdown*, back cover, front cover.
28. Ibid., 85.
29. Ibid., 11, 344, 344.
30. Ibid., 323, 82.

Chapter Seven

The Development of the Militia Movement's Public Identity

We were preparing for revolution, and we're still
convinced that revolution will come.

--Norman Olson, Northern Regional Michigan Militia¹

Establishing a credible public image is one of the most important and difficult rhetorical tasks faced by any social movement.² For the Militia Movement the undertaking was especially challenging. The movement's conspiracy theories, its roots in the far right, and its apparent obsession with guns located it on the cultural fringe. The absence of rhetorically skilled national leaders placed the militias at an additional disadvantage. In their initial efforts to publicize the movement, various local militia leaders invited the press to hear about their grievances and to witness their paramilitary training sessions. Yet, the few stories that resulted invariably dismissed the militias as harmless eccentrics who liked to "play" war. Appearances on such national venues as *The Phil Donahue Show* did little to improve the militias' image, as their self-appointed spokesmen appeared in battle dress and made seemingly empty threats against the federal government.

The Oklahoma City bombing changed all that. With bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh linked to the militias by his anti-government beliefs, the groups became the focus of intense media scrutiny. The bombing provided the militias with the publicity that some of their leaders craved, but that publicity was largely negative and created a

public relations crisis for the militias. With anti-hate “watchdog” groups serving as the media’s chief “experts” on the militias, the groups essentially took the blame for the bombing and were branded domestic “terrorists.” In response, militia leaders tried to moderate their image, casting themselves as educational and civic organizations and aligning themselves with the Founding Fathers. However, the inconsistency of their messages about the militias’ goals and paramilitary training, along with the fiery rhetoric of one renegade militia leader, undermined those efforts. Overwhelmed by a “feeding frenzy” of negative coverage, they lost the power to define their own movement.³

The Clinton administration exacerbated the militias’ image problems. The president initially responded to the bombing with a rhetoric of resolve and reassurance, but soon turned the tragedy to his political advantage by blaming the bombing on the extremist and hate-filled rhetoric of the radical right. His strategy of blaming “hate rhetoric” for the bombing put the militias as well as other critics of his administration on the defensive. Pointing fingers not only at the militias, but also at right-wing talk-show hosts and other critics of his administration, the president also exploited the situation to push for anti-terrorist legislation. In the end, Clinton did not get everything he wanted from Congress, but generally the administration managed the tragedy to its political benefit.

The Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center perhaps benefited the most from the debate over the militias. Launching their crusade against the militias well before the Oklahoma City bombing, these watchdog groups appeared prophetic when their predictions of violence came true. Almost overnight, they became the nation’s foremost “experts” on this new terrorist threat. Fashioning a disturbing

psychological and behavioral profile of the militias, they blamed the militias for the Oklahoma City bombing and charged them with creating a broader atmosphere of hatred and violence in America. Like the Clinton administration, the watchdog groups exploited the issue to push their legislative agenda, which focused on passing anti-paramilitary training legislation in every state. The debate also bolstered the watchdog groups' fundraising efforts. In short, as spokespeople for what might be seen as a "countermovement," the watchdog groups were "rival contenders not only for power and influence, but also for primacy in identifying the relevant issues and actors" in the struggle.⁴ Their credibility was enhanced by the mainstream media, which presented the watchdog groups as unbiased "experts," not as the militias' political rivals.

Indeed, mainstream news coverage of the militias almost completely reflected the perspective of the watchdog groups. Before the Oklahoma City bombing, the media paid little attention to the militias, dismissing them as misfits who posed little danger. After the bombing, however, the media portrayed the militias as a "terrorist" threat, echoing the rhetoric of the watchdog groups. Repeating the watchdog groups' warnings about the militias' bizarre conspiracy theories and paramilitary training, the media coverage introduced the nation to such colorful characters as Mark "from Michigan" Koernke and Norman Olson, the Michigan Militia leader who gave interviews in battle-dress and insisted that "revolution is inevitable."⁵ Suddenly, Timothy McVeigh's violent attack on the Murrah federal building seemed to make sense. The militias were no longer "playing" war, but were dangerous domestic terrorists, well-armed and serious about their threats to bring down the government.

The militias' menacing image was further developed in fictional and filmic representations. While sometimes sympathetic to their radical individualism and professed patriotism, most portrayals of the militias in popular culture suggested that their anti-government ideology was just a cover for criminal or terrorist actions. In novels such as *The Maggody Militia* and *Brothers*, and in films such as *Militia* and *Arlington Road*, militia leaders sought power, money, or revenge in the guise of defending the principles of the Constitution. As in real-world news coverage, the militias generally were portrayed in popular culture as domestic terrorists who pursued their own selfish motives in the name of a false patriotism.⁶

According to Laird Wilcox, an independent researcher who writes about extremism, the negative images of the militias in public discourse and popular media actually may have "radicalized" the movement.⁷ Moderates who did not fit the media's image of paranoid, gun-toting conspiracy theorists have dropped out of the movement, according to Wilcox, while radicals who fit the image have become more prominent. Wilcox has suggested that the media images may even have attracted more radical and violent personalities to join the movement in the first place. If he is correct, then the alarmist rhetoric of Clinton, the watchdog groups, and the news media actually may have backfired. By exaggerating the threat, the movement's critics may have created something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, helping to transform a fringe political movement that posed little threat into a more radical, more disciplined group of committed revolutionaries.⁸

