

The Road to Oklahoma City:  
How Some Americans Came to Hate Their National  
Government

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March 1998

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Just after 9:00 a.m. on the morning of April 19, 1995, the television networks interrupted their regularly scheduled programming. Millions of viewers watched billowing smoke and dust pour from what was left of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The front third of the nine-story building had simply imploded-reduced to a tangled heap of concrete rubble and broken bodies by a powerful terrorist bomb.

For the next three days, those images filled our television screens: the dazed survivors, the covered bodies as they were taken from the building by rescue workers and-most memorably-the face of fireman Chris Fields as he walked away from the wreckage cradling the bloodstained body of a dying one-year-old boy. The final toll was 168 dead, more than 600 individuals injured, and property damage reaching two-thirds of a billion dollars.<sup>1</sup>

The first few hours, you may also recall, were filled with speculations about Libyan terrorists and Iranian saboteurs. But with the arrest of two ex-army buddies-Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols-the nation confronted a far less comforting reality. In Pogo's words, "We have met the enemy . . . and he is us."  
Bomber number one: Timothy McVeigh

News accounts almost invariably described the upstate New York native as a decorated veteran of the Gulf War: a soldier's soldier who enlisted in 1988, never shirked an assignment, and quickly rose to the rank of sergeant. That description proved misleading, however. Fellow noncommissioned officers also knew him for his

erratic behavior and his extremist political views. He pored over survivalist magazines and novels. After returning from the Middle East, he enrolled in the army's Special Forces ("Green Beret") program, but dropped out after two days. A month later, he requested and received early discharge from the service.<sup>2</sup>

Back in civilian life, he drifted through a series of low-wage jobs, first as a security guard, then as a hardware store clerk. Finally, he became an itinerant salesman for military-surplus items.<sup>3</sup> By fall 1994, he was traveling across the country from gun show to gun show-he always had been obsessed by firearms-driving as many as 1,000 miles at a stretch. He was sustained by a steady intake of methamphetamines-"speed"-and constantly on the phone to one of his old army buddies, Terry Nichols.<sup>4</sup>

Terry Nichols: bomber number two

Nichols had wanted to be a doctor, but he flunked out of college after less than a year. During the next fifteen years, he tried his hand at farming, but failed; he became a real estate salesman, then lost his job because he never could meet his quotas. At the age of thirty-three he joined the army-where he met and became close friends with McVeigh-but he soon asked for and received an early discharge.

He was even a failure as a husband and father. After divorcing his first wife, he married a seventeen-year-old Filipino mail-order bride. As he put it, the "young ones are easier to train."<sup>5</sup> Apparently not easy enough. His second wife cooperated with federal prosecutors and became a critical witness against him at his trial last year in Denver.

Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were the ultimate embodiment of the phrase "life's losers," ineffectual in their personal lives and in their careers, with few real friends and prime examples of the sort of marginal individuals in the last forty years who hoped to change the course of history by individual acts of violence:

Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, James Earl Ray, and would-be assassins Arthur Bremer and John Hinkley.

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If these two misfits were psychologically maladjusted, however, they also were driven by the politics of the far right. Investigators and journalists quickly learned that McVeigh and Nichols had drifted in and out of the network of right-wing paramilitary organizations that had emerged into public view in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For fifteen years, Terry Nichols and his brother, James, were in constant trouble with the law for their various bizarre schemes to avoid paying taxes or private debts. Both insisted they had "renounced" their citizenship and were not subject to the authority of the state or federal government.<sup>6</sup>

Timothy McVeigh shared Nichols's antigovernment views, although he was usually less vocal in expressing them. Friends and acquaintances who knew the gaunt ex-soldier had consistent recollections. On the surface, he was quiet, self-controlled, and rational. When least expected, however- and particularly when the subject of gun control arose-he would explode.<sup>7</sup>

They also remembered that he was obsessed with William L. Pierce's apocalyptic 1978 novel, *The Turner Diaries*. He carried it with him everywhere. Pierce-a former chemistry professor, John Birch Society organizer, and activist in George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign-set his novel in a nightmarish future America of the 1990s in which the federal government had fallen under the complete control of Jews and blacks. While Jewish elites used the Federal Reserve system, the corrupt banking structure, and the IRS to strip hard-working white Americans of their earnings, they gave free rein to their black junior allies, who exercised their animal passions, mainly by raping defenseless white women.

All this had been made possible by the systematic disarming of the population through a series of Draconian gun-control measures. Fortunately, far-thinking patriots had secretly buried caches of weapons and munitions and begun training to strike against the Zionist-controlled federal government through terror and assassination. In *The Turner Diaries*, the first real blow against the hated national government is struck when one of the book's "freedom fighters" drives a delivery truck filled with a 4,400-pound fertilizer bomb into the basement of the FBI building. The blast that follows kills hundreds of workers and sets off a cycle of retaliation and mass murder that ends with the assassination and hanging of hundreds of thousands of Jews, blacks, and race-mixing liberals. (Pierce seemed to take particular pleasure in describing a group of UCLA professors dressed in their academic robes and hanging from lamp posts around that campus.)

