



The Rise of the Militias

By Daniel Junas

Winter is harsh in western Montana. Short days, bitter cold and heavy snows enforce the isolation of the small towns and lonely ranches scattered among the broad river valleys and high peaks of the Northern Rockies. But in February 1994 - the dead of winter - a wave of fear and paranoia strong enough to persuade Montanans to brave the elements swept through the region. Hundreds of people poured into meetings in small towns to hear tales of mysterious black helicopters sighted throughout the United States and foreign military equipment moving via rail and flatbed truck across the country, in preparation for an invasion by a hostile federal government aided by U.N. troops seeking to impose a New World Order.

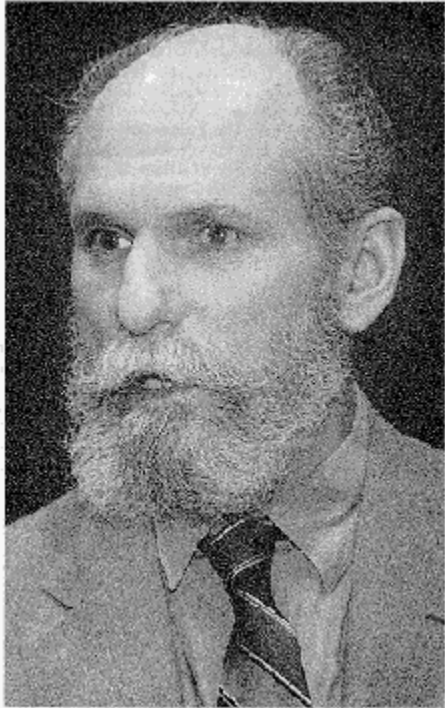
In Hamilton (pop. 1,700), at the base of the Bitterroot Mountains dividing Idaho and Montana, 250 people showed up; 200 more gathered in Eureka (pop. 1,000), ten miles from the Canadian border. And 800 people met in Kalispell, at the foot of Glacier National Park. Meeting organizers encouraged their audiences to form citizens' militias to protect themselves from the impending military threat.¹

Most often, John Trochmann, a wiry, white-haired man in his fifties, led the meetings. Trochmann lives near the Idaho border in Noxon (pop. 270), a town well-suited for strategic defense. A one-lane bridge over the Clark Fork River is the only means of access, and a wall of mountains behind the town makes it a natural fortress against invasion. From this bastion, Trochmann, his brother David, and his nephew Randy run the Militia of Montana (MOM), a publicity-seeking outfit that has organized "militia support groups"² and pumped out an array of written and taped tales of a sinister global conspiracy controlling the U.S. government. MOM also provides "how to" materials for organizing citizens' militias to meet this dark threat.

Militia Mania

It is difficult to judge from attendance at public meetings how many militias and militia members there might be in Montana, or if, as is widely rumored, they are conducting military training and exercises. The same applies across the country; there is little hard information on how many are involved or what they are actually doing.

But the Trochmanns are clearly not alone in raising fears about the federal government nor in sounding the call to arms. By January, movement watchers had identified militia activity in at least 40 states, with a conservatively estimated hard-core membership of at least 10,000 - and growing.³



The appearance of armed militias raises the level of tension in a region already at war over environmental and land use issues.

A threat explicitly tied to militias occurred in November 1994, at a public hearing in Everett, Washington. Two men approached Ellen Gray, an Audubon Society activist. According to Gray, one of them, later identified as Darryl Lord, placed a hangman's noose on a nearby chair, saying, "This is a message for you." He also distributed cards with a picture of a hangman's noose that said, "Teason = Death" on one side, and "Eco fascists go home" on the other. The other man told Gray, "If we can't get you at the ballot box, we'll get you with a bullet. We have a militia of 10,000."⁴ In a written statement, Lord later denied making the threat, although he admitted bringing the hangman's noose to the meeting.⁵

Militias, 'Patriots,' and Angry White Guys

As important as environmental issues are in the West, they are only part of what is driving the militia movement. The militias have close ties to the older and more broadly based "Patriot" movement, from which they emerged, and which supplies their worldview. According to Chip Berlet, an analyst at Political Research Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who has been tracking the far right for over two decades, this movement consists of loosely linked organizations and individuals who perceive a global conspiracy in which key political and economic events are manipulated by a small group of elite insiders.