Larger Implications: The Militia Movement and Public Identity

Several larger implications are suggested by this study. First, this study shows how the public identity of a social movement is often a complex rhetorical construction arising out of an ongoing public debate involving multiple actors with diverse interests and motivations. The public image of a movement entails more than the interaction between a social movement and the media, as some studies have suggested.⁹ Often *multiple* parties compete to define the goals and character of a social movement, creating an image of the movement that evolves as the debate progresses. When examining how public identities are created, we must take care to identify all of the actors involved in defining a movement and take into account the motivations and interests of each.

“Catalytic events,” the term used by rhetorician James Darsey to indicate historical events that alter the rhetoric of a movement, also play an important role in shaping the public identity of a social movement.¹⁰ Darsey has suggested that catalytic events—usually historical events external to the movement and dramatic in nature—often fundamentally alter the rhetorical situation, forcing both a social movement and its critics to shift their strategies of identity construction.¹¹ In the case of the militias, the Oklahoma City bombing significantly altered the public discourse *of* the Militia Movement, as well as the larger public conversation *about* the militias. Before the bombing, media reports dismissed the militias as essentially harmless eccentrics. After the bombing, journalists—as well as the watchdog groups and the Clinton administration—dramatically re-framed the militias as dangerous terrorists bent on violent revolution. News frames “organize experience and guide action,” sociologist

David A. Snow and his co-authors have argued,¹² and the bombing—the catalytic event—became an inextricable component of the “news frame” used to explain the militias. Emphasizing some aspects of the story and downplaying others, news frames promote particular definitions, evaluations, and solutions,¹³ and in the case of the militias, the Oklahoma City bombing became a news frame justifying drastic action to prevent more “terrorist attacks.” Even after the FBI cleared the Michigan Militia of any direct involvement in the bombing, the Oklahoma City bombing continued to function as a catalytic event, shaping the rhetoric of the militias and their critics, as well as the public image of the militias in news and popular culture.

The militias’ conspiracy theories confirmed rhetorician David Zarefsky’s observations about how such theories function to provide simple explanations for complex problems and to help believers make sense of a chaotic world.¹⁴ They also confirmed sociologist Hans Toch’s observation that conspiracy theories allow believers to “focus accumulated resentments against a tangible enemy.”¹⁵ As historian David Byron Davis has argued, counter-subversive groups often fashion images of their enemies that reflect their own fears, values, and aspirations.¹⁶ For the militias, the “One World Government” conspiracy theory—a theory handed down from the John Birch Society and other earlier right-wing groups—provided a cohesive, coherent, and compelling explanation for what they perceived as the federal government’s increasingly aggressive behavior.¹⁷ The government’s actions at Ruby Ridge and Waco, as well as its passage of the Brady Law, conveniently provided evidence of that larger plot. The militias’ predictions that the government would eventually use its military to impose one-world government on the people reflected their own anxieties about changing societal norms

and perceived threats to traditional values. Furthermore, it justified the militias' radical response: the creation of a battle-ready citizens' militia.

The militias' conspiracy theories, however, ultimately hurt their public relations efforts and confirmed Zarefsky's observation that conspiracy theorists tend to be dismissed as "deluded advocates."¹⁸ In media coverage of the militias, their conspiracy theories became an excuse for ignoring the diversity of the movement, oversimplifying its ideology, and generally dismissing it as "irrational." Rhetorician Craig Denton has pointed out, "the media have a tendency to boil down things, to make a soup with a single, distinctive taste when the offering should be perceived as a collection of separate tastes."¹⁹ In the case of the militias, conspiracy theories became the movement's defining characteristic, making it easy for the media and the public to dismiss its concerns as "paranoia."

News coverage of the Militia Movement also has implications for the larger debate over media bias. The "bias" against the militias did not so much reflect an ideological distaste for its right-wing ideas as an aversion to its political methods. Generally, as rhetorical critic J. Michael Hogan has argued, the news media have celebrated "grassroots" social movements, at least since the 1980s.²⁰ Such movements conform to the news media's definition of legitimate democratic action—as long as they pose no fundamental threat to the existing social order.²¹ Media scholar Daniel Hallin agrees, arguing that the mainstream media tend to "uphold the consensus distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political activity."²² If political activists deviate too significantly from the traditional and non-violent means of political expression, the news media are quick to label them a threat. After the Oklahoma City bombing, the militias

appeared to have crossed that line. Not only did the media coverage suggest that the militias were responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians in Oklahoma City, but it emphasized the militias' most extreme spokesmen's threats of armed conflict with the federal government. More than their "far right" views, the militias' apparent resort to violence best accounts for the negativity of their media coverage.

