

## INTRODUCTION

On April 29, 1994, twenty-eight men met in the woods of northern Michigan. Angered by the events at Ruby Ridge and Waco and alarmed by rumors of black helicopters and foreign soldiers hidden on American military bases, these men agreed to associate as the first brigade of the Northern Michigan Regional Militia. The militia was the brainchild of Norm Olson and Ray Southwell, the pastor and deacon of a small Baptist church near Alanson, Michigan. Those assembled elected Olson as their commander. He in turn laid down some basic principles under which they would proceed. First, the militia would operate publicly. If they believed that the government was a threat to their liberty, then it was their duty, as patriots and as men, to “shake their guns in the tyrant’s face.” Second, the militia would be open to men and women of principle regardless of race or faith. Olson believed that the government was utterly corrupt, but unlike other voices on the far right, he argued that the source of that corruption lay in the human heart and not in any Jewish conspiracy or in the loss of racial purity.

Finally, Olson portrayed the militia as an expression of popular sovereignty, a reincarnation of the Minutemen who had faced off against the king’s troops at Lexington and Concord. The people’s right to associate under arms to protect their liberty, Olson declared, was not subject to

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

regulation by any government on earth. The purpose of that association was to create an armed force capable of deterring an increasingly abusive government. That April 29 meeting proved to be the genesis of the Michigan Militia.<sup>1</sup>

The Michigan Militia was one of hundreds of citizens' militias formed around the nation in 1994 and 1995. The Texas Constitutional Militia also held its first muster in April 1994. That same spring, J. J. and Helen Johnson began organizing E Pluribus Unum, a public discussion forum that would serve as a catalyst for militia activity in Ohio. Smaller organizations formed in Indiana, California, Alabama, Florida, and the states of the Northwest. Olson himself assisted in the organization of militias in Pennsylvania, Florida, and Wisconsin. His manual outlining the historical justification, organization, goals, and code of conduct of the Michigan Militia served as the basis for the manuals of militias in Missouri, Texas, and California.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these emerging militias followed Olson's model of holding public meetings and opening membership to all citizens. Others disagreed. The Militia of Montana, which began organizing in February 1994, offered a very different model. Founder John Trochman warned that America faced an apocalyptic invasion by the forces of the New World Order and consequently proposed an organizational structure based on closed, underground cells.<sup>3</sup> This more nativist and millenarian vision of the movement also spread to the Midwest. The Militia of Montana's manual was adopted by the early leadership of the Ohio Unorganized Militia. Mark Koernke, whose vision was similar to Trochman's, also began organizing local underground militias in southeast Michigan.

By the spring of 1995, hundreds of militias with as many as one hundred thousand members total had formed across the nation.<sup>4</sup> Most of the public became aware of the burgeoning militia movement only in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995. Around the country, people reacted with shock, wondering what could possibly motivate citizens who claimed to be patriots to take up arms against their own democratically elected government. As journalists, self-appointed militia experts, and scholars rushed to offer answers, several explanations emerged. A loose coalition of civil rights organizations argued that the

## INTRODUCTION

movement was an outgrowth of a white supremacist paramilitary movement that had emerged in the 1980s, and constituted an attempt to reestablish white supremacy by armed force. Other experts saw the movement as the product of millenarian impulses within the Christian Right. Finally, some scholars and journalists compared the militia movement to earlier populist vigilante movements, and argued that it was the product of economic dislocation. All of these explanations portrayed the movement as an outgrowth of right-wing extremism in America.<sup>5</sup>

Like most Americans, I first learned of the militia movement in the weeks after the Oklahoma City bombing. As I began to do research on the movement, I became increasingly dissatisfied with these explanations. From the outset, I was struck by the lack of evidence behind the charge that racism had played a significant role in the emergence of the movement. It was also clear to me that economic concerns did not hold a prominent place in the movement's analysis of the ills facing the nation. Finally, while some militias were clearly caught up in the sort of elaborate conspiracy theories that characterized American millenarian movements in the twentieth century, others went out of their way to debunk such theories.

Beyond this empirical unease, it seemed to me as a historian that the concept of extremism begged a question: how do certain ideas, movements, and political impulses come to be considered extremist? As a citizen whose political identity was shaped by the late twentieth century, I saw the militias' assertion of a right to use armed force to change government policy as new, threatening, and beyond the pale of legitimate politics. But as a historian of early America I found achingly familiar their assertion of a right to take up arms to prevent the exercise of unconstitutional power by the federal government. As a historian, then, I was faced with a more specific question: how has the United States as a political society come to view the assertion of that right as extremist?

Why did the militia movement emerge in 1994, and why do we view that movement as extremist? On the surface they are simple questions, and yet answering them involved reading the hundreds of newsletters and Web pages in which militia men and women explained their movement to the public, to each other, and to themselves. It involved hours of

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

interviewing participants around the country, of sitting down and asking them what they were trying to do and listening carefully to the answers. Finally, it required tracing the history of the ideas that animated the movement, with a particular focus on the impact of those ideas on previous insurgent movements and on the relationship of these movements to the established political parties of their day.