On the far right flank of the Patriot movement are white supremacists and anti-Semites, who believe that the world is controlled by a cabal of Jewish bankers. This position is represented by, among others, the Liberty Lobby and its weekly newspaper, the Spotlight. At the other end of this relatively narrow spectrum is the John Birch Society, which has repeatedly repudiated anti-Semitism, but hews to its own paranoid vision. For the Birchers, it is not the Rothschilds but such institutions as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, and the U.N. which secretly call the shots.⁶

This far-right milieu is home to a variety of movements, including Identity Christians, Constitutionals, tax protesters, and remnants of the semi-secret Posse Comitatus. Members of the Christian right who subscribe to the conspiratorial world view presented in Pat Robertson's 1991 book, *The New World Order*, also fall within the movement's parameters.⁷ Berlet estimates that as many as five million Americans consider themselves Patriots.⁸

While the Patriot movement has long existed on the margins of U.S. society, it has grown markedly in recent years.⁹ Three factors have sparked that growth.

One is the end of the Cold War. For over 40 years, the "international communist conspiracy" held plot-minded Americans in thrall. But with the collapse of the Soviet empire, their search for enemies turned toward the federal government, long an object of simmering resentment.

The other factors are economic and social. While the Patriot movement provides a pool of potential recruits for the militias, it in turn draws its members from a large and growing number of U.S. citizens disaffected from and alienated by a government that seems indifferent, if not hostile, to their interests. This predominantly white, male, and middle- and working-class sector has been buffeted by global economic restructuring, with its attendant job losses, declining real wages and social dislocations. While under economic stress, this sector has also seen its traditional privileges and status challenged by 1960s-style social movements, such as feminism, minority rights, and environmentalism.

Someone must be to blame. But in the current political context, serious progressive analysis is virtually invisible, while the Patriot movement provides plenty of answers. Unfortunately, they are dangerously wrong-headed ones.¹⁰

Ruby Ridge and Waco

Two recent events inflamed Patriot passions and precipitated the formation of the militias. The first was the FBI's 1992 confrontation with white supremacist Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in which federal agents killed Weaver's son and wife. The second was the federal government's destruction of David Koresh and his followers at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in April 1993.¹¹

Key promoters of the militia movement repeatedly invoke Ruby Ridge and Waco as spurs to the formation of militias to defend the citizenry against a hostile federal government.

The sense of foreboding and resentment of the federal government was compounded by the passage of the Brady Bill (imposing a waiting period and background checks for the purchase of a handgun) followed by the Crime Bill (banning the sale of certain types of assault rifles). For some members of the Patriot movement, these laws are the federal government's first step in disarming the citizenry, to be followed by the much dreaded United Nations invasion and the imposition of the New World Order.¹²

But while raising apocalyptic fears among Patriots, gun control legislation also angered more mainstream gun owners. Some have become newly receptive to conspiracy theorists and militia recruiters, who justify taking such a radical step with the Second Amendment:

"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."