Final victory comes when the last surviving Jews, blacks, and mixed-race peoples are expelled—Pierce is as vague as Hitler had been about their ultimate disposition—and the leaders of the new nation begin the slow process of rebuilding a pure Aryan America.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to know which is more disturbing: the sadistic racism that permeates *The Turner Diaries* or the fact that it sold nearly 200,000 copies in the fifteen years after it was published.

In the wake of such revelations about Nichols and McVeigh, *Time* and *Newsweek* gave us profiles of the bizarre right-wing groups that attracted men such as McVeigh and Nichols, while the major networks dispatched glamorous correspondents to the heartland for so-called in-depth analyses.

After the most intensive investigation in the history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, officials found only one other individual linked with the two men in their violent undertaking: Michael Fortier, an ex-army buddy of McVeigh and Nichols who was so addled by his daily intake of crystal meth that he would have made a good poster child for the consequences of drug abuse.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the underlying story of right-wing paranoia proved difficult to explain. These right-wing nuts sounded, well, nuts; more suitable for the comedy routines of the adult cartoon, King of the Hill, with Hank Hill's neighbor on one side mumbling incoherently about the imminent arrival of black helicopters while a second laconically dispenses such words of wisdom as "Guns don't kill people; our government kills people."

Absent a clear-cut right-wing conspiracy, the human drama had the staying power: the teddy bears hung on the chain-link fence outside the destroyed Murrah building, the grieving parents and relatives, the unrepentant McVeigh. After the conviction of the two men, even that emotional hook faded and most of the nation's media returned to peddling their favorite commodities: celebrity happenings, natural disasters, street crime, and-most of all-sex scandals.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps no one wanted to think about the implications of the very absence of a widespread conspiracy. McVeigh and Nichols had purchased forty 100-pound sacks of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, piled them in a cone-shaped mound in the back of a rented truck, saturated each with a gallon of fuel oil, and placed a small blasting charge at the base of the mound. McVeigh then drove the truck within 100 feet of the building, apparently lit the fuse, and walked away to his waiting pickup.<sup>11</sup>

Two pathetically incompetent individuals had brought a great American city to its knees. It was as easy as following a recipe from The Joy of Cooking-as easy as it had been for Lee Harvey Oswald or James Earl Ray to obtain a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight. That is what we learned from Oklahoma City: Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols didn't need any help.

If these two men acted without the direct support of fellow right-wing zealots, it is not to say that these ideological connections are unimportant. Today, there very well may be hundreds of individuals so filled with hatred for their national government that they are willing to justify the assassination of federal civil

service employees by planting a massive bomb in clear sight of a children's day care center.

As the fictional protagonist of The Turner Diaries said after the bombing of the FBI building, the death of these low-level clerks was "unfortunate" but necessary. The "corruption of our people by the Jewish-liberal-democratic-equalitarian" cancer had gone so far that there was no way it could be uprooted without violence. "If we don't cut this cancer out of our living flesh, our whole [Aryan] race will die."<sup>12</sup>

No wonder the Congress has been so reluctant to institute hearings on the rise of violently antigovernment paramilitary groups even as it falls all over itself to launch another investigation of sex in the White House. Monica Lewinsky and Paula Jones we can understand -- not our vulnerability to a decorated war hero who stared dispassionately at autopsy photographs of the mutilated children from the Murrah Building and then boasted to his lawyers about his success in raising the "body count" to teach the federal government a lesson.<sup>13</sup>

There was never any doubt about the immediate inspiration for the Oklahoma City bombing. As journalists and investigators quickly realized, the blast came on the second anniversary of the storming of the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas--an operation that led to the death of cult leader David Koresh and eighty of his followers, including twenty-four children. Although the Clinton administration continues to defend the conduct of agents of the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), most independent observers now believe that officials badly handled the episode from start to finish, underestimating the fanaticism of Koresh and his hold over his paranoid followers and downplaying the dangers involved in a military-style operation against the compound.

Whatever these failures of judgment, polls showed that the majority of Americans tended to place the ultimate responsibility at the feet of David Koresh and his

fellow cult leaders. In clear violation of federal firearms laws, the Branch Davidians had accumulated an arsenal that included numerous illegal automatic weapons and more than one million rounds of ammunition. Moreover, Koresh and several of his advisers had repeatedly scoffed at the lawful orders of federal and state courts. Lest we forget, two ATF agents died when they tried to enforce the orders of the courts.