As I listened to the disparate voices within the militia movement, the issue of political violence stood out above all others: the proximate cause of the movement lay in its members' perception that their government had turned increasingly violent. That perception may have been exaggerated, but it was firmly rooted in reality and fundamental to militia members' sense of their place in the world. The excesses committed by the federal government at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, were the most important events driving this perception. But many joining the movement perceived a general trend at all levels of law enforcement toward the use of paramilitary tactics and military hardware, and several reported violent assaults and sieges reminiscent of Waco in their local communities. Finally, militia men and women feared that recently passed federal gun control legislation would be enforced with the same violence exhibited at Waco and Ruby Ridge. They feared that as gun owners they might become "next year's Davidians."

To defend themselves against what they perceived to be an imminent threat, a broad array of libertarians, gun owners, Christian millenarians, and survivalists seized upon the militia of association, an old political institution with a hallowed place within the collective memory of the founding period propagated by the gun rights movement. To explain the legitimacy of their new militia movement, members turned to ideas about political violence with similar eighteenth-century origins: they argued that popular political violence was a legitimate response to the denial of certain fundamental rights by agents of government; that insurgent violence against the state was a legitimate response to state-sponsored violence against its citizens; and that a state monopoly on violence, absent any popular deterrent against its abuse, yielded more violence rather than less.

In support of these assertions, the militia movement invoked one of

## INTRODUCTION

the most radical intellectual legacies of the American Revolution. When Americans of the founding generation debated the limits of the right of revolution, two theories of legitimate political violence emerged. The first held that armed resistance to the oppressive acts of a representative government became legitimate only when that government infringed the constitutional means of opposition, such as access to the courts and the ballot box. But a second, more radical understanding of the meaning of the revolutionary conflict with Great Britain justified armed resistance to the acts of any government that repeatedly violated those rights, liberties, and privileges that the people believed they possessed as human beings and as citizens of a constitutional republic. Such transgressions of liberty were deemed illegitimate even if they had been enacted by a representative government following proper constitutional procedures. Under this theory, it was not only the right, but the duty, of all free men to embody themselves in a militia of the whole community and nullify the offending acts, by armed force if necessary. Many early Americans believed that those willing to undertake the duty of freemen to defend liberty and the constitutional order against the state exemplified the ideal of patriotic citizenship.

The eighteenth-century proponents of this ideal of patriotic insurgency based their claims for its legitimacy upon a particular interpretation of the meaning of the American Revolution. They described the Revolution not as a struggle for representation or to create an independent nation, but as a struggle to defend liberty against a corrupt and abusive state. I will refer to this interpretation as the *libertarian* understanding of the American Revolution. This interpretation was libertarian in the sense that it portrayed the Revolution as a struggle to protect liberty by enforcing inviolable constitutional restraints on the power of the state. Nevertheless, the early American proponents of this theory believed that liberty was best protected by a united community, and that an individual's freedom to act on behalf of either the people or the state was subject to the approval of the local community. They believed that the recourse to legitimate violence was neither public, in the sense of requiring state sanction, nor wholly private. This theory thus had little connection to the hyperindividualism of modern economic libertarianism.

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

In the 1790s, this libertarian understanding of the meaning of the American Revolution found its way into the ideas, rituals, and institutions of the Democratic-Republican Party. Over the next several decades, Democratic-Republican political culture and political rhetoric celebrated the Revolution as a legitimate exercise of popular violence against a despotic government. After the passing of the Revolutionary generation, the libertarian understanding of the Revolution retained a significant place within the collective memory of the Democratic Party. During the Civil War this libertarian memory of the Revolution fueled both political opposition and violent resistance to the war policies of the Lincoln administration.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, the libertarian understanding of the American Revolution gave way in collective memory and public commemoration to a new ideal of patriotism and a new set of rituals emphasizing unquestioning loyalty and obedience to the nation-state. Within this new ideology of "one hundred percent Americanism," all forms of revolution took on the visage of an alien, subversive menace. So pervasive was this shift in patriotic ideology that in twentieth-century Independence Day festivities, celebrations of the justified recourse to popular violence against a lawful government bent on tyranny were entirely replaced by sanitized commemorations of the birth of the nation.

Deprived of its former place in public discussion and commemoration, the libertarian memory of the Revolution lived on at the extremes of the political spectrum. On the far right, the libertarian vision of righteous popular revolution blended with vigilante impulses rooted in white supremacy and the long history of American nativism. This fusion produced a series of paramilitary insurgencies, including the Depression-era Black Legion, and the Minutemen of the 1960s. On the far left, the libertarian justification of armed defense against state tyranny motivated radical civil rights activists such as Robert F. Williams to form local African American militias in the 1950s and 1960s. Within mainstream politics, however, the patriotic emphasis on countersubversion facilitated campaigns to suppress first communists, then fascists, and, after World War II, white supremacists and radical civil rights activists such as

## INTRODUCTION

Williams. Their willingness to resort to violence against the state marked all of these groups as extremist and un-American.