Right-wing organizers have long used the amendment to justify the creation of armed formations. The Ku Klux Klan began as a militia movement, and the militia idea has continued to circulate in white supremacist circles. It has also spread within the Christian right. In the early 1990s, the Coalition on Revival, an influential national Christian right networking organization, circulated a 24-plank action plan. It advocated the formation of "a countywide 'well-regulated militia' according to the U.S. Constitution under the control of the county sheriff and Board of Supervisors."¹³

Like the larger Patriot movement, the militias vary in membership and ideology. In the East, they appear closer to the John Birch Society. In New Hampshire, for example, the 15-member Constitution Defense Militia reportedly embraces garden variety U.N conspiracy fantasies and lobbies against gun control measures.¹⁴

In the Midwest, some militias have close ties to the Christian right, particularly the radical wing of the anti-abortion movement. In Wisconsin, Matthew Trehella, leader of Missionaries to the Preborn, has organized paramilitary training sessions for his churchmembers.¹⁵

And in Indianapolis, Linda Thompson, the self-appointed "Acting Adjutant General of the Unorganized Militia of the U.S.A.," called for an armed march on Washington last September to demand an investigation of the Waco siege. Although she canceled the march when no one responded, she remains an important militia promoter.¹⁶ While Thompson limits her tirades to U.S. law enforcement and the New World Order, her tactics have prompted the Birch Society to warn its members "to stay clear of her schemes."¹⁷

Despite light variations in their motivations, the militias fit within the margins of the Patriot movement. And a recurring theme for all of them is a sense of deep frustration and resentment against the federal government.

Nowhere has that resentment been felt more deeply than in the Rocky Mountain West, a hotbed of such attitudes since the frontier era. The John Birch Society currently has a larger proportional membership in this region than in any other.¹⁸ Similarly, the Rocky Mountain West is where anti-government presidential candidate Ross Perot ran strongest.

And nowhere in the West is anti-government sentiment stronger than along the spine of wild mountains that divide the Idaho panhandle from Montana. In the last two decades, this pristine setting has become a stomping ground for believers in Christian Identity, a religious doctrine that holds that whites are the true Israelites and that blacks and other people of color are subhuman, 'mud people'.¹⁹

In the mid-1970s, Richard Butler, a neo-Nazi from California who is carrying out a self-described war against the "Zionist Occupational Government," or "ZOG," relocated to the Idaho panhandle town of Hayden Lake to establish his Aryan Nations compound. He saw the Pacific Northwest, with its relatively low minority population, as the region where God's kingdom could be established. Butler also believed that a racially pure nation needs an army.²⁰

Butler is aging, and his organization is mired in factional disputes. But he has helped generate a milieu in which militias can thrive. In May 1992, one of his neighbors and supporters, Eva Vail Lamb, formed the Idaho Organized Militia. During the same year, Lamb was also a key organizer for presidential candidate Bo Gritz (rhymes with "whites"), another key player in the militia movement.²¹

Bo Gritz and the Origins of the Militias

A former Green Beret, Ret. Lt. Col. Gritz is a would-be Rambo, having led several private missions to Southeast Asia to search for mythical U.S. POWs. He also has a lengthy Patriot pedigree. With well-documented ties to white supremacist leaders, he has asserted that the Federal Reserve is controlled by eight Jewish families.²² In 1988, he accepted the vice-presidential nomination of the Populist Party, an electoral amalgam of neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and other racist and anti-Semitic organizations.²³ His running mate was ex-klansman David Duke. Gritz later disavowed any relationship with Duke, but in 1992, Gritz was back as the Populist Party's candidate for president.

He has emerged as a mentor for the militias. During the 1992 campaign, he encouraged his supporters to form militias,²⁴ and played a key role in one of the events that eventually sparked the militia movement, the federal assault on the Weaver family compound at Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

In the mid-1980s, Randy Weaver, a machinist from Waterloo, Iowa, moved to Ruby Ridge in Boundary County, the northernmost county in the panhandle. A white supremacist who subscribed to anti-government conspiracy theories, he attended Richard Butler's Aryan Nations congresses at least three times.²⁵ And acting on the long-held far right notion that the county ought to be the supreme level of government, he even ran for sheriff of Boundary County.

