



A Closer Look: Militias in America
Timothy McVeigh execution

After a surge, militias on the wane

Arrests, loss of interest among factors cited

The Courier-Journal and The Indianapolis Star are collaborating to cover the execution of Timothy McVeigh.

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Six years after the Oklahoma City bombing made "militias" part of the American vocabulary, the number of such groups nationwide has dwindled dramatically, a result of law-enforcement crackdowns and withdrawal of members who grew tired of waiting for a revolution that never came, militia watchdogs say.

The Southern Poverty Law Center's most recent figures show the number of militia groups dropping from a peak of 370 in 1996 to 68 last year.

But militias continue to be strong in the Midwest, particularly in a corridor that runs from Michigan to Kentucky and east to Ohio, according to the civil-rights organization based in Montgomery, Ala., other private watchdog groups and militia leaders.

"We are having a resurgence of new members," said Stan Wilson, who commands the militia in Hancock County, Ind., east of Indianapolis, which describes itself as a moderate group.

Militia membership everywhere jumped immediately after Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995, but then began to decline, according to the FBI and private watchdog organizations.

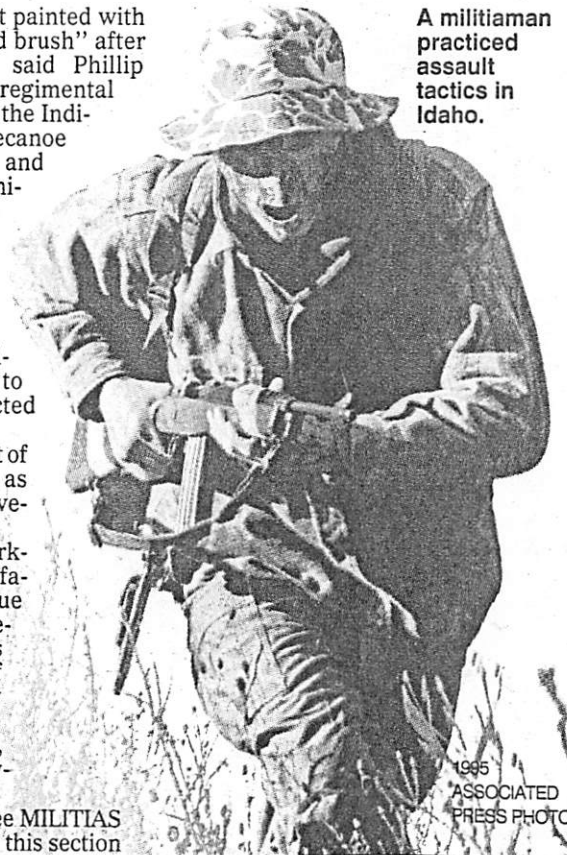
No direct links were found between the bombing that killed 168 people and the militia movement, although McVeigh, who is scheduled to be executed in Terre Haute, Ind., on May 16, attended a few militia meetings in Michigan.

Still, "we got painted with the same broad brush" after the bombing, said Phillip Crousore, regimental commander of the Indiana's Tippecanoe County militia, and the image of militia members as mad bombers stuck.

Militias, many of which offer paramilitary training to rebuff expected government attacks, are part of what is known as the patriot movement.

The New York-based Anti-Defamation League says the movement includes a collection of groups, many more extreme than militias, known as "sov-

A militiaman practiced assault tactics in Idaho.



See MILITIAS
Page 6, col. 1, this section

1995
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PRESS PHOTO

Militias saw surge but now waning

Continued from Page One

foreign citizens," tax protesters, Christian patriots, Christian Identity groups and white supremacists.

While many of the remaining militias disclaim violence and terrorism, experts say some of the more extremist organizations still present a grave threat. In the past three years, several militia leaders have been convicted in conspiracies to bomb government buildings and utilities, and to assassinate state and federal officials, including judges and senators.

In St. Petersburg, Fla., for example, militia leader Donald Beauregard was sentenced last July 28 to five years in federal prison for conspiring to incite civil war by bombing power lines to St. Petersburg and Tampa.

"Something's got to be done," Beauregard, a convenience-store manager, said to his co-conspirators in a conversation recorded by police. "They don't listen to our yells, our cries. We tried the ballot box. Maybe some of the sheep in this country will wake up and see what's really going on."

In Michigan, North American Militia leaders Brad Metcalf and Randy Graham were sentenced in May 1999 to 40 and 55 years in prison, respectively, for plotting to blow up federal buildings and threatening to murder Gov. John Engler, U.S. Sen. Carl Levin and federal judges.

Graham claimed he was only guilty of talking, but the federal judge who sentenced him said: "This was not talk in a coffee shop. Randy Graham was a domestic terrorist, one trigger pull

away from killing people and blowing up buildings."

And in Texas, militia leader Bradley Glover was sentenced on Jan. 7, 1999, to five years on weapons charges connected to a plot to attack Fort Hood, which he targeted because he believed the Army was training Chinese soldiers there.

Radical right not going away

On its Militia-Watchdog.org Web site, the Anti-Defamation League cautions that even though most militia groups say they only operate defensively, "the extremely high levels of paranoia most such groups possess means that they often think they are acting justifiably when they are not."

"And even groups that may not pose a danger can spawn individuals committed to violent or extreme acts," it says.