If the rise of American anticommunism played a key role in further driving the libertarian memory of the Revolution from the public sphere, the defeat of Communism opened the door to its return. In post-Cold War America, a wave of state-sponsored violence, real and imagined, encouraged some Americans to look at the American Revolution through new eyes. Some encountered the libertarian memory of the Revolution in a set of eighteenth-century texts that were widely disseminated by the gun rights movement. Others came across it as an idea articulated within far right discourse, where it was still entwined with white supremacist and nativist corollaries. From these encounters emerged distinct constitutional and millenarian wings of the militia movement, represented respectively by Norm Olson and John Trochman. Though operating on very different principles, these militias together rested on ideas about constitutionalism and political violence, on rituals of public armed deterrence, and on the eighteenth-century institution of the militia of association. Thus, in terms of ideology, organization, and cultural performance, the militias began in 1994 to do something that was both very old and very new.

### **Beyond the Narrative of 1995: Methodological Imperatives for Research on the Militia Movement**

The militia movement has been the subject of at least a dozen books and hundreds of articles, yet it remains one of the most poorly understood political movements of the twentieth century. In the months after the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by Timothy McVeigh, civil rights organizations issued at least a dozen published reports on the militia movement, and civil rights activists offered “expert” commentary in hundreds of news stories. Within a year, books by leading figures associated with civil rights organizations, including Morris Dees, Kenneth Stern, and Richard Abanes, offered a coherent narrative of the origin of the movement.<sup>6</sup>

What America learned in these months was that the militia move-

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

ment was an outgrowth of the racist Right. Civil rights activists portrayed the militias as the armed wing of a much larger "Christian Patriot" movement. They warned that Christian Patriots numbered in the millions and that Christian Patriotism called for the restoration of white, Christian, patriarchal domination. The Christian Patriot movement as a whole, and the militias in particular, were antidemocratic, paranoid, virulently anti-Semitic, genocidally racist, and brutally violent. Much of this literature suggested that Timothy McVeigh was the movement's highest expression. In this narrative, the militias and the Patriot movement took on the guise of the perfect, racist "other," and the threat they posed was best articulated by Morris Dees' apocalyptic vision of a "gathering storm."

This "narrative of 1995" produced by civil rights organizations, coupled with the horror of the Oklahoma City bombing, triggered what Steven Chermak has referred to as a moral panic. Through published reports, their influence over the news coverage of the movement, and testimony at prominent public hearings, leading militia "experts" injected their portrait of the movement into public consciousness and popular culture. In news coverage, popular novels, episodes of *Law and Order*, and movies such as *Arlington Road*, the public became well acquainted with the archetypal militiaman, usually portrayed as warped by racial hatred, obsessed with bizarre conspiracy theories, and hungry for violent retribution.<sup>7</sup>

The moral panic over the "militia menace" strongly resembled previous moral panics over the "communist menace" that had swept the nation in the aftermath of World War I and again in the early 1950s. Less well known than these two Red scares is America's "Brown Scare." In the late 1930s, political activists on the left warned that an array of far right opponents of President Roosevelt and the New Deal, including the Silver Shirts, the Black Legion, the German American Bund, and the Christian Front, constituted a fifth column composed of fascist brownshirts allied with Nazism and dedicated to the overthrow of democratic government in America. According to Leo P. Ribuffo, a leading scholar of the Depression-era Far Right, the ensuing moral panic facilitated a campaign of repression waged by the U.S. government against the Far Right during

## INTRODUCTION

World War II.<sup>8</sup> In 1995–96, the moral panic over the militia movement blossomed into a second American Brown Scare.

The literature produced by the second Brown Scare has had a significant impact on academic analysis of the movement, and this poses a problem for continuing scholarship. The civil rights organizations that produced the narrative of 1995 conceived of themselves as political opponents of the militia movement, and these organizations made the legal suppression of the movement one of their central political objectives.<sup>9</sup> That political objective has systematically shaped their reporting on the movement. Their analyses might serve as a primary source base for an interesting analysis of how the activist Left perceived the Far Right at the turn of the millennium. To use this literature as a primary source base in an analysis of the character of the militia movement itself is to allow the movement's opponents to define it.

Unfortunately, much of the scholarship on the militia movement produced in the last ten years has not broken free from the influence of the narrative of 1995. Too many scholars have relied on the reports and books generated by the Brown Scare as primary evidence of the character of the movement. Others who have avoided this first error have nevertheless allowed the narrative of 1995 to unduly influence their research agendas. Finally, even the best scholarship on militias tends to inappropriately conflate the militia movement with other movements on the far right of American politics and to overstate the influence of millennial thought on militia ideology.