To McVeigh and Nichols and to an unknown number of other Americans, however, the Waco assault was proof that the federal government—operating through its jackbooted agents in the FBI and ATF—would do anything to disarm and destroy Christian patriots who dared to challenge the authority of the federal government, including deliberately murdering innocent children.<sup>14</sup>

In order to understand how these Americans became so alienated from their government, we have to reach back to the passions of the Cold War. When Boston candy manufacturer Joseph Welch founded the John Birch Society in 1958, his rhetoric seemed little different from that of the right-wing anti-Communists of the period. Welch opposed the United Nations, argued that liberalism was Communism in disguise, and passionately espoused his Manichaeian view of the Cold War. "This is a worldwide battle between light and darkness," he told his followers, "between freedom and slavery, between the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of anti-Christ for the souls and bodies of men."<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, Welch's John Birch Society marked something of a departure in the evolution of postwar right-wing movements. In the first place, Welch and his followers escalated the levels of rhetorical paranoia. In the 1936 presidential campaign, newspaper magnate Randolph Hearst sneered that Franklin Roosevelt was Joe Stalin's favorite, and Joe McCarthy constantly complained that Communists had infiltrated the State Department. To Welch and many of his fellow Birchers, however, the Communists actually controlled the government. Welch, you may recall, claimed that President Dwight Eisenhower was a "dedicated conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy"—the latest actor in

an ever-changing plot against free men that reached back through the Bolshevik and French revolutions to the Illuminati Freemason conspiracy.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the Birchers also brought the notion that the national government was already under the control of Communist forces into the national political dialogue. Between 40 and 45 percent of Americans dismissed the Birchers as hysterical alarmists, but the Birch Society was not the usual ragtag handful of misfits and fanatics. By 1962, membership passed the 60,000 mark and, more important, the wealth and standing of Birchers within their home communities made it difficult to ignore them.

The average John Bircher's income was well above the national average. These were doctors, lawyers, substantial businessmen, and comfortably paid midlevel managers. And they proved to be remarkably resourceful organizers and promoters of their ideas. In George Wallace's presidential campaign in 1968, for example, several of the most successful of his non-Southern state campaigns were dominated by Birchers.<sup>17</sup>

Even as Welch's John Birch Society steadily grew in membership during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a Missouri-based chemist and well-to-do entrepreneur named Robert DePugh had begun to create a paramilitary anti-Communist organization that he called the Minutemen. His goal was to recruit members into small, well-armed, and well-trained guerrilla units; collect intelligence data on the infiltration of the federal government by "traitors" and pro-Communists; and prepare his followers for a revolutionary war of resistance against the coming Communist takeover.<sup>18</sup> Like many of these ultra-right leaders, DePugh carefully concealed his background. Over the years, though, investigators gradually constructed a profile. It was not a reassuring picture.

He had enrolled in the United States Army in December 1942, then received a medical discharge fifteen months later because of what military doctors called a "schizoid personality." Robert Welch and DePugh

cooperated briefly, but even the fanatical Welch realized that this man was dangerously unstable. (After John Kennedy's assassination, twenty congressmen introduced a bill to control the sale of weapons by mail order. DePugh, never a subtle man, distributed posters with photographs of the twenty legislators, each placed squarely in the circle and cross-hairs of a telescopic sight.)<sup>19</sup>

DePugh surrounded himself with individuals who were hardly stabilizing influences. One of his associates pleaded guilty to possessing nine submachine guns and stealing twenty-three antitank bazookas from an Indiana National Guard armory in 1959. Another associate was arrested fifteen times between 1950 and 1960 on charges ranging from indecent exposure to assault and battery. During the mid-1960s, the organization claimed to have more than 40,000 supporters-undoubtedly an exaggeration. Still, watchdog groups estimated membership at more than 10,000, with many other sympathizers and passive supporters.<sup>20</sup>

In late January 1968, however, Seattle police (who had infiltrated the local branch of the Minutemen) arrested seven members of the organization and charged them with conspiring simultaneously to bomb a local police station and a hydroelectric plant. According to the indictment, during the chaos likely to follow the bombings, commando units would rob four local banks and pocket the money to finance future Minutemen operations. Unfortunately for the planners of this operation, one of the participants was an informer. Eventually, DePugh himself was indicted for conspiracy and then convicted for trafficking in illegal weapons, mainly machine guns and hand grenades. With DePugh in prison, the Minutemen collapsed in the late 1960s.<sup>21</sup>

Violence-particularly vigilante violence-is, as Rap Brown used to say, "as American as cherry pie." Think of the various rebellions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Ku Klux Klan in its many manifestations, the explosive conflicts between labor and capital in the late-nineteenth century, the Silver Shirts of the 1930s.

Yet for most of our modern history-and by that, I mean the years since the American Civil War-this violence was directed against religious, racial, and ethnic minorities. Vigilantes saw themselves as upholding the nation; they were the true defenders of national values. But in the 1960s, the nation-state itself and the government and bureaucracy that controlled it had become the enemy.

That was only one of the many ways DePugh's Minutemen served as a model for many of today's most extreme antigovernment movements. During those first years after Robert DePugh founded his organization in 1957, he said little about race or religion; anti-Communism was the main arrow in his quiver. He quickly learned that Moscow-however attractive as the symbol of the "evil empire"-lacked the drawing power of the more traditional American scapegoats.

