Q&A with Robert Churchill, author of *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant’s Face: Libertarian Political Violence and the Origins of the Militia Movement*

In *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant’s Face*, author Robert Churchill uses three case studies to illustrate the origin of some of the core values of the modern militia movement. Building on extensive interviews with militia members, Churchill places the contemporary militia movement in the context of these earlier insurrectionary movements that, animated by a libertarian interpretation of the American Revolution, used force to resist the authority of the federal government.

A historian of early America, Robert Churchill has published numerous articles on American political violence and the right to keep and bear arms.

The University of Michigan Press: Militias came to the attention of the nation after the bombings in Oklahoma City, but in your book, you explain how they’re a much older phenomenon in this country. When did modern militias essentially begin?

Robert Churchill: When looking at the militia movement and its antecedents, we need to be careful to distinguish between state sanctioned militias and private political moments that adopted militia organization as their structure. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it was common for partisan politics to spill over into the state militia system. As a result, official militias often participated in political festivity and ritual and engaged in partisan political speech. In periods of crisis, militias sometimes threatened to turn their weapons and training against the party in power, much as American militias organized by the Crown had turned on their master during the American Revolution.

The collapse of universal militia service in the 1830s and 1840s did not end armed challenges to state authority. Both before and during the Civil War, even mainstream political movements sometimes adopted militia-like organization to deter what they saw as dangerous expansions of state power, especially by the federal government. But by the last decades of the nineteenth century, such paramilitary organizations were branded subversive and regarded as un-American. Hence the practice of militia organization for the pursuit of political ends passed out of mainstream politics and became a marker of political “extremism.”

The modern militia movement which emerged in the 1990s marked a return to older practices. It is difficult to pinpoint a precise date for its origin, but there are three prerequisites that allow us to put a rough date on the movement’s emergence. The first is that the movement was made possible by the technology revolution of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second is that the movement drew upon ideas popularized by gun rights activists beginning in the late 1980s, and reaching a broader audience on the internet in the early 1990s. Finally, the modern movement was very much a response to the fear
and reality of state violence. Hence, though some voices on the far right may have been talking about militias earlier, the militia movement emerged in the aftermath of the U.S. government sieges of the Weaver homestead on Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and the Branch Davidian Compound at Waco Texas. The date of the earliest militia whose formation I can pinpoint is February 1994, but there may have been units springing up as early as 1993.

**UMP: What were the precepts that those early militia movements were founded on, and are they shared by the modern groups?**

**RC:** We need to be careful about using the term militia movement as in a generic sense. There have been many insurrectionary movements in American history, defined as movements that sought to take up arms against the government. Some of these movements adopted a militia-like organization patterned after the eighteenth century institution of the militia. But that eighteenth century institution was the creation of state governments, and the distinction is important and often misunderstood today. The militias of the Revolutionary era were created by state legislation and they were the military arm of the colonial and early state governments. Private individuals didn’t just go out and form a militia. They were obligated to serve in a militia company organized by the state in their community. They had to serve under officers commissioned by the state. The right to keep arms stems from the obligation of adult men in British North America to own guns for the purpose of serving in the colonial militia.

What happened in the American Revolution is that the colonists turned this institution against the state. In 1774 the people of New England reorganized existing militia companies under new officers devoted to the patriot cause, and used the militia to defend their communities and their liberties against the British Army. Other regions quickly followed suit after the Battle of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. So the militia pre-existed the political movement that used it against the Crown.

In the 1790s, that experience of fighting in the militia against the crown, which was until July 1776 the lawful government of the colonies, lent itself to a distinct understanding of the militia in popular culture. Under the Constitution, the purpose of the militia was defined as supporting the state by executing the laws and suppressing insurrections. Within popular political culture, however, the militia acquired a third purpose: to deter, and, if necessary, overthrow a lawful government bent on tyranny. In other words, the militia represented a means of balancing the state’s capacity for violent coercion with a continuing popular capacity to resist domestic tyranny. In this understanding of the constitutional order, the American state was never intended to hold a monopoly of legitimate political violence. It is this understanding of the militia that is at the heart of the modern individual rights interpretation of the Second Amendment and the right to keep and bear arms. Furthermore, this libertarian and insurrectionary understanding of the militia became a fundamental part of the political ideology and political culture of the Democratic-Republican Party, and as a consequence continued to resonate into the middle of the nineteenth century, long after the institution of the state militia had decayed.

To briefly explain their importance in history, and why they’re important to understanding today’s militias?

RC: The case studies illustrate two aspects of the book’s argument. The first is the staying power of the libertarian understanding of the American Revolution and the purpose of the militia. The first two case studies, Fries’ Rebellion and the Sons of Liberty Conspiracy, document the emergence of militia-based insurrectionary movements in moments of constitutional crisis. In each case, the party in power, the Federalists in 1798 and the Republicans in 1863, attempted to significantly expand federal authority in order to meet a political crisis, and did so in a manner that threatened to render political opposition illegal. Democratic opponents responded by suggesting that the people had a right to resist such exercises of unconstitutional authority, and argued that such resistance was a legitimate recourse to the principles of the American Revolution. Against this backdrop, each crisis witnessed the emergence of an insurrectionary movement, at least loosely politically aligned with the opposition party, which took up arms against federal authority. Together these cases demonstrate that the libertarian understanding of the American Revolution continued to resonate as late as the Civil War.

The Sons of Liberty case, along with the reaction to the Black Legion, also serves a second purpose: together they illustrate the origin of America’s rejection of the memory of the Revolution on which insurrectionary resistance was based. In the aftermath of the war, Americans built a new memory of the Revolution and a new understanding of patriotism. Where they once celebrated the willingness to take up arms against the government as a mark of patriotism, after the Civil War, Americans fashioned a new ideal of patriotism based on a state monopoly on violence and a citizen’s duty of unquestioning obedience. By the twentieth century, the advocacy of violence against the state became a mark of un-American extremism, the province of communists, anarchists, and fascists. Together these case studies explain how the modern militia movement, which embraced a set of ideas so central to early American political philosophy, appeared so alien and extremist to most Americans observing them in the 1990s. They explain how the militia movement, which was doing something so very old, could be seen as so shockingly new.

To read more about Robert Churchill’s To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant’s Face, visit the University of Michigan Press at: www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=327258

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