Two of the first scholarly accounts of the movement relied almost entirely on Brown Scare literature as sources. David Bennett, historian of the Far Right, added a chapter on the militia movement to the 1995 edition of *The Party of Fear* that was based almost entirely on civil rights reports and news accounts. While Bennett was one of the first scholars to place the militia movement in a historical context, his source base led him to significantly overestimate the influence of nativism within the movement. Catherine McNichol Stock wrote *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* without conducting any primary research on her subjects. Her understanding of the militia movement came largely from Morris Dees and Kenneth Stern. As a result she placed a movement that

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

was neither rural nor particularly violent within a historical context that emphasized the legacy of agrarian rebellion and populist vigilantism. More recently, sociologists Barbara Perry and Manuel Castells have published analyses of the movement based largely on Brown Scare sources.<sup>10</sup>

Other scholars have allowed the narrative of 1995 to dictate their research agenda and design. This has particularly been true of younger scholars. John Keith Akins accepted Kenneth Stern's contention that racism and anti-Semitism were central to the movement, and chose the case studies of his dissertation accordingly.<sup>11</sup> The most important statistical studies on the correlates of militia activity, by Sean O'Brian and Donald Haider-Markel, by Joshua Freilich, and by Nella Van Dyke and Sarah Soule, have all relied on lists of militia groups compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League. The inaccuracy of these lists, and their tabulation of militia groups by state rather than locality, has significantly diminished the utility of the only statistical analyses of the movement.<sup>12</sup>

The final academic legacy of the Brown Scare is an emphasis on the allegedly close association of militia groups with other far right organizations, such as white supremacist groups, Christian Identity ministries, common-law courts, and tax protest societies. The narrative of 1995 lumped all of these disparate far right groups together in the "Christian Patriot movement," a misguided simplification that has led a number of senior scholars to blur the lines between different groups with quite different worldviews. For example, Michael Kimmel and Abby Ferber, in a recent analysis of militia concepts of masculinity, accept *in toto* the narrative of 1995, concluding that "far right-groups are intricately interconnected and share a basic anti-government, anti-semitic, racist, sexist/patriarchal ideology." They then subject this "militia ideology" to a gendered analysis. But the texts on which they base this analysis were all generated by the white supremacist Right. The authors thus published what purports to be a gendered analysis of the militia movement without examining a single militia-generated text.<sup>13</sup>

The conflation of militia-generated texts with texts produced by other "Christian Patriot" groups has also undermined promising work by other senior scholars. Lane Crothers offers a fine analysis of militia

## INTRODUCTION

ideology's complicated relationship to mainstream culture. But the manner in which he juxtaposes militia and Christian Patriot statements on conspiracism and racism leads to fundamentally misleading conclusions about militia ideology. Michael Barkun and Martin Durham have explored the role of millennial expectation within militia thought. Their work offers important insights into militia thought, but their reliance on texts circulating within Christian Patriot circles rather than on texts generated by militia members leads them to overestimate both the depth and reach of millennial concerns within the movement.<sup>14</sup>

Since the turn of the millennium, three scholars have begun the task of freeing scholarship on the militia movement from the narrative of 1995. In 2002 Steven Chermak offered a systematic critique of the media construction of the militia movement and journalists' extensive reliance on civil rights activists to provide expert opinion. He juxtaposed media depictions of militia ideology with primary source material drawn from dozens of interviews with active members of the movement. The following year, David C. Williams offered a book-length study that combined a thoughtful discussion of the political philosophy of the founding generation with an analysis of contemporary militia ideology, based on a variety of primary and secondary texts. Finally, in 2004, D. J. Mulloy offered the first sustained examination of the place of history and collective memory in militia ideology. His book also offers a thoughtful examination of the similarities between militia beliefs and those of "mainstream America."<sup>15</sup>

As a historian, I hope to contribute to this field an insight gained in the study of other partisan political crises in American history: in evaluating the ideology of an insurgent movement, one must not allow the movement's partisan allies, much less its partisan enemies, to speak for it. My analysis of the militia movement is based on the methodological imperative that militia ideology can only be analyzed by evaluating the primary source texts in which the movement itself speaks. In choosing these texts I have closely considered how the militia movement interacted with other groups on the far right. Though often described as a unified movement with a coherent ideology, the phenomenon of Christian Patriotism is best understood as the cultural product of an alterna-

tive public sphere in which a variety of far right political movements, including the militia movement, interact, exchange ideas, and often engage in fervent debate.

The public sphere is a forum in which “private people come together as a public” to express their opinions on matters of collective concern. In America, a public sphere has existed since the advent of newspapers and political societies in the eighteenth century. Debating societies, political parties, and the rise of partisan newspapers ensured vigorous debate and thorough public deliberation on political issues. Yet this public sphere has privileged some voices and excluded others. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, racial minorities were excluded from the public sphere, and with the rise of “mainstream” journalism in the early twentieth century, groups on the far right found themselves barred from communicating in public forums.<sup>16</sup> As a result, far right groups generally fell back on private and binary modes of communication such as private lectures, newsletters, and direct mail to promote their message.