Finally, this study points not only to the important role that "counter-movements" can play in shaping the public identity of protest groups, but also how such groups often come to mirror their enemies rhetorically. Social movement scholars have long noted this tendency in studies of how, for example, the environmental and pro-life movements employed many of the same rhetorical strategies as their critics.²³ When movements vilify their opponents, or when they engage in conspiracy theories, chances are that the same "paranoid style" will be found in the rhetoric of those who oppose them.²⁴ During the debate over the militias, the watchdog groups may have been treated as unbiased "experts" by the government and media alike, yet in many ways their rhetoric was no less exaggerated and "paranoid" than that of the militias themselves. Like the militias, watchdog groups presented themselves as the *true* guardians of liberty, collected volumes of information to "prove" that the militias were conspiring against the federal government, and generally vilified their opponents. No less than the militias, the watchdog groups warned of a dire, even apocalyptic threat and called upon their supporters to take immediate action.

Postscript

By 2001, the Militia Movement had largely disbanded. Some individual militias have continued their paramilitary training, but they are more likely to assist in missing persons searches than to prepare for battle with federal agents.²⁵ The movement lost steam because its leaders could no longer convince potential followers of an imminent threat. In part, that was due to the federal government not providing the militia with further ammunition. After the Oklahoma City bombing, Congress held hearings into the government's actions at Waco and Ruby Ridge. It adopted new rules of engagement to avoid such debacles in the future. When the Montana Freeman tested those rules in March 1996, the government's handling of the situation contrasted sharply with earlier confrontations. The incident ended peacefully, and there have been no similar instances since. The election of President George W. Bush in 2000 may also have been a factor in the militias' decline, as it relieved some of their concerns that the government would institute tougher gun-control laws.²⁶

Norman Olson, the most recognizable face of the paramilitary radicals, was forced to disband his Northern Michigan Regional Militia in April 2001 due to a consistently low turnout at his paramilitary training exercises. He blamed the lack of interest on people's "lackadaisical" attitude and complained, "We haven't had a good Waco lately to fuel the engine."²⁷ Ever the firebrand, Olson has continued to insist that armed conflict is inevitable. "We were preparing for revolution and we're still convinced that revolution will come," Olson told an Associate Press reporter in May of

2001.²⁸ Even as he disbanded his own militia group, Olson maintained that “there is a fervor across America, and if need be, people are willing to fight and die.”²⁹

Mark “from Michigan” Koernke, the popular militia personality known for his conspiracy theories, is currently serving a three- to seven-year sentence in a Michigan state prison. Mistaking him for a bank robbery suspect, police chased Koernke for forty miles before he ran his vehicle into a tree, fled on foot, and assaulted the officer who apprehended him.³⁰ Koernke insisted that police targeted him because of his involvement in the Militia Movement, and that he fled when pursued because he feared for the safety of his two teenaged sons who were with him. In handing down the long sentence, the judge insisted that Koernke’s “lagging faith in law enforcement” did not excuse his actions, and cited an incident two years earlier when Koernke jumped bail after being charged with felony assault.³¹ Koernke’s wife, Nancy, crusades for her husband’s release and has carried on his anti-government cause through her own short-wave talk radio program, “The Kitchen Militia.”³²

John Trochmann and the Militia of Montana moved into the new millennium on the World Wide Web. Hawking survival gear and conspiracy-based literature on the web, the Militia of Montana has become something of a “virtual” militia. The literature available for order on the website demonstrates the militias’ continued belief in conspiracy theories, as the group even interprets the September 11, 2001, attacks as part of the One World Government plot to undermine the U.S. Constitution.³³ Trochmann has also incorporated the theme into his personal appearances, including one at the Missoula Republican Club in August 2002 where he claimed that the Constitution was suspended on September 13, 2001: “We are under martial law, whether the people know it or

not.”³⁴ In Noxon, Montana, and in cyberspace, the Militia of Montana continues the fight.

The Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center have continued to track the militias’ activities. The Anti-Defamation League still features the militias in the “extremists” section of its website, and the Southern Poverty Law Center prints updates on the militias in its newsletter *The Intelligence Report*.³⁵ The watchdog groups report that the militias have been in steady decline since the movement peaked in 1996.³⁶ Joe Roy of the Southern Poverty Law Center has written that the movement is “running out of steam.” He has suggested that members have abandoned the militias in favor of more overtly racist hate groups.³⁷ Those militias that remain, however, are “harder core” than the militias of the 1990s, the watchdogs maintain.³⁸ They also caution that the movement remains strong in the Midwest, and that a number of militia leaders are attempting to “rejuvenate” the movement.³⁹

The Bush Administration has turned its attention to terrorists of foreign extraction since the attacks on September 11, 2001. In many ways, however, the administration’s immediate response to September 11 resembled Clinton’s response to the Oklahoma City bombing. In his address to the nation the evening of September 11, Bush called the attacks “evil, despicable acts of terror.”⁴⁰ He reassured the nation that the perpetrators “cannot touch the foundation of America” and that the terrorists would be brought to justice.⁴¹ While both the Bush and Clinton administrations used the terrorist attacks to justify new anti-terrorism legislation, the Bush administration proved more successful. Bush’s Patriot Act passed quickly after September 11, substantially increasing federal law enforcement’s powers of investigation and detention.