Even the most cursory examination of DePugh's followers reveals a striking range of racists and anti-Semites, including even aging veterans of the Silver Shirts and other fascist groups from the 1930s who had argued that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was a front for an international Jewish conspiracy.

Most Ku Klux Klansmen in the deep South declined to join the organization. They already had their own down-home paramilitary club, thank you. Still, a number of Klan leaders expressed support for the Minutemen and rallied to the banner of anti-Semitism. We associate the post -- World War II Klan almost entirely with its activities against African Americans in the South in the 1950s and 1960s, but the most violent fringe of that Klan movement was as anti-Semitic as it was anti-black. During those decades, white-robed terrorists in the South bombed nearly as many synagogues as black churches, and Klan orators often depicted Jewish political leaders as the real power behind the civil rights movement. As Alabama's Asa Carter said in a 1956 speech to his Klan followers, "The Negro and his jungle culture is the bacillus, but it is the Jew who injects

this deadly disease into the bloodstream of white Christian civilization."22

The Klan and old-time fascist groups such as the Silver Shirts were familiar faces to journalists and police and federal investigators. Less easy to place were the jumble of loosely affiliated religious groups known as Identity Christians. On the surface, these Identity Christians seemed little different from the dozens of millennial sects that have existed throughout American history. Like other millennialists, they warned of an approaching Armageddon in which Christians would engage in a violent and apocalyptic struggle against the forces of Satan-the "end-times"-before Jesus finally returned to reign on earth.

Their theology had a peculiarly racialist emphasis. Identity Christians drew their beliefs from a minor nineteenth-century British sect, the Anglo-Israelites, who argued that Anglo-Saxons were the true Jews-the literal descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel. American and Canadian adherents of Anglo-Israelism went further, arguing that modern Jews were not the descendants of Adam and Eve, but the sons and daughters of an illicit relationship between Eve and Satan. From that unholy sexual union came Cain. And it was from the seed of Cain-slayer of his brother, Abel-that this false Jewry descended. In short, the people whom we call Jews are the spawn of the devil, while the true chosen people-Aryans all-had emigrated through eastern and southern Europe during the first five centuries of the Christian era to settle in northern Europe and Great Britain.

In the 1930s and 1940s, these scattered churches coalesced around the Christian Nationalist movement of Gerald L. K. Smith. Smith, you may recall, was a significant political force in the 1930s, first as Senator Huey Long's right-hand man and then as the close associate of Father Charles Coughlin, the enormously popular radio show host and rabid anti-Semite.

Although leaders of the Christian Identity movement often faulted Smith on doctrinal grounds, they joined their twisted theology to Smith's social and political views-views that emphasized the role of Jews as the malevolent force in the American economic system. According to Smith and his old ally, Father Coughlin, these Semitic conspirators- descendants of the killers of Jesus-controlled the Federal Reserve system and were deliberately bankrupting the Anglo-Saxon majority by printing worthless paper money, enacting confiscatory taxes, and undertaking spendthrift programs for African Americans. While Smith's influence faded after the war, the Identity churches quietly expanded through the late 1940s and 1950s, becoming seed churches of a particularly vicious blend of traditional anti-Semitism and ultrareligious fanaticism.<sup>23</sup>

With their obsession with guns, the Minutemen furnished the last major building block of modern antigovernment groups. Many of the Minutemen were anti-Semitic, racist, and passionately religious. Many. However, all members of the Minutemen were united around the principle that the federal government had no right to interfere with gun ownership. This matter involved more than protecting constitutional rights; gun ownership was the only barrier that stood in the way of the complete subjugation of the white race.

The majority of Americans continued to see the Minutemen as more extreme and dangerous than the John Birch Society. Yet their focus upon the right to bear arms-particularly after the passage of federal gun-control legislation in the 1960s-gave paramilitary groups such as the Minutemen a hearing with a much larger constituency within American society, through the National Rifle Association and other sporting and gun-rights groups.

Thus, by the mid-1960s, groups and individuals scattered across the nation-but especially numerous in the South, Midwest, Rocky Mountain states, and the Northwest-saw themselves as the chosen people. They were, though, a chosen people under siege from their own government, a government controlled by Jews and

blacks. As one Christian Identity preacher vividly described it, we had reached the point where the God-fearing white people of the United States had been ground under the yoke of a federal government controlled by "pornographic push-cart peddlers," the "brown-skinned-homosexual-welfare bum," and the "secular-humanist-feminist-Jew."<sup>24</sup>

What this violent antigovernment movement lacked was numbers. But that began to change. First came the race riots of the long hot summers of the mid-1960s and the rise of what the pundits called "white backlash." And as American cities crackled to the sound of gunfire, the antiwar movement moved into the streets as the conflict in Vietnam accelerated after 1965.