The telecommunications revolution of the 1990s transformed this binary model of communication. Far right activists were among the early pioneers in the use of new telecommunications media to better spread their message. As fax networks, computer bulletin boards, email discussion lists, shortwave and AM radio programming, and Web sites proliferated, an alternative public sphere emerged on the far right that facilitated real public discussion, deliberation, and debate among an array of groups that had previously had little direct communication with each other.<sup>17</sup>

Though inhabiting the same public sphere, and thus exposed to each other's messages, these groups did not necessarily share the same conceptual universe. Close observation of a variety of media within this sphere reveals a diverse collection of communities that butt up against each other. Interactions between these communities are as often characterized by vigorous debate, name-calling, and shouting matches as they are by agreement. Consensus, even among different militia groups, is rare.<sup>18</sup> Though civil rights groups generally describe the inhabitants of the Christian Patriot public sphere as dupes, devoid of intellectual

## INTRODUCTION

agency, those venturing into this public sphere behave more like consumers, some avid and others more skeptical.<sup>19</sup>

The recognition that Christian Patriotism is best understood as a public sphere suggests that militia ideology can only be analyzed by evaluating militia-generated texts. For the purposes of this study, I have used several criteria to determine whether an individual or a group should be considered part of the militia movement. First, a militia is an organization that has a membership and that conducts paramilitary training. Plenty of individuals have belonged to militias that never extended beyond the bounds of their own imaginations. Some of them even created Web sites.<sup>20</sup> There were many groups within the Christian Patriot public sphere that never engaged in armed organization. None of these should be considered part of the movement. Second, the militia movement emerged in the aftermath of the assaults on the Weaver homestead on Ruby Ridge in August 1992 and on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in April 1993. There may have been far right paramilitaries in existence prior to these events, but the militia movement as a historical phenomenon clearly began in the aftermath of Waco. Third, militias generally self-identify as part of the movement.

Finally, some white supremacist groups, hoping to ride the wave of popularity of the new militia movement, reorganized their paramilitary wings in the mid-1990s and called them militias. For example, David Duke's National Association of White People and several branches of the Ku Klux Klan formed militias in the mid-1990s. I consider such groups to be part of a distinct white supremacist paramilitary movement that has existed since the late 1960s and that operates on foundational principles very different from those of the militia movement. In many cases militias used the Klan and other white supremacist groups as a negative referent in crafting their own identity.<sup>21</sup>

Following these methodological imperatives, my analysis of the militia movement is based on evidence drawn from militia Web sites, newsletters, email discussions, internal documents, videotapes, and manuals. Between 1996 and 2000 I periodically visited every identifiable militia Web site and downloaded all substantive documents. I also visited the archives

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

of Political Research Associates, the Detroit office of the ADL, the Wilcox Collection on the American Far Right housed at the University of Kansas, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. In each of these visits I made paper or electronic copies of every militia-generated document to which I was given access. I supplemented this material with oral history interviews with prominent members of the militia movement conducted in the Midwest in 1998–99 and in other regions of the country in 2005–6. During these visits I received a great deal of additional written material to which I would never have had access, including material held in the Michigan Militia Multi-Information Archive and in the papers of Mike Vanderboegh. These documents included manuals, newsletters, and copies of internal communications otherwise unavailable.<sup>22</sup>

This source base does have some limitations. I conducted interviews only with members of the movement whose membership was public. Thus my findings may not adequately represent that portion of the movement which is “underground.”<sup>23</sup> My source base also lacks geographic balance. My interviews and my document base are particularly strong for militias in the Midwest. I have incorporated additional material from groups in New England, Texas, Alabama, and the Pacific Northwest. I have not, however, collected significant material from California, the Southeast, or the Great Plains. The analysis offered here may thus underestimate regional variation.

An analysis based on oral history must assess the candor of the interviewee and the biases inherent in the interview process. In some of the interviews I conducted, the subjects offered accounts of the movement that were clearly self-serving. All of the subjects were probably motivated to give good account of themselves and their movement. In my approach to subjects I made it clear that I was interested in creating an oral history archive of the movement. Thus participants were aware that their words were being recorded for posterity.

With these issues in mind, I have attempted wherever possible to fact-check the content of the interviews against past public statements by the subjects, email communication between groups, and, where possible, internal communications. For example, much of the information contained in interviews with members of the Michigan Militia is cor-

## INTRODUCTION

roborated by documents in the Michigan Militia Multi-Information Archive. Documents in Mike Vanderboegh's papers support his interview assertions at key points. Some statements simply cannot be checked, and here I must rely on my own impressions of the character and candor of those with whom I spoke.

There are many on the left and even within the academy whose perception of the Far Right is dominated by the figure of the "stealth Nazi," a dissembler who masks his genocidal intent behind a moderate and earnest public visage. Some would argue that only by posing as a militiaman could I encounter "the real militia mind" and would regard public statements by militia members as no more than public posturing. In my experience, however, most denizens of the Far Right, white supremacists included, wear their hearts on their sleeves. Many of my interviews developed into free-ranging and uninhibited conversations. Although all interviewees were given the opportunity to edit the interview transcript in any way that they saw fit, only one edited a transcript to change the substance of what was said, and the issue involved was trivial.