The attacks on September 11 were cause for the news media to briefly revisit the Oklahoma City bombing and the militias. As the most recent attack of its kind on American soil, the comparisons to the Oklahoma City bombing were to be expected. In *Searching for a Demon*, sociologist Steven Chermak observed that the media used the Oklahoma City bombing as a reference point to gauge the impact of the September 11 attacks.⁴² Furthermore, Chermak pointed out, reporters compared the “hatred, motivation, and backgrounds” of Osama Bin Ladin and Timothy McVeigh as they worked to solidify public understanding of this “new” terrorist threat.⁴³ They also used reports about Bin Ladin to shape the public’s understanding of Middle-Eastern terrorism, in much the same way they had used Timothy McVeigh to shape understanding of the Militia Movement.⁴⁴

The dire warnings issued to the American people in the mid-to-late 1990s about the dangers posed by the militias never materialized. The tendency is to look back at the Militia Movement with eyes less frantic and conclude that a genuine threat never existed. Hindsight suggests that the militias were, for the most part, little more than a cultural backlash against rapid social change and globalization. Yet, for a time, the militias loomed as a grave “terrorist” threat. Losing the contest over their public identity, their image became—and remains—fused with the most deadly “terrorist” attack on America soil up to that time: the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Notes:

1. Deborah Hastings, "Militia Movement runs short of money, misery; Outrage over Oklahoma City also hurt 'patriot' groups," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 6C, May 13, 2001. Lexis-Nexis on-line.
2. Robert J. Cox, "Perspectives on Rhetorical Criticism of Movements: Anti-War Dissent, 1964-1970," *Western Speech* 38 (Fall 1974): 262; Elisabeth A. Van Zoonen, "The Women's Movement and the Media: Constructing Public Identity," *European Journal of Communication* 7 (1992): 456.
3. John George and Laird Wilcox, *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists and Others* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 246.
4. David S. Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity," *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (1996): 1635.
5. CBS News, "The Michigan Militia," *60 Minutes*, April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line transcript.
6. Only author Ian Slater's military-fiction novel *Showdown: USA vs. Militia* depicted the militia differently. He portrayed the groups as well-trained soldiers and a formidable fighting force that was a reasonable response to a zealous government.
7. Laird Wilcox, e-mail message to author, January 19, 2001.
8. Sociologist Todd Gitlin has suggested that the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) suffered a similar fate in the 1960s, as media coverage recruited new members who expected SDS to reflect its media caricature. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), 30.
9. Bernadette Barker-Plummer, "News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U.S. Women's Movement, 1966-1975," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (Summer 1995): 307; Van Zoonen, "The Women's Movement," 453-476.
10. James Darsey, "From 'Gay is Good' to the Scourge of AIDS: The Evolution of Gay Liberation Rhetoric, 1977-1990," *Communication Studies* 42 (Spring 1991): 59-61.

11. Ibid., 46.
12. David A. Snow and others, "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51 (August 1986): 464.
13. Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43 (Autumn 1993): 52.
14. David Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (Fall 1984): 72-73.
15. Hans Toch, *The Social Psychology of Social Movements* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965): 52.
16. David Byron Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971): 10.
17. Charles J. Stewart, "The Master Conspiracy of the John Birch Society: From Communism to the New World Order," *Western Journal of Communication* 44 (Fall 2002). For nearly thirty years the Birchers had claimed that "Insiders of the master conspiracy" had created the United Nations to precipitate a "Global Big Brother Superstate."
18. Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments," 63.
19. Craig Denton, "Stereotyping True Believers: The Clash of Reductionism and Symbolism" in *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Paul Martin Lester (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 193.
20. J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing: Michigan State Press, 1994), 141.
21. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, 1980 ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 52.
22. Daniel C. Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," *Journal of Politics* 46 (February 1984): 21.

23. See: Jonathan I. Lange, "The Logic of Competing Information Campaigns: Conflict Over Old Growth and the Spotted Owl," *Communication Monographs* 60 (September 1993): 242 and Marsha L. Vanderford, "Vilification and Social Movements: A Case Study of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (May 1989): 166.
24. Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 29. See also: Marouf Hasian, Jr., "Understanding the Power of Conspiratorial Rhetoric: A Case Study of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*," *Communication Studies* 48 (Fall 1997): 198 and Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy*, xv.
25. John Flesher, "After Time in Spotlight, Michigan Militia Fades," *South Bend Tribune* May 13, 2001. Lexis-Nexis on-line.
26. Ibid.
27. John Flesher, "Militia Founder Disbands Faction, Others Say Movement Continues," *South Bend Tribune*, sec. 6D, May 1, 2001. Lexis-Nexis on-line.
28. Hastings, "Militia Movement," 6C.
29. Ibid.
30. "Militia activist sentenced for fleeing police," *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, April 24, 2001. Lexis-Nexis on-line.
31. Ibid.
32. Patriot Broadcasting Network, "The Kitchen Militia," <http://www.pbn.4mg.com/kitchenmilitia.htm> (accessed August 26, 2004).
33. In short, they suggest that the One World Government initiated the attacks to destroy the U.S. Constitution. The website does not indicate *why* the act should have undermined the constitution.
34. "Founder of Militia of Montana Still Active," *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, August 31, 2002. Lexis-Nexis on-line.
35. Anti-Defamation League Law Enforcement Agency Network, "The Militia Movement," Anti-Defamation League, <http://www.adl.org>; "The Rise and Decline of the 'Patriots,'" *Intelligence Report* Summer 2001, www.splcenter.org.
36. Anti-Defamation League Law Enforcement Agency Network, "The Militia Movement."