At the same time, rising crime rates, the legalization of abortion, the rise of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, the increase in divorce rates, and the proliferation of "obscene" literature and films undermined traditional cultural symbols of conservatism and unnerved millions of Americans—an uneasiness reinforced by the new medium of television. For most Americans, their own community and neighborhood might be relatively calm, but through the immediacy of television, they became angered and felt menaced. Who were these disrespectful and unpatriotic drug-crazed hippies angrily burning the American flag night after night on the flickering screen while American soldiers died for their country in Vietnam? Who were these armed black men in combat fatigues and dark sunglasses, exultantly brandishing their semiautomatic weapons as they marched out of college classrooms? Who were these brazen women, flaunting their sexuality, burning their bras and challenging the God-ordained hierarchy of men over women?

In another time, these threatening events, these threatening individuals, would have remained remote, even abstract. Now they came directly into America's living room—in living color.<sup>25</sup>

The general political impact could be felt in a growing anti-Washington rhetoric, for the federal government

now seemed complicit in these assaults on traditional American values. It was the United States Justice Department which proposed that Northern schools be integrated. It was the federal courts that "pandered" to criminals, banning prayer from the schools even as it opened the nation's bookstores to filth and pornography. Spurred by fire-eating politicians and right-wing talk-show hosts, federal bureaucrats—from IRS agents to forest rangers to OSHA inspectors to EPA enforcement officers to ATF agents—were increasingly depicted as power-hungry, arrogant, jackbooted thugs intent on harassing honest tax-paying citizens with mindless and unnecessary red tape.

Protests against red tape are hardly enough to trigger mass murder, but the general shift toward conservatism in American politics pulled those on the far right toward greater legitimacy. Ideas that would have been dismissed out of hand a decade earlier were suddenly open for discussion. Most of what followed was rhetoric rather than action on the part of the far right into the 1970s. But that too began to change in the 1980s because of two developments.

The first was the end of the Cold War. From the Berlin airlift through the fall of Nationalist China and the struggles between "Communist" and "free world" forces in lesser-developed countries, Americans had rallied around the flag to oppose the threat posed by the international Communist conspiracy, a threat made even more terrifying by the possibility of nuclear annihilation. As the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s, there was a palpable sense of frustration. We had always had an enemy. But who was the enemy?

When Timothy McVeigh told his friend Michael Fortier that he planned to bomb the Murrah federal office building, Fortier pointed out that many of the workers who would be killed were low-level federal clerks. According to Fortier, McVeigh replied that he "considered all those people to be as guilty as if they were storm troopers in the movie Star Wars." They were guilty because they were part of the federal government, which he called the "evil empire."<sup>26</sup>

A second, underlying factor was less dramatic than the end of the Cold War but equally destabilizing: the economic changes of the last quarter century. For a sizable minority of Americans--for those who are well educated or have substantial capital assets--these have been golden years. However, two groups--American farmers and blue-collar workers--have been particularly hard-hit by these changes.

The background to this turnaround for small farmers was the go-go decade of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Encouraged by rising prices, easy loans, and the promise of growing post -- Cold War markets, they went into debt at an astonishing rate. The much-heralded Third World and Soviet grain markets failed to materialize, though. Rising property values and easy credit temporarily concealed the dimensions of the problem; however, in late 1979 Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker decided that inflation was out of control. He raised interest rates to never-before-seen levels and, in so doing, set off a devastating series of economic events in the nation's agricultural heartland. As farm-loan interest rates skyrocketed and land prices plummeted, bank officials and government officials overseeing federally guaranteed loan programs began the painful task of liquidating the farms of hundreds of thousands of farmers.<sup>27</sup>

In the decade and a half after 1980, one million small-to medium-sized family farms disappeared; in one twelve-month period alone in the mid-1980s, 900,000 Americans left the farm. Some did so voluntarily; others did so after years of desperate struggle culminating in humiliating bankruptcy and forced sales.<sup>28</sup>

Much of the same happened to blue-collar workers, particularly those less educated. The internationalization of trade, the opening of a global labor economy, the decline of trade unions, and the displacement of semiskilled and skilled workers by new technologies undermined the sense of security that had emerged during the twenty-five years after World War

II. Tax policies of the last twenty years-which have shifted the cost of maintaining federal, state, and local government away from the wealthy toward the struggling end of the middle class -further exacerbated these differences. Every study of income distribution, whether liberal or conservative, is relatively consistent. Between 1972 and 1996, white males with a high school education or less have suffered a devastating decline in real income, with estimates of this decrease ranging from 30 to 40 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Displaced farmers, as well as insecure blue-collar and marginal white-collar individuals, turned to any kind of explanation, any kind of hope, and the charlatans were waiting. There was the Posse Comitatus, a shadowy organization whose political ideology was as convoluted as the Christian Identity movement from which it sprang. Arkansas founder Gordon Kahl-a victim of the collapse in land values in the 1970s-drew upon the writings of American fascist "Mike" Beach, who argued in his 1968 Blue Book that the only legitimate source of law in America are "common law" courts, created informally on county levels and operating independently of any federal or state interference. Kahl convinced desperate followers that the entire banking system in America was the product of Jewish banking interests who controlled the federal government, and he proposed the creation of a vast network of common-law courts operating on the community level. These courts would supplant the corrupt, Jewish-black-dominated national (and state) political and legal systems. While African Americans- so-called "Constitutional citizens" created by the Fourteenth Amendment-were subject to federal law, white American citizens- "natural citizens"-could secede from the national government, thus avoiding financial obligations to banks, corporations, and the Internal Revenue Service.<sup>30</sup>