As for "infiltrating" the movement, the core ethical stricture governing research involving living human subjects can be summed up as "First, do no harm." I was initially leery of some standard oral history procedures, including the taping of interviews and allowing subjects to edit transcripts. I have come to realize, however, that these requirements simply represent good ethical practice. In any case it is unlikely that a research protocol based on deception would have received the approval of the Institutional Review Boards of Rutgers University and the University of Hartford.<sup>24</sup> Readers are of course invited to bring their own healthy skepticism to their encounter with the men and women of the militia movement. It is only those biases born of the Brown Scare that I would urge them to leave behind.

### **Exploring the Sources of Militia Identity: Race, Class, and Gender**

Scholars of social movements, particularly those on the far right, have most often focused on the racial and class anxieties of their subjects.

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

From the post–World War II liberal pluralist studies that focused on status anxiety as the root of fascism to more recent examinations of the role of whiteness within Christian Patriotism, the application of social theory to scholarship on the Far Right has yielded insights, but it has also lent itself to condescension and caricature. Used cautiously, theory can help to explain ethnographic evidence and also place that evidence in a larger context. Theory can also overwhelm that evidence and allow political animus to masquerade as scholarship.

The insurgents described in this book occupied a broad range of class positions, from rural yeomen to middle-class professionals to corporate managers. Though the militia movement has often been described as rural and working class in character, analysts of the militia movement lack the kind of membership data that allowed earlier scholars to probe the class and occupational composition of, for example, the second Ku Klux Klan. An analysis of militia discourse may yield some insights, but here too the available data does not support firm conclusions. For example, some militiamen describe the threats they perceive in language laden with economic anxiety and class resentment, but others emphasize issues of sovereignty, political agency, and the potential for state violence. Given these limitations in the sources, a focus on class is unlikely to yield significant insight into the militia movement.<sup>25</sup>

Almost all of the insurgents discussed in this book were white. Race is a part of their story. Some militia members speak of the New World Order in language evocative of racial fear and animus, and some of the earlier insurgents discussed in this book were clearly motivated in part by white supremacy. But to sum up either the militia movement or earlier insurgencies as expressions of racial anxiety and identity runs the risk of effacing the complex influences of religion, rural culture, localism, and libertarianism. It would also bury the voices of many militia members who have denounced the doctrines of white supremacy as un-Christian, unpatriotic, and un-American. Race is a part of the story, sometimes a powerful part. It is not the whole story.

In recent years sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has offered an analytical perspective that is useful when evaluating the complex influence of race on the militia movement. Bonilla-Silva notes that racial ideology

## INTRODUCTION

has shifted significantly in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. He argues that white Americans continue to enjoy systemic social and economic advantages due to their race, and to view race relations in terms that perpetuate these advantages. Bonilla-Silva's model of "color-blind racism" permits a nuanced evaluation of militia racial discourse and also suggests that this discourse mirrors the mainstream racial ideology of white America.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars of the Far Right and of earlier insurgent movements have until recently paid relatively little attention to the workings of gender. Yet conceptions of manliness have played a powerful role in shaping both early and modern American insurgent movements. Democratic-Republicans vowed to resist the Alien and Sedition Acts with "manly firmness," while leaders of the Civil War-era Democratic Party warned that violent resistance to conscription was "unmanly." Each of the movements under consideration here acted out of a sense of masculine duty, though their understandings of that duty were markedly different.<sup>27</sup>

Several observers have described the militia movement as an outgrowth of masculine anxiety, and cite James Gibson's *Warrior Dreams* to explain the contours of militia manliness.<sup>28</sup> Gibson's pathbreaking analysis of post-Vietnam masculine anxiety described attempts to shore up the cultural identity of white men whose social and political authority had been undermined by feminism, the civil rights movement, and defeat in the Vietnam War. Within a new subculture of books, movies, magazines, and games, authors created a "new war fantasy" in which archetypal warriors, freed from the restraining influences of family and society, would "retake and reorder the world" through the use of genocidal violence.<sup>29</sup>

Gibson's book was a tour de force, but the casual equation of the new war fantasy and the gender ideals of the militia movement is deeply problematic. An anecdote told by Steven Chermak illustrates a much more domestic and civic orientation within militia manhood. Chermak traveled to Knob Creek, Tennessee, to observe a militia meeting held at the annual Knob Creek machine gun shoot. As militia members left the meeting, two cars collided at a nearby intersection. After calling for emergency assistance, militia men ran to the scene, administered first

aid, and began to direct traffic. When Chermak asked a journalist who had also witnessed this display of civic engagement whether he would describe the militia members' response in his story on the movement, the latter replied that "he was not in Kentucky to cover car crashes, but was sent to evaluate the militia movement." The journalist then returned to the machine gun shoot "to find his story."<sup>30</sup> In search of warrior dreams, the journalist proved blind to a live demonstration of militia manliness.

