

Militia organizations in the United States

Militia organizations in the United States are private organizations that include paramilitary or similar elements. These groups may refer to themselves as militia, unorganized militia^[1] and constitutional militia^[2]

While groups such as the Posse Comitatus existed as early as the 1980s,^[3] the movement gained momentum after controversial standoffs with government agents in the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, groups were active in all 50 US states, with membership estimated at between 20,000 and 60,000.^[4]^[5]

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History

Although the far-right patriot movement had long been a fringe factor in American politics, cultural factors paved the way for the wide-scale growth of the ideological militia movement. The catalysts came in the form of the FBI's 1992 shootout with Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, and the government's 1993 siege and eventual destruction of David Koresh's compound and the Branch Davidians at Mt. Carmel in Waco, Texas.^[6]^[7]^[8] Critic Mark Pitcavage described the militia movement of the 1990s:^[3]

The militia movement is a right-wing movement that arose following controversial standoffs in the 1990s. It inherited paramilitary traditions of earlier groups, especially the conspiratorial, anti government Posse Comitatus. The militia movement claims that militia groups are sanctioned by law but uncontrolled by government; in fact, they are designed to oppose a tyrannical government. The movement's ideology has led some adherents to commit criminal acts, including stockpiling illegal weapons and explosives and plotting to destroy buildings or assassinate public officials, as well as lesser confrontations.

During the 1990s public attention to the militia movement began to grow. The Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the Waco fire, drew nationwide attention to the militia movement as Timothy McVeigh was erroneously associated with the Michigan Militia. This increased public scrutiny and law enforcement pressure, and brought in more recruits due to the heightened awareness of the movement.^[9]

In March 1996, agents of the FBI and other law enforcement organizations surrounded the 960-acre (390 ha) eastern Montana "Justus Township" compound of the Montana Freeman. The Freeman were a Sovereign Citizen group that included elements of the Christian Identity ideology, espoused common law legal theories, and rejected the legitimacy of the Federal Reserve.^[4] Montana legislator Carl Ohs mediated through the standoff. Both Randy Weaver (one of the besieged at Ruby Ridge) and Bo Gritz (a civilian negotiator at Ruby Ridge) had attempted to talk to the group but had given up in frustration, as did Colorado Senator Charlie Duke when he had attempted negotiations.^[10] A break finally came when far right leaders abandoned the group to their fate.^[11] The group surrendered peacefully after an 81-day standoff and 14 of the Freeman faced criminal charges relating to circulating millions of dollars in bogus

checks and threatening the life of a federal judge.^[10] The peaceful resolution of this and other standoffs after Ruby Ridge and Waco have been credited by some to the creation of the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) in the U.S. Department of Justice in 1994.^[12]

A 1999 US Department of Justice analysis of the potential militia threat at the Millennium conceded that the vast majority of militias were reactive (not proactive) and posed no threat.^[13] By 2001, the militia movement seemed to be in decline, having peaked in 1996 with 858 groups.^[14] With the post-2007 global financial crisis and the election of Barack Obama to the United States presidency in 2008, militia activity has experienced a resurgence.^{[15][16][17]} Militia groups have recently been involved in several high-profile standoffs, including the Bundy Standoff in 2014 and the Occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016 amid a renewed rise in anti-government militia movements.

Legal legitimacy

Most militia organizations envisage themselves as legally legitimate organizations authorized under constitutional and statute law, specifically references in state and federal law to an "unorganized militia". Others subscribe to the "insurrection theory" which describes the right of the body politic to rebel against the established government in the face of tyranny. (In the 1951 case Dennis v. United States, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the insurrection theory, stating that as long as the government provides for free elections and trials by jury "political self-defense" cannot be undertaken.^[18])

Opposition to the government

While militia organizations have a variety of ideologies and objectives including anti-tax, anti-immigration, survivalist, sovereign citizen, libertarian, land rights and southern restoration tendencies, they generally share a common belief in the imminent or actual rise of a tyrannical government in the United States which, they believe, must be confronted through armed force.^{[19][20]}

Active militia groups

United States militia groups^[21]

Militia group name	State, county or locale
<u>3 Percenters</u> ^[22]	nationwide
<u>Arizona Border Recon</u> ^[23]	<u>Arizona</u> , <u>Sasabe</u>
<u>Hutaree</u> ^[24]	<u>Michigan</u> , southern
<u>Idaho Light Foot Militia</u> ^[25]	<u>Idaho</u> , statewide
<u>Michigan Militia</u> ^[26]	<u>Michigan</u> , <u>Redford</u>
<u>Militia of Montana</u> ^[27]	<u>Montana</u> , <u>Noxon</u>
<u>Missouri Citizens Militia</u> ^[28]	<u>Missouri</u> , statewide
<u>Missouri Militia</u> ^[29]	<u>Missouri</u> , <u>Kansas City</u>
<u>New York Light Foot Militia</u> ^[30]	<u>New York</u> , statewide
<u>Oath Keepers</u> ^[31]	nationwide
<u>Ohio Defense Force</u> ^[32]	<u>Ohio</u> , statewide
<u>Pennsylvania Military Reserve</u> ^[33]	<u>Pennsylvania</u>
<u>Texas Light Foot Militia</u> ^[34]	<u>Texas</u> , statewide

The Southern Poverty Law Center identified 334 militia groups at their peak in 2011. It identified 276 in 2015, up from 202 in 2014.^[35]

See also

- Domestic terrorism in the United States
- Guerrilla warfare
- Minutemen (anti-Communist organization)
- Second American Revolution

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This page was last edited on 14 May 2018, at 11:26(UTC).

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