For followers of the Posse Comitatus movement and successive organizations such as the Montana Freeman, this disengagement from the system was part of a broader movement that also had tactical military advantages. Ever since the 1950s, Klan leaders such as Asa Carter and Louis Beam had been urging

antigovernment activists to organize into isolated "leaderless resistance" cells and to create as few paper records as possible. By the early 1990s, almost all the most extreme antigovernment leaders urged their followers to refrain from using Social Security numbers and credit cards. And they were told that they no longer had to use driver's licenses or to register their cars and trucks with state motor-vehicle departments.<sup>31</sup>

By the mid-1980s, more than 50,000 individuals a year were refusing to pay their federal taxes on the grounds that they were subject only to common-law courts. In 1986, the IRS had to assign 200 auditors just to deal with Posse tax-protest cases. More ominously, officers of these so-called common-law courts had begun to issue death threats against political officials, judges, and law-enforcement officials who refused to acknowledge their legitimacy.<sup>32</sup>

Terry Nichols had been directly influenced by such ideas. He destroyed his driver's license, passport, and voter registration card. When summoned to pay child support after leaving his first wife, he rejected the court's jurisdiction on the grounds that he was no longer a "constitutional" citizen of the "corrupt political corporate . . . United States of America."<sup>33</sup>

Undoubtedly, it will be an ironic footnote to Timothy McVeigh's epitaph to note that he was arrested by a sharp-eyed Oklahoma highway patrolman because he did not have a tag on his truck -- an act of defiance against any form of government, state or local.

By the early 1980s, radical antigovernment activists were ready to turn from organization to action. In the state of Washington, a charismatic right-wing rebel named Robert Jay Mathews formed The Order, drawing heavily upon Christian Identity theology for spiritual inspiration. In 1983 he and his followers launched a series of daring commando actions that included the assassination of a Jewish radio talk-show host in Denver, Alan Berg, and a series of bank- and armed-car robberies that netted them more than four million

dollars. More than half the money went to other far-right groups, while Mathews kept the rest to finance a series of terrorist acts closely modeled after the events described in *The Turner Diaries*. Indeed, most of The Order's operations -- from the assassination of Berg to the bank- and armored-car holdups to the use and distribution of counterfeit currency -- seem to have been lifted directly from the pages of Pierce's novel.

That blueprint proved their undoing: when a member of The Order was caught passing bogus bills, federal agents arrested him and persuaded him to serve as a spy within The Order.

On December 7, 1983, a 200-member FBI antiterrorist unit cornered Mathews and members of The Order at a rented complex on Whidby Island in Seattle's Puget Sound. Mathews's followers surrendered, but -- true to his pledge to die as an Aryan warrior -- Mathews held off the attacking force for six hours until a magnesium illumination flare touched off the large cache of ammunition, plastique, and dynamite that The Order had stored for future terrorist attacks. The Whidby Island house disappeared in a massive explosion felt five miles away.<sup>34</sup>

Mathews was only one of a number of right-wing martyrs who would die in a blaze of gunfire in the course of the next twelve years. Earlier that year, Posse Comitatus founder Gordon Kahl had confronted a group of federal marshals intent on arresting him for his long-standing failure to pay federal taxes. Heavily armed, Kahl killed two marshals and wounded four others before retreating to a heavily fortified bunker outside Smithville, Arkansas.<sup>35</sup> The local sheriff, aware of Kahl's conviction that only county officials were legitimate, walked up to the house to ask him to surrender. Kahl stepped out from his concealed position and killed him instantly with a barrage from his military-style Ruger Mini-14 rifle. In the gunfight that followed, Kahl died when a smoke grenade set off an ammunition case that in turn ignited an arsenal estimated to contain more than 100,000 rounds.<sup>36</sup>

What is most astonishing about these deadly shootouts is the way in which both men quickly became martyrs of the far-right movement. At gun shows across the country, activists displayed posters of Mathews and Kahl and printed pamphlets extolling the two as freedom fighters -- defenders of Christian civilization and the right of free men everywhere to bear arms. Forgotten was Mathews's order for the cold-blooded murder of Alan Berg. And no one thought to point out that it was Kahl who had initiated the initial firefight with outgunned federal marshals, killing two of them, or that he had murdered an Arkansas sheriff.