But in 1991, after being arrested on gun charges, Weaver failed to show up for trial and holed up in his mountain home. In August 1992, a belated federal marshals' effort to arrest him led to a siege in which FBI snipers killed Weaver's wife and son, and Weaver associate Kevin Harris killed a federal marshal. Gritz appeared on the scene and interposed himself as a negotiator between the FBI and



Weaver. He eventually convinced Weaver to surrender and end the 11-day standoff. The episode gave Gritz national publicity and made him a hero on the right.²⁶

He moved quickly to exploit both his new-found fame and the outrage generated by the Weaver killings. In February 1993, Gritz initiated his highly profitable SPIKE training - Specially Prepared Individuals for Key Events. The ten-part traveling program draws on Gritz's Special Forces background and teaches a rigorous course on survival and paramilitary techniques. Gritz - who has already instructed hundreds of Christian Patriots in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California, and elsewhere - recommends the training as essential preparation for militia members.²⁷

MOM

The Randy Weaver shootout also led directly to the formation of the Trochmanns' Militia of Montana (MOM). In September 1992, during the Ruby Ridge standoff, John Trochmann helped found United Citizens for Justice (UC-J), a support group for his friend Weaver. Another steering committee member was Chris Temple, who writes regularly for the *Jubilee*, a leading Christian Identity publication. Temple also worked as a western Montana organizer for Gritz's presidential campaign. One of the earliest mailing lists used to promote MOM came from UCJ.

But despite Trochmann's links to their adherents, white supremacist and Christian Identity rhetoric is conspicuously absent from MOM literature.²⁸ Instead, Trochmann purveys the popular UN/New World Order conspiracy theory with an anti-corporate twist. The cabal, he claims, intends to reduce the world's population to two billion by the year 3000.²⁹

At public events, he cite news accounts, government documents and reports from his informal intelligence network. Trochmann also reports on the mysterious black helicopters and ties them to the U.N. takeover plot. In one of his lectures, distributed on a MOM videotape, he uses as evidence a map found on the back of a Kix cereal box which divides the United States into ten regions, reflecting, he implies, an actual plan to divide and conquer the nation.³⁰

The Trochmanns give talks around the country and are part of a very effective alternative media network which uses direct mail, faxes, videos, talk radio, TV, and even computers linked to the Internet to sustain its apocalyptic, paranoid world view.³¹

The Trochmanns use all these venues to promote MOM materials, including an organizing manual, "Militia Support Group," which provides a model military structure for the militias and lays out MOM's aims:

"The time has come to renew our commitment to high moral values and wrench the control of the government from the hands of the secular humanists and the self-indulging special interest groups including private corporations."³²

It also reveals that MOM has recruited "Militia Support Groups" throughout the nation into its intelligence network, which provides MOM with a steady stream of information to feed into its conspiracy theories. Consequently, the Trochmanns were well aware when trouble was brewing in another remote corner of the West.

The County Rule Movement

In Catron County, New Mexico, the militia movement has converged with some other strands of the anti-government right to create a new challenge to federal power. Catron, located in the desolate southwest of New Mexico and with a population of less than 3,000 people, has been the site of a novel legal challenge to federal control of public lands. In what has become known as the County Rule movement, Catron was the first county to issue a direct legal challenge to the federal government over those lands.

It grew out of a conflict between local ranchers and federal land managers over federal grazing lands. County attorney James Catron, whose ancestors gave the county its name, joined forces with Wyoming attorney Karen Budd, a long-time foe of environmental regulation³³ to produce the Catron County ordinances. These purport to give the county ultimate authority over public lands - making it illegal for the U.S. Forest Service to regulate grazing, even on its own lands.³⁴

But such regulations also serve the interests of natural resource industries. Since it is relatively easy for those industries to control county governments, the ordinances provide them with a convenient end run around federal environmental laws and rules. The Catron County legislation has since been disseminated throughout the West and recently into the Midwest by the National Federal Lands Conference of Bountiful, Utah, which is part of the anti-environmental Wise Use movement.³⁵