Gender theorist R. W. Connell's discussion of "complicit masculinity" provides a better theoretical foundation for a discussion of militia manliness than Gibson's warrior dream. Connell describes complicit masculinities as those that derive the benefits of patriarchy while remaining engaged in "marriage, fatherhood, and community life." Such engagement involves "extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority."<sup>31</sup> This theoretical lens helps to illustrate the contrast between militia masculinity and the new war fantasy. Many militiamen developed strong partnerships in their marriages. Concern for family and community animated all aspects of militia activity. To be sure, members of the militia movement brandished weapons and played at war, but within militia literature, imagined violence was deeply embedded in political principle and civic obligation, and there was rarely anything joyous about it. Theirs was a different warrior dream, one that, like all facets of militia identity, requires careful, sustained, and comparative analysis.

## **The Dynamics of Collective Memory and the Challenge of Writing a History of the Present**

In addition to a close analysis of the militia movement, this volume discusses the history of the ideas that animated the movement and the currents of historical memory that have carried them across time. The theory of collective memory and my choice of events on which to focus this historical analysis therefore require a last bit of explanation.

The theory of collective memory offers insight into the process by which some political ideas are celebrated across time and others are mar-

## INTRODUCTION

ginalized, by which the past often acts to shape the present. Scholarship on collective historical memory is founded on Maurice Halbwach's insight that historical memory is a collective construction grounded in present social need. Political actors thus invoke particular historical memories to rally support for desired outcomes.<sup>32</sup> The transmission of ideas across time is embedded in the process of historical memory. Political actors have the creative capacity to reshape ideas and memories, and to combine them with new ones. Nevertheless, the dynamics of historical memory place limits on that creativity.

One limitation stems from the fact that the public commemoration of the past is often contested. John Bodnar, in tracing the evolution of public commemoration after the Civil War, argues that the contest over public memory involves a struggle between elite-sponsored "official memory" and "vernacular memories" held by "ordinary people." According to Bodnar, social and political elites compete with each other and with popular groups to reshape the history commemorated within the public sphere.<sup>33</sup>

Insurgent movements in American history have almost always sought to justify their acts by invoking the memory of the past. Creativity in the construction of that historical memory holds the potential to enhance these movements' freedom of action. But in an environment in which memory is contested, creativity can also alienate the audience whose political support a group seeks. The insurgents discussed here have been remarkably (and sometimes horrifically) creative in reshaping the memory of the American Revolution, but the most creative groups were the least successful in making a public case for their aims. The past thus shapes and limits the present, even as it is pressed into its service.

Once they have invoked a specific memory of the past, political actors may also find themselves captive to it. During the Civil War, northern Peace Democrats invoked the memory of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798, which articulated the right of the people to nullify unconstitutional legislation. When one of their number, Harrison Dodd, decided that the principles of 1798 justified a plot to overthrow the governments of four midwestern states, party leaders discovered that these principles represented a devastating political liability.<sup>34</sup> Ideas from the

past, incorporated into historical memory, bring with them consequences that cannot be easily escaped.

A final observation is crucial to the story of the militia movement: a fundamental shift in the dynamics of public commemoration took place in the post-Civil War era. Prior to the Civil War, public memory emerged from an open competition of political parties, popular movements, and ethnic groups within the public sphere. Because the state lacked the power to project a single unified memory, multiple competing constructions of the past emerged from public debate and ritual. After the Civil War, the capacity of the state and of national and local elites to project an "official" memory into the public sphere and to mute the impact of popular, vernacular memories transformed public commemoration. John Bodnar argues that after the war, elite interest groups gained the power to shape public discourse and to prevent the "meaningful" public expression of competing constructions.<sup>35</sup> His model helps explain the post-Civil War suppression of the libertarian memory of the American Revolution and the exclusion of the Far Right from the mainstream public sphere after World War II. In the 1990s the communications revolution partially reversed this trend, allowing the vernacular memories within the Christian Patriot public sphere to reach a much broader audience. As a result, the libertarian memory of the American Revolution, long marginalized, found a renewed place in public discussion.

Tracing the intellectual roots of the militia movement and the manner in which collective memory has transmitted these ideas over time poses a challenge. American history is crowded with agrarian rebels, insurgent slaves, working-class syndicalists, and vigilantes of all stripes. Even confining the examination to those groups that have invoked the American Revolution to justify the use of violence would still run the risk of overwhelming an analysis of the militia movement with accounts of its predecessors.