There is considerable merit in the argument of these anti-government groups that they only want to be left alone, to live their lives separated from a corrupt society and free from coercion by a demonic federal government. Of course, that is impossible, though. However much paramilitary groups may insist that they are simply arming themselves for defensive purposes, most Americans are unwilling to live side-by-side with unstable, paranoid groups and their arsenals of automatic weapons, antitank guns, and powerful explosives.

And even though members of the Free State of Texas or Posse Comitatus or Freeman societies may announce that they have "seceded" from all but "common-law" court jurisdiction, states will continue to insist upon regulating motor vehicles and their drivers. And no government -- local, state, or federal -- can simply allow individuals to decide they no longer have to pay taxes.

And so, the stage had been set for a repeated series of conflicts that only heightened the paranoia. Government bureaucrats may not be monsters, but they can make tragic mistakes. Take the siege of Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992. Federal officials -- desperate to infiltrate what they saw as the growing movement of illegal paramilitary units in Idaho -- first baited a crude trap to snare white supremacist survivalist Randy Weaver. An ATF undercover agent who had befriended the

cash-strapped Weaver persuaded him to shorten the barrel of a shotgun, thus making it an illegal weapon. When Weaver refused to come out for his arraignment on firearms charges, dozens of agents surrounded his Ruby Ridge hideout and, in a confusing gunfight, one agent and Weaver's fourteen-year-old son died. The FBI official in charge of the siege then issued his fatal "shoot to kill" orders. The problem was that the sharpshooter ended up killing Weaver's wife as she held her ten-month-old baby in her arms.<sup>37</sup>

In the aftermath of Ruby Ridge, Vicki Weaver became the vivid symbol of a cruel and murderous federal police state. Antigovernment zealots presented their views with passion and a blissful disregard for the facts on the burgeoning internet, on talk radio, and in sophisticated direct mailings.

The fiasco at Waco, coming only one year after Ruby Ridge, gave additional impetus to their attacks. One of the most effective was a video, *Waco: The Big Lie*, produced by Indiana attorney Linda Thompson. The filmmakers edited videotapes to make it appear that the federal government deliberately had set fire to the Branch Davidian compound. Throughout the film, Thompson argues that the attack on the Branch Davidians was the first stage in the government's campaign to disarm the American people and to destroy all Christian churches.<sup>38</sup>

*Waco: The Big Lie* -- with its heart-rending photographs of lifeless Branch Davidian children -- became a best-seller among Christian Identity and right-wing groups. It also proved to be what one journalist called the ultimate "get-the-bastards motivational tape." Terry McVeigh watched it over and over in the months leading up to Oklahoma City.<sup>39</sup>

After Ruby Ridge and even more so after Waco, violent antigovernment groups had powerful and emotional arguments to drive home their appeals to alienated Americans. These two events gave a dramatic impetus to the growth of the militia movement, a growth that continued after the events of Oklahoma City. In fact,

within hours of the blast, the internet was filled with "documentation" that the federal government secretly had planted the bomb in order to discredit patriots and to justify the adoption of stringent new gun controls.

Blood and guns, the worship of a fiery martyrdom, rampant paranoia -- all set in the midst of a Manichaeian worldview that sees the nation as balanced on the knife-edge of freedom and tyranny. Today we are dealing with a closed subculture against which rational argument seems useless.

We recoil with disgust and rage at the racism, the anti-Semitism, the cruelty explicit in much of their rhetoric; and it is tempting to demand that these hate-filled movements be smashed by the firm and forceful hand of the law. But Joel Dyer, a Colorado journalist who has written extensively on the far right in the farm belt, reacted much more uneasily once he came to know many of these people. So did James Aho, an Idaho sociologist who spent years interviewing members of Christian Identity sects. Many -- most -- of these right-wing converts, concluded Dyer and Aho, were tormented and confused, badly mistaken in their views, but hardly the monsters they had anticipated.

Demonization, after all, is a two-way street. One thing is certain: no one can know for certain whether Oklahoma City is the end of this story or simply the beginning. Nonetheless, the peaceful conclusion to the Montana Freeman siege of

1996 and the patient negotiations that ended the more recent standoff with the Republic of Texas paramilitaries remind us that forbearance and patience are not inconsistent with justice.

We might also do well to heed the words of Martin Luther King Jr. Violence as a means of achieving justice is not simply immoral, he argued; it is impractical. "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind," he said in one of his sermons. Brute force seeks to "humiliate the opponent rather than winning his understanding; it seeks to annihilate

rather than to convert." And ultimately, said King, it "ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers."

## Notes

1 "A Blow to the Heart," Time, 1 May 1995; New York Times, 21 May 1995.

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2 New York Times, 23 April 1995, 7 June 1995, 5 July 1995. Journalist Richard A. Serrano tells us what we know about McVeigh in *One of Ours: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998).

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3 New York Times, 28 May 1995, 24 April 1995; Kenneth S. Stern, *Once upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997; orig. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 187-91.