37. Anti-Defamation League Law Enforcement Agency Network, "The Rise and Decline of the 'Patriots.'"
38. Ibid.
39. Anti-Defamation League Law Enforcement Agency Network, "The Militia Movement."
40. "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush 2001*, ed. Raymond A. Mosley (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2003): 2:1100.
41. Ibid.
42. Steven M. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 212.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 213.

Bibliography

ABC News. *20/20*. April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. "Believers See Government Actions as War-Provoking."
Primetime Live. April 25, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. "Militia Extremists." *Day One*. April 27, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. *Nightline*. April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. *Nightline*. April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. *Nightline*. April 25, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. *Nightline*. April 1, 1996. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. *This Week with David Brinkley*. April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

_____. *This Week with David Brinkley*. March 31, 1996. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

Akins, John Keith. "God, Guns, and Guts: Religion and Violence in Florida Militias."
PhD diss., University of Florida, 1998.

Andrews, Jay. [Jim Wynoriski]. *Militia*. Avalanche Home Entertainment, 1999.

Anti-Defamation League. "History of the Anti-Defamation League, 1913-2000." Anti-Defamation League. <http://www.adl.org/ADLHistory.html>

Anti-Defamation League Law Enforcement Agency Network. "The Militia Movement."
Anti-Defamation League. <http://www.adl.org>.

Barker-Plummer, Bernadette. "News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U.S. Women's Movement, 1966-1975." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (Summer 1995): 306-324.

Baym, Geoffrey. "Constructing Moral Authority: *We* in the Discourse of Television News." *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (Winter 2000): 92-111.

Bellon, Joseph G. "Well Regulated: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Modern Militia Movement." PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1999.

- Bennett, David H. *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to Militia Movement*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Benoit, William L. *Accounts, Excuses and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Benson, Thomas W. "Thinking through Film: Hollywood Remembers the Blacklist." In *Rhetoric and Community: Studies in Unity and Fragmentation*, Ed. J. Michael Hogan, 217-255. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.
- Berlet, Chip. "Militia Nation." *The Progressive*, June 1995, 22.
- Bostdorff, Denise M. and Daniel J. O'Rourke. "The Presidency and the Promotion of Domestic Crisis: John Kennedy's Management of the 1962 Steel Crisis." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1997): 343-361.
- Burns, James MacGregor and Georgia J. Sorenson with Robin Gerber and Scott W. Webster. *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation*. New York: Scribner, 1999.
- Bush, George W. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush, 2001-2003-*. 6 vols. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office. 2002-.
- Cathcart, Robert S. "New Approaches to the Study of Movements: Defining Movements Rhetorically." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 36 (Spring 1972): 82-88.
- CBS News. *CBS This Morning*. April 24, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- _____. "Enemy Within." *48 Hours*. April 18, 1996. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- _____. *Face the Nation*. March 31, 1996. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- _____. "John Trochmann." *48 Hours*. April 18, 1996. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- _____. "Manhunt Under Way for those Responsible for the Oklahoma City Bombing," *CBS Morning News*. April 20, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- _____. "The Michigan Militia." *60 Minutes*. April 23, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- _____. "Who's Country Is It?" *48 Hours*. April 27, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.

- Chaloupka, William. "The County Supremacy and Militia Movements: Federalism as an Issue of the Radical Right." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 26 (Summer 1996): 161-175.
- Chermak, Steven M. *Searching for a Demon: The Media Construction of the Militia Movement*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002.
- CNN. "Sources Say Radical Paramilitary Group Being Sought." April 21, 1995. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- Clinton, William Jefferson. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1993-2001*. 16 vols. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office. 1993-2002.
- Condit, Celeste Michelle. *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- _____. "The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar." *Communication Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1985): 284-299.
- Congress. House of Representatives. Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime. *Combating Domestic Terrorism*. 104th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 1995.
- _____. House of Representatives. Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime. *Nature and Threat of Violent Anti-Government Groups in America*. 104th Cong., 1st sess., November 2, 1995.
- _____. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information. *Militia Movements in the United States*. 104th Cong., 1st sess., June 15, 1995.
- _____. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. *Terrorism in the United States: The Nature and Extent of the Threat and Possible Legislative Responses*. 104th Cong., 1st sess., November 2, 1995.
- Cox, J. Robert. "Perspectives on Rhetorical Criticism of Movements: Antiwar Dissent, 1964-1970." *Western Speech* 38 (Fall 1974): 254-268.
- Cox, Michael and Martin Durham. The Politics of Anger: The Extreme Right in the United States. In *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Paul Hainsworth, 287-311. New York: Pinter, 2000.
- Darsey, James. "From 'Gay is Good' to the Scourge of AIDS: The Evolution of Gay Liberation Rhetoric, 1977-1990." *Communication Studies* 42 (Spring 1991): 43-66.