Over 100 counties in the West have passed similar legislation, despite the ordinances' shaky legal foundations. The Boundary County, Idaho, ordinances have been overturned in state court, and federal court challenges to county rule legislation in Washington state are expected to succeed; the U.S. Supreme Court has consistently upheld federal government authority over federal lands.³⁶

Nevertheless, the county rule movement has succeeded in shifting the balance of power between the counties and the federal government, if through no other means than intimidation. In Catron County, the sheriff has threatened to arrest the head of the local Forest Service office. And the county also passed a resolution predicting "much physical violence" if the federal government persists in trying to implement grazing reform.³⁷

In fact, a climate of hostility greets environmentalists throughout the West. Author David Helvarg writes that there have been hundreds of instances of harassment and physical violence in the last few years.³⁸ Sheila O'Donnell, a California-based private investigator who tracks harassment of environmentalists, concurs that intimidation is on the rise.³⁹

Catron County has been the scene of at least one such incident. Richard Manning, a local rancher, planned to open a mill at the Challenger mine, on Forest Service land in the Mogollon mountains. Forest Service and state regulators went to determine if toxic mine tailings are leaching into watercourses. According to several Forest Service and state officials, Manning threatened to meet any regulator with "a hundred men with rifles." Manning denies having made the threat.⁴⁰

Militias and the Power of the County

The County Rule movement and the militias share an ideological kinship, revolving around the idea, long popular in far-right circles, that the county is the supreme level of government and the sheriff the highest elected official.

"Posse Comitatus" - the name for a far-right, semi-secret anti-tax organization - literally means "the power of the county." A militia has formed in Catron County, quickly sparking an incident



that demonstrates the high level of paranoia in the area. Last September, two days after the militia held its first meeting, FBI and National Guard officials arrived in Catron County to search for the body of a person reportedly killed a year earlier in the nearby Mogollon mountains. Several militia members refused to believe the official explanation and fled their homes for the evening.⁴¹

Catron County may be a bellwether: The county rule and militia movements are apparently converging. In October 1994, the monthly newsletter of the National Federal Lands Conference featured a lead article that explicitly called for the formation of militias. The article, which cited information provided by the Militia of Montana and pro-militia organizations in Idaho and Arizona, closed by saying:

"At no time in our history since the colonies declared their independence from the long train of abuses of King George has our country needed a network of active militias across America to protect us from the monster we have allowed our federal government to become. Long live the Militia! Long live freedom! Long live government that fear [sic] the people!"⁴²

Smoke on the Horizon

Such incendiary rhetoric, commonplace in the Patriot/Militia movement, makes an armed confrontation between the government and militia members seem increasingly likely. If past behavior is any guide, federal law enforcement agencies are all too ready to fight fire with fire.

Obviously, militias do not pose a military threat to the federal government. But they do threaten democracy. Armed militias fueled by paranoid conspiracy theories could make the democratic process unworkable, and in some rural areas of the West, it is already under siege.

As ominously, the militias represent a smoldering right-wing populism with real and imagined grievances stoked by a politics of resentment and scapegoating - just a demagogue away from kindling an American fascist movement.

The militia movement now is like a brush fire on a hot summer day, atop a high and dry mountain ridge on the Idaho panhandle. As anyone in the panhandle can tell you, those brush fires have a way of getting out of control.

Daniel Junas is a Seattle-based political researcher and author of "The Religious Right in Washington State," published by the ACLU of Washington. Research assistance by Paul de Armond and David Neiwert.