The Southern Poverty Law Center says the patriot movement "is a shadow of its former self," a decline it attributes to several factors, including the arrest of hundreds of members in the past few years. According to its most recent "intelligence report," many members and would-be militia members have lost interest — "too bored, too tired, too worried about doing possible jail time."

Instead, the center says, "right-wing extremists are increasingly joining race-based hate groups or taking up 'lone-wolf' type terrorist activity."

While most militia groups don't espouse racial bigotry, FBI Director Louis Freeh warned at a 1999 congressional hearing on counterterrorism that "hate philosophies" had

"begun to creep into the militia movement." That includes the "pseudo-religion" of Christian Identity, which provides both a religious basis for racism and anti-Semitism, he said, describing it as a disturbing trend that "will only strengthen the radical elements of the militias."

Militia groups — including the Kentucky State Militia — say they don't discriminate based on race. Wilson, for example, said a variety of ethnic groups are represented in the Indiana Citizens Volunteer Militia, and "we want people of all races to join."

There is no centralized militia leadership, and different chapters hold far different views, said retired FBI Special Agent Donald Bassett. He heads the independent Crisis Incident Analysis Group, which reviews and tries to prevent violence between government and militia groups, as well as more extremist organizations.

Some militias, such as the one in Kentucky, have never been linked to any crime, according to the state police and the Anti-Defamation League.

Writing in the FBI's Law Enforcement Bulletin in 1997, two of the FBI's leading experts on militias noted that the movement is "far from the monolithic terrorist conspiracy that some media accounts have portrayed it to be."

At the same time, agents James Duffy and Alan Brantley said, "The potential for death and destruction emanating from the most radical elements of the movement" made it one of the most significant social trends of the 1990s.

Militias ignored before bombing

Before the Oklahoma City bombing — the worst act of terrorism on American soil — most law-enforcement and media organizations ignored militias, writing them off as "overgrown boys playing with guns in the woods," said Ken Stern, an analyst for the American Jewish Committee and author of "A Force on the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate."

Many militia leaders, including those in Indiana and Kentucky, condemned the bombing, while others alleged that McVeigh was a patsy in a government conspiracy to embarrass and vilify the patriot movement, said Mark Pitcavage, who monitors it for the Anti-Defamation League from Columbus, Ohio.

And while publicity about the bombing, including suggestions that it was militia-based, initially attracted more members to the movement, it eventually had the opposite effect, according to the Anti-Defamation League and other organizations.

"When you shine a light on something like that, it's often like flipping on the light when you come into the kitchen," said Devin Burghart, director of Building Democracy Initiative at the Center for New Community, a Chicago think tank. "The cockroaches tend to scatter."

But even with a decline of members, there are militias in virtually every state, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

They arose in the early 1990s as a reaction to fears that the federal government was about to confiscate firearms from its



1995 ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

Militia members prepared for guerrilla warfare training during a demonstration exercise in northern Idaho.

citizens, according to the FBI and other organizations.

The federal government's role in confrontations with the Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas, in 1993 and with Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, a year earlier further fueled conspiratorial beliefs that the government was becoming more tyrannical and attempting to reverse constitutional guarantees, according to Duffy, who served in the FBI's Critical Incident Response Group, and Brantley, who works in the bureau's Profiling and Behavioral Assessment Unit.

Militia leaders said gun-control legislation was a prelude to socialist one-world government or "New World Order." Claiming they were the legal and ideological heirs to the Minutemen who fought at Lexington and Concord, militiamen and women positioned themselves as a last defense against the government, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

Still, many militias and others

who espouse anti-government beliefs remain law-abiding citizens and do not advocate terrorist acts, Duffy and Brantley said in a paper that recommended that law enforcement reach out to talk to nonviolent militia groups.

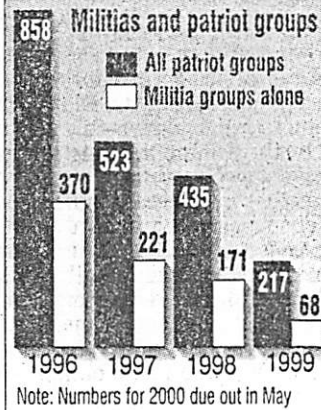
Assessing the threat posed by militia groups, the agents said they fall into four categories, from those that engage in no known criminal activity and say they'll respond only to government provocation, to fringe groups that often attract individuals with "frank mental disorders" and plot and engage in homicide, bombings and other terrorist acts.

Just weeks after the Oklahoma City bombing, Freeh and then-Attorney General Janet Reno ordered agents in the FBI's 56 field offices to open lines of communication with militias, and meetings were held in many cities, including Indianapolis.

FBI Special Agent Doug Garrison, who works in the Indianapolis office, said the meetings

DWINDLING NUMBERS

The number of self-described "patriot" groups - a category that includes militias - has steadily declined since its peak in 1996, according to the most recent figures from the Southern Poverty Law Center:



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helped calm tensions.

"It was just to let them know . . . we weren't the big, bad FBI lurking behind every tree and interested in what they were doing on weekends when they were out having meetings," Garrison said. "They feared the FBI. They feared that we were wiretapping their phones, or following them around, and that wasn't true."

Garrison said the bureau wants to keep lines of communication with the militias open as McVeigh's execution nears. But he said that doesn't mean there's a heightened threat.

"Most of the militia people don't view Tim McVeigh as a hero," Garrison said. "He's a killer of innocent people. I don't think there's much disagreement on that."