- Davis, David Byron. *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Dees, Morris. "Rise of the Militia Movement." Speech at the National Press Club. April 16, 1996. Lexis-Nexis transcript.
- Dees, Morris with James Corcoran. *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Denton, Craig. "Stereotyping True Believers: The Clash of Reductionism and Symbolism." In *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Paul Martin Lester, 191-198. Westport., Conn.: Praeger, 1995.
- Dobkin, Bethami A. *Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat*. New York: Praeger, 1992.
- Dobratz, Betty A. & Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile. *White Power, White Pride!': The White Separatist Movement in the United States*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- Donohue, George A., Phillip J. Tichenor, and Clarice N. Olien. "A Guard Dog Perspective on the Role of Media." *Journal of Communication* 45 (Spring 1995): 115-132.
- Dority, Barbara. "Is the Extremist Right Entirely Wrong?" *The Humanist*. November/December 1995.
- Dougherty, Chuck. "Note. The Minutemen, the National Guard and the Private Militia Movement: Will the Real Militia Please Stand Up?" *John Marshal Law Review* 28 (Summer 1995) : 959-985.
- Dow, Bonnie J. "The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53 (Summer 1989): 294-310.
- Drew, Elizabeth. *Showdown: The Struggle Between the Gingrich Congress and Clinton White House*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Duffy, Bernard K. "The Anti-Humanist Rhetoric of the New Religious Right." *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 49 (Summer 1984): 339-360.
- Duffy, Brian. "The End of Innocence." *U.S. News & World Report*, May 1, 1995, 40.

- Duffy, James E. and Alan C. Brantley. "Militias: Initiating Contact," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1997, 23.
- Durham, Martin. "Preparing for Armageddon: Citizen Militias, the Patriot Movement and the Oklahoma City Bombing." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8 (Spring 1996): 65-79.
- Dyer, Joel. *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997.
- Elliot, Deni. "Ethical and Moral Responsibilities of the Media." In *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Paul Martin Lester. Westport., Conn.: Praeger, 1995.
- Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43 (Autumn 1993) 51-58.
- "Fact Sheet: Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995." Clinton Presidential Materials Project, 2001. Database on-line; available from: <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1995/02/1995-02-10-fact-shet-on-omnibus-counterterrorism-act-of.html>., accessed September 21, 2002.
- Farley, Christopher John. "Patriot Games." *Time*, December 19, 1994, 48.
- Flesher, John. "After time in Spotlight, Michigan Militia Fades." *South Bend Tribune*. May 31, 2001.
- _____. "Militia Founder Disbands Faction, Others Say Movement Continues," *South Bend Tribune*, May 1, 2001.
- "Founder of Militia of Montana Still Active." *Associated Press State and Local Wire*, August 31, 2002.
- Freeman, Steven M. *The ADL Anti-Paramilitary Training Statute*. New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1995.
- Freilich, Joshua D., Nelson A. Pichardo Almanzar, and Craig J. Rivera. "Organizations Explicitly and Implicitly Promote Deviant Behavior: The Case of the Militia Movement." *Justice Quarterly* 13 (September 1999) : 655-683.
- Gamson, William A., David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson. "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality." *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 373-393.

- Gans, Herbert J. *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, 1980 ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- _____. "The Messages Behind the News" *Columbia Journalism Review* 17 (1979): 40.
- George, John and Laird Wilcox. *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists, and Others*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996.
- Gitlin, Todd. *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Haider-Markel, Donald P. & Sean P. O'Brien. "Creating a 'Well Regulated Militia': Policy Responses to Paramilitary Groups in the American States." *Political Research Quarterly* 50 (September 1997): 551-565.
- Hallin, Daniel C. "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media." *Journal of Politics* 46 (February 1984): 2-24.
- Halpern, Thomas. *Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows: An Update of Armed and Dangerous*. New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1995.
- Hasian, Marouf Jr. "Understanding the Power of Conspiratorial Rhetoric: A Case Study of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*." *Communication Studies* 48 (Fall 1997): 195-214.
- Hastings, Deborah. "Militia Movement runs short of money, misery; Outrage over Oklahoma City also hurt 'patriot' groups," *South Bend Tribune*, May 13 2001.
- Hess, Joan. *The Maggody Militia: An Arly Hanks Mystery*. New York: Onyx, 1998.
- Hinrichs, Robert and Marouf Hasian Jr. 1998. The Militia Movement and the Limits of Freedom of Expression. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference, New York City.
- Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.
- Hogan, J. Michael. *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age*. East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1994.
- Johnson, Bonnie McD. "Images of the Enemy in Intergroup Conflict." *Central States Speech Journal* 26 (Summer 1975): 84-92.