References

1. Montana Human Rights Network, "A Season of Discontent: Militias, Constitutionals, and The Far Right in Montana," May 1994.
2. Paramilitary formations are illegal in Montana. Militia organizers skirt the law by forming "support groups."
3. Interview with Chip Berlet, Dec. 21, 1994.
4. Diane Brooks, "Threats Replace Debate at Hearing," *Seattle Times*, Snohomish edition, Nov. 15, 1994, p. B1; interview with Ellen Gray by Paul de Armond, Nov. 22, 1994.
5. Statement to the press, Nov. 16, 1994.
6. For Birch Society theories, see its magazine, *The New American*; also James Perloff, *The Council on Foreign Relations and the American Decline* (Belmont, Mass.: Western Islands, 1988), and Dan Smoot, *The Invisible Government* (Belmont, Mass.: Western Islands, 1965).
7. Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Irving, Tex.: New Publishers, 1991).
8. Berlet interview, *op. cit.*
9. *Ibid.* Berlet notes that the John Birch Society has rebounded from a low of 20,000 members and claims to have doubled its membership in recent years. Berlet believes membership has probably increased by 10,000.
10. This analysis is based on interviews with long-time movement watcher Chip Berlet, Feb. 6, 1995.
11. The behavior of federal law enforcement agencies merits criticism. Weaver and actual shooter Kevin Harris were acquitted of murder charges in the death of a federal agent during the siege. A December 1993 Justice Department report on the Weaver stand-off found that FBI agents violated both bureau policies and constitutional guidelines when they issued "rules of engagement" allowing agents to shoot any armed adult. An Idaho prosecutor's investigation continues, and FBI head Louis Freeh expects two agents to be indicted. (Jerry Seper, "Probe of federal agents in siege killings continues," *Washington Times*, Feb. 13, 1995, p. A3). Similarly, the Justice Department's *Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco, Texas, February 28 to April 19, 1993* faulted BATF and FBI performance, but found no cause for indictments.

12. See "Under the Law of the Gun," *Taking Aim* (Militia of Montana newsletter), v. 1, n.7, 1994, pp. 1-3.
13. Fred Clarkson, "HardCOR," *Church and State*, Jan. 1991, p.26.
14. Anti-Defamation League, *Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government*, 1994, p.20.
15. John Goetz, "Missionaries' Leader Calls for Armed Militia," *Front Line Research*, Aug. 1994, pp. 1,3-4; Beth Hawkins, "Patriot Games," *Metro Times* (Detroit), Oct. 12-18, 1994, pp. 12-16.
16. Adam Parfrey and Jim Redden, "Patriot Games," *Village Voice*, Oct. 11, 1994, pp. 26-31.
17. Cited in Anti-Defamation League, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
18. Charles Jeffrey Kraft, "A Preliminary Socio-Economic and State Demographic Profile of the John Birch Society," Political Research Associates, 1991.
19. Leonard Zeskind, "The 'Christian Identity' Movement," National Council of Churches, 1986.
20. In 1984, Butler's vision briefly materialized in the form of an Aryan Nations offshoot led by Robert Jay Matthews. The Order committed a series of crimes, including bank robberies, bombings, and the murder of Denver radio talk show host Alan Berg. Matthews himself died in a shootout with police in December 1984 on Whidbey Island, In Puget Sound near Seattle. See Robert Crawford, S.L. Gardiner, Jonathan Mozzochi, and R.L. Taylor, *The Northwest Imperative* (Portland, Ore.: Coalition for Human Dignity, 1994), p. 1.16.
21. Robert Crawford, S.L. Gardiner, Jonathan Mozzochi, "Patriot Games," Coalition for Human Dignity Special Report, 1994.
22. Crawford, *et al.*, *Northwest Imperative*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.25; I. Gritz nonetheless denies that he is a white supremacist. Phone interview by David Neiwert, Nov. 10, 1994.
23. Crawford, *et al.*, *Northwest Imperative*, p. 1.32.
24. Montana Human Rights Network, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
25. Philip Weiss, "Off the Grid," *New York Times Magazine*, January 8, 1995, pp. 24-33.
26. Weiss, *op. cit.*; Crawford, *et al.*, *Northwest Imperative*, *op. cit.*,p. 2.27.
27. Phone interview by David Neiwert, *op. cit.*