My solution to this problem is to confine the historical discussion as much as possible to key turning points in the evolution of the collective memory of the American Revolution: the political crises of 1798, 1863–64, and 1936. In each of these crises, unprecedented assertions of federal authority triggered the emergence of an insurrectionary movement: Fries'

## INTRODUCTION

Rebellion in Pennsylvania, 1798–99, the Sons of Liberty conspiracy in Indiana and Illinois, 1863–64, and the Black Legion in Michigan and Ohio, 1932–36. In each case, insurgents threatened or enacted violent resistance to the authority of the federal government. Each of these groups invoked the libertarian understanding of the American Revolution and used that collective memory to justify political violence. Finally, each insurgency existed in complicated tension with a broader movement of political opposition to the party in power, and thus these crises illustrate the process by which the libertarian memory of the American Revolution was transformed from a mainstream creed to a badge of extremism.

There are several other insurgent movements in American history that at least partially fit these criteria. The Whiskey Rebels staged an insurrection against federal authority in 1794, and certainly merit inclusion. I have chosen to discuss Fries' Rebellion instead because it better illustrates the Democratic-Republican Party's embrace of the libertarian memory of the Revolution. Thomas Dorr led a working-class rebellion against the government of Rhode Island in 1842. Dorr invoked the memory of the American Revolution, but we have very little evidence of the ideological motivations of the rank-and-file members of his movement. The Dorr War's significance for the Supreme Court's repudiation of a constitutional right of revolution will be discussed at the end of Part I. Finally, the first Ku Klux Klan organized armed resistance to the authority of the biracial Reconstruction governments of southern states after the Civil War. Though the Klan waged a paramilitary campaign of violence and intimidation in the defense of local autonomy and white supremacy, it rarely invoked the memory of the American Revolution. Furthermore, as I discuss in the second chapter in Part II ("Cleansing the Memory of the Revolution"), Klansmen sought to assume state power, not to limit it.

The book is divided into three parts, corresponding roughly to three chronological periods in the evolution of the historical memory of the Revolution. Part I covers the years between the Revolution and the Civil War, a period that encompasses the Revolution itself, a series of political crises in which the meaning of the Revolution was fervently debated by those who participated in it, and the passage of the Revolution into his-

TO SHAKE THEIR GUNS IN THE TYRANT'S FACE

torical memory. In this first period, the libertarian memory of the Revolution and celebrations of popular political violence continued to play a fundamental role in American political culture. The two chapters in this section explore the American recourse to political violence to nullify the Coercive Acts in 1774–75, the theoretical discussions of legitimate insurgent violence that emerged from the debates over the ratification of the Constitution and the Second Amendment, and the Democratic-Republican celebration of these precedents during the Alien and Sedition Act crisis of 1798. Part I concludes with a brief discussion of the transmission of Democratic-Republican principles and rituals of legitimate resistance into antebellum political theory and into the public commemoration of the Revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Part II covers the era of American countersubversion that lasted from the beginning of the Civil War to the end of the Cold War. This period witnessed the Civil War, the rise of industrial class conflict and American anticommunism, and the emergence of a new, countersubversive ideal of patriotism, one hundred percent Americanism. The first of two chapters in Part II examines the violent political battle between Democrats and Republicans in the North over Lincoln's assertion of unprecedented powers during the Civil War. Midwestern Democrats invoked the memory of the Revolution and the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 and publicly denounced Lincoln as a tyrant. In response, Republicans crafted a new patriotic identity based on loyalty, obedience, and a state monopoly on violence. The second chapter in this part traces the process by which a new conception of patriotism, styled one hundred percent Americanism, drove the libertarian memory of the American Revolution out of mainstream public discussion and public commemoration after the Civil War. During the 1930s, Democrats joined the Republican embrace of countersubversive patriotism and warned that paramilitary organization by far right opponents of the New Deal constituted a "terrorist" threat to the Republic. Part II concludes with a brief discussion of Cold War–era efforts to reinforce Americanism's repudiation of revolutionary political violence and to contain paramilitary activity on the far left and far right.

Part III explores the militia movement's challenge to the state's mo-

## INTRODUCTION

nopoly on violence. Its first chapter examines the causes that generated militia organizing. Chief among these are the paramilitarization of law enforcement that led to the tragedies at Waco and Ruby Ridge, the opening of the Christian Patriot public sphere, and the revival of the libertarian memory of the Revolution. In addition to analyzing the movement's racial discourse and gender identity, the chapter traces the emergence of militias along America's suburban-rural frontier. The next chapter lays out the movement's perception and critique of the government's increasingly violent enforcement of the law and its growing intrusion into personal lives. It explores the distinct Whig and millenarian diagnoses of state violence offered by different voices in the movement, its program for reform, and its struggle to articulate clear boundaries for legitimate insurgent political violence. Finally, it narrates the gradual divergence of the millenarian and constitutional wings of the militia movement.

One final observation is in order: the invocation of the past to justify present action is a perpetual theme in American politics. It need not, however, command our deference. If there is a point at which the practice of history departs from the practice of collective memory, it is in the recognition that no word or deed from ages past can in and of itself justify the recourse to violence in the present. This is the story of men and women who asserted that the libertarian memory of the American Revolution enjoined them to fight for liberty at the turn of the twenty-first century. But history does not bind any of us. For the legitimacy of our acts, we must all seek judgment in a different realm.