- Karl, Jonathan. *The Right to Bear Arms: The Rise of America's New Militias*. New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1995.
- Katz, Rebecca C. and Joey Bailey. "The Militia, A Legal and Social Movement Analysis: Will the Real Militia Please Stand Up? Militia Hate Group or the Constitutional Militia?" *Sociological Focus* 33 (2000): 133-151.
- Kiewe, Amos. *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994.
- Kuypers, Jim A. *Presidential Crisis Rhetoric and the Press in the Post-Cold War World*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997
- _____. *Press Bias and Politics: How the Media Frame Controversial Issues*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002.
- Lange, Jonathan I. "The Logic of Competing Information Campaigns: Conflict Over Old Growth and the Spotted Owl." *Communication Monographs* 60 (September 1993) : 439-237.
- Larizza, R. J. "Paranoia, Patriotism, and the Citizen Militia Movement: Constitutional Right or Criminal Misconduct?" *Mercer Law Review* 47 (Winter 1996) : 581-636.
- Leets, Laura and Peggy J Bowers. "Loud and Angry Voices: The Insidious Influence." *Communication Monographs* 66 (December 1999) : 325-340.
- Levitas, Daniel. *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002.
- Linenthal, Edward T. *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Mahan, Sarah Elizabeth. "A Dramatistic Analysis of the Video Rhetoric of the Militia of Montana." PhD diss., Ohio University, 1997.
- McCurry, Mike. "Press Briefing 19 April 1995." Clinton Presidential Materials Project, 2001. Database on-line; available from: <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1995/04/1995-04-19-press-briefing-by-mike-mccurry.html>, accessed August 6, 2001.
- Meyer, David S. and Susan Staggenborg. "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity." *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (May 1996) : 1628-1660.

"Militia Activist Sentenced for Fleeing Police," *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, April 24, 2001.

"Militia Task Force Established in 1994." *SPLC Report*, March 1996, 1.

Morganthau, Tom. "A View From the Far Right." *Newsweek*, May 1, 1995, 37.

Morris, Dick. *Behind the Oval Office: Getting Reelected Against All Odds*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999.

Morse, Dan. "Marketing the Militias." *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 June 1995, 1A.

Multimedia Productions. *The Phil Donahue Show*. December 27, 1994. Videotape.

"No Flames, No Guns in Montana." *New York Times* (Late ed), June 15, 1996, A18.

O'Brien, Sean P. & Donald P. Haider-Markel. "Fueling the Fire: Social and Political Correlates of Citizen Militia Activity." *Social Science Quarterly* 72 (June 1998): 456-465.

Paranoia As Patriotism: Far-Right Influences on the Militia Movement. David H. Strassler, Chair. New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1996.

Patriot Broadcasting Network. "The Kitchen Militia." Patriot Broadcasting Network, <http://www.pbn.4mg.com/kitchenmilitia.htm> (accessed August 26, 2004).

Pellington, Mark. *Arlington Road*. Culver City, California: Columbia Tristar Home Video, 1999.

Perspectives. *Newsweek*. May 1, 1995.

Pitney, John J. Jr. "Clinton and the Republican Party." In *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*, ed. Steven E. Schier, 167-182. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

Pratt, Ray. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

Reed, Joseph W. *American Scenarios: The Uses of Film Genre*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

Reno, Janet. "Press Briefing 19 April 1995." Clinton Presidential Materials Project, 2001. Database on-line; available from: <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1995/04/1995-04-19-press-briefing-by-attorey-general-reno.html>.

- "The Rise and Decline of the 'Patriots.'" *Intelligence Report*, Summer 2001.
<http://www.splcenter.org>. accessed August 25, 2004.
- Ronson, Jon . *Them: Adventures with Extremists*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.
- Ross, L. "Saying it with a Gun." *The Progressive*, June 1995, 26.
- Roy, Joseph T. *False Patriots: The Threat of Anti-Government Extremism*.
 Montgomery: Klanwatch Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, 1996.
- Ryan, Charlotte. *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing*.
 Boston: South End Press, 1991.
- Schneider, Keith. "Fearing a Conspiracy, Some Heed Call to Arms." *New York Times*,
 November 14, 1994, A1.
- Seul, Timothy M. "Militia Minds: Inside America's Contemporary Militia Movement."
 Ph. D. diss., Purdue University, 1997.
- Shabad, Steven. "Beyond the Fringe." *Newsweek*, 1 May 1995, 38.
- Shaprio, Joseph. "An Epidemic of Fear and Loathing." *U.S. News & World Report*,
 May 8, 1995, 37.
- Shogan, Robert. *The Fate of the Union: America's Rocky Road to Political Stalemate*.
 Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.
- Snow, David A., E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden, Robert D. Bedford. "Frame
 Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation."
American Sociological Review 51 (August 1986): 464-481.
- Siegel, Robert. "*All Things Considered*: Interview with Jeffrey Syninsky." National
 Public Radio. April 23, 1995.
- Silverstein, Ken. "The Church of Morris Dees: How the Southern Poverty Law Center
 Profits from Intolerance." *Harpers Magazine*, November 2000, 54.
- Slater, Ian. *Showdown: USA vs. Militia*. New York: Fawcett Gold Metal, 1997.
- Smolowe, Jill. "Enemies of the State" *Time*, May 8, 1995, 58.
- Soley, Lawrence C. *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*. New York:
 Praeger, 1992.

- Solomon, Martha. "The Rhetoric of STOP ERA: Fatalistic Reaffirmation." *Southern Speech Journal* 44 (1978): 42-59.
- Stern, Kenneth. *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Stewart, Charles J. "The Master Conspiracy of the John Birch Society: From Communism to the New World Order." *Western Journal of Communication* 44 (Fall 2002): 424-447.
- Stewart, Charles, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton Jr., *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 3d ed. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 2001.
- Stock, Catherine McNichol. *Rural Radicals: From Bacon's Rebellion to the Oklahoma City Bombing*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Stone, Andrea. "Morris Dees: At Center of the Racial Storm." *USA Today*, August 3, 1996, 7A.
- Suall, Irvin. *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*. New York City: Anti-Defamation League, 1994.
- Tanner, Mack. "Extreme Prejudice: How the Media Misrepresented the Militia Movement." *Reason*, July 1995, 42.
- Tharp, Mike. "Rise of the Citizen Militias." *U.S. News & World Report*, August 15, 1994, 34-35.
- Tharp, Mike and William J. Holstein. "Mainstreaming the Militia." *U.S. News & World Report*, April 21, 1997, 25.
- Thompson, Julian F. *Brothers*. New York: Alfred a. Knopf, 1998.
- Toch, Hans. *The Social Psychology of Social Movements*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.
- Tuchman, Gaye. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1979.
- Turner, Ralph H. and Lewis M. Killian. *Collective Behavior*, 3d ed. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987.
- "25 Years of Seeking Justice." *SPLC Report*, March 1996, 1.
- Van Biema, David. "The Message from Mark." *Time*, June 26, 1995, 57.

- Van Zoonen, Elisabeth A. "The Women's Movement and the Media: Constructing a Public Identity." *European Journal of Communication* 7 (1992): 453-476.
- Van Zoonen, Liesbet. "A Dance of Death: New Social Movements and Mass Media," in *Political Communication in Action: States, Institutions, Movements, Audiences*, ed. David L. Paletz, Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1996.
- Vanderford, Marsha L. "Vilification and Social Movements: A Case Study of Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (May 1989) : 166-182.
- Waldman, Michael. *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words that Defined the Clinton Presidency*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Welsh, James W. "Action Films: The Serious, the Ironic, the Postmodern." In *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, 161-176. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Wilcox, Laird. *The Watchdogs: A Close Look at Anti-Racist "Watchdog" Groups*. Olathe, Kansas: by the author, 1998.
- _____. E-mail communication with the author, January, 19, 2001.
- Williams, David C. "The Militia Movement and Second Amendment Revolution: Conjuring with the People." *Cornell Law Review* 81 (May 1996) : 879-952.
- Wills, Garry. *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Windt, Theodore. *Presidential Rhetoric: 1961 to the Present*, 3d ed. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1983.
- _____. "The Presidency and Speeches on International Crisis: Repeating the Rhetorical Past." *Speaker and Gavel* 11 (November 1973) : 6-14.
- Zarefsky, David. "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 21 (Fall 1984) : 63-75.
- _____. *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1986.

Heather M. Norton
Curriculum Vitae

Education

- Ph. D. Speech Communication. The Pennsylvania State University. 2005.
Dissertation: "Patriots or Paranoids? The Creation of a Public Identity for
the Modern Militia Movement."
Advisor/Dissertation Director: Dr. J. Michael Hogan.
- M. A. Speech Communication. The University of South Dakota. 1996.
Thesis: "A Narrative Analysis of a Senate Hearing on 'Militia Movements
in the United States.'"
Advisor/Thesis Director: Dr. Larry Underberg.
- B. S. Communication Studies. Manchester College. 1994.

Refereed Publications

- Norton, H. (1999). Preparing Publicly Palatable Propositions: Returning *Public* to
Debate Resolutions. *The Journal of Public Advocacy*, 4, 1-9.
- Norton, H. (1997). Irreparable Reputation: Militia Members Futile Attempt to Establish
Credibility. *The Journal of Public Advocacy*, 2, 2-13.
- Underberg, L. & Norton, H. (1996). A Tale of Two CEDAs. *The Journal of Public
Advocacy*, 1, 12-25.

Selected Honors and Recognition

- Robert G. Gunderson Award. 2002. Awarded to the top student paper in the Public
Address Division. National Communication Association.
- First Place, Arts & Humanities Division. 2002 Penn State University Graduate Research
Exhibition. "The Militia Watchdogs: Sounding the Warning about "Hate"
Groups in America."
- Kathryn DeBoer Distinguished Teaching Award. Awarded by the Department of Speech
Communication at The Pennsylvania State University. 2001.
- Research and Graduate Studies Office Dissertation Support Grant. The
Pennsylvania State University. 2001.
- Dissertation Release. Awarded by the Department of Speech Communication. The
Pennsylvania State University for Spring 2002.
- The President's Award. Awarded by the National Educational Debate Association. 1996.
- Outstanding Graduate Student. Awarded by the Speech Communication
Department, University of South Dakota. 1996.
- Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant. Awarded by the Speech Communication
Department, University of South Dakota. 1995.
- Outstanding Graduate Student in Research. Awarded by the Speech Communication
Department, University of South Dakota. 1995.