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4 New York Times, 23 April 1995, 24 April 1995, 5 July 1995, 6 August 1995; Joel Dyer, *Harvest of Rage* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1997) 216.

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5 Jeffrey Tobin, "The Plot Thins: The Oklahoma City Conspiracy That Wasn't," *New Yorker* 75 (12 January 1998): 8-9.

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6 New York Times, 24 April 1995; Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 219-20.

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7 Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 214-19.

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8 New York Times, 5 July 1995, 21 August 1995. See Andrew Macdonald (pseud. William Pierce), *The Turner*

Diaries, 2d ed. Hillsboro WV: National Vanguard Books, 1980; rpt., New York: Barricade Books, 1996.

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9Tobin, "The Plot Thins," 9; Dyer, Harvest of Rage, 214-19. During the trials of McVeigh and, particularly, Nichols, their defense attorneys brought forth witnesses who told of a mysterious second rental truck and shadowy "John Does" who supposedly were the real masterminds behind the bombing. Yet one of the most massive investigations ever undertaken by the Federal Bureau of Investigation has failed to turn up other conspirators.

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10Dyer, Harvest of Rage. From this generalization, I would exempt the good, gray New York Times and some of the nation's major newspapers, particularly the Washington Post. Even the Times and the Post, however, seemed to lose interest in the story in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City trial.

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11The precise instructions for construction and detonation of the bomb are available from a half-dozen internet sites.

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12Macdonald, Turner Diaries, 42; Dyer, Harvest of Rage, 214-35.

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13New York Times, 3 May 1995, 17 May 1995, 16 March 1996, 2 March 1997.

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14New York Times, 28 May 1995, 5 July 1995.

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15Political Research Associates, "John Birch Society," [www.publiceye.org/pratopics](http://www.publiceye.org/pratopics).

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16Alan Westin, "The John Birch Society: 'Radical Right' and 'Extreme Left' in the Political Context of Post-World War II-1962," in *The Radical Right*, ed. Daniel Bell (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Co., 1963) 201; Richard Abanes, *American Militias* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 134.

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17Westin, "The John Birch Society," 201-202; Seymour Martin Lipset, "Three Decades of the Radical Right: Coughlinites, McCarthyites, and Birchers," in Bell, *Radical Right*, 350, 352, 355-56; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) 296, 314, 343.

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18New York Times, 3 November 1961, 7 November 1961, 12 November 1961. See Richard Albares, "Nativist Paramilitarism in the United States: The Minuteman Organization," Report #109, Chicago IL: Center for Organization Studies, University of Chicago, April 1968.

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19Ibid.

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20New York Times, 3 November 1961, 7 November 1961,

12 November 1961, 23 June 1968, 1 October 1968, 15 October 1968, 15 November 1968, 19 November 1968, 23 November 1968, 14 July 1969, 17 July 1969, 18 July 1969, 24 July 1969,

12 August 1969, 23 August 1969, 13 September 1969, 22 January 1970, 21 February 1970, 10 October 1970, 4 November 1970,

5 May 1971, 27 February 1973, 1 May 1973, 20 June 1973; Albares, "Nativist Paramilitarism."

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21Ibid.

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22Typescript of Asa Carter speech before Klan meeting, May 1956, in author's possession.

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23Lenny Zeskind, *The "Christian Identity" Movement: A Theological Justification for Racist and Anti-Semitic Violence* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1986) 10, 16-17, 24-25; Gerald L. K. Smith, *Besieged Patriot*, ed. Elna Smith and Charles Robertson (Eureka Springs AR: Elna M. Smith Foundation, 1978) *passim*. See Glen Jeansonne and Gerald L. K. Smith, *Minister of Hate* (Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

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24James Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness* (Seattle WA: University of Washington Press, 1995) 89.

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25Marshall Frady, "Gary, Indiana," *Harper's Magazine* 239 (August 1969): 37.

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26New York Times, 13 May 1997.

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27Catherine Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) 156-58; Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 14-18, 138.

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28Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 14-18.

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29Conservative think-tanks have tried to refute this decline for low-income workers, by insisting that (1) the Department of Labor's Consumer Price Index has overestimated inflation and (2) most of the decline for low-income families has been attributable to the rise of single-parent households. See the reports of the

Employment Policy Foundation at  
[http://epf.org/labor97/97\\_income\\_3.html](http://epf.org/labor97/97_income_3.html).

Their views are clearly in the minority, however. See Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, eds., *Uneven Tides: Rising Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994) 11-16, 19-97, 265-67; Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 16-18; "Benefits Dwindle along with the Wages of the Unskilled," *New York Times*, June 14, 1998, p. 1.

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30Devin Burghart and Robert Crawford, *Guns and Gavel: Common Law Courts, Militias, and White Supremacy* (Portland OR: Coalition for Human Dignity, 1996) 1-3, 10, *passim*.

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31James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1987) 118; Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 168; Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 232; Asa Carter, *The Southerner* (mimeographed newsletter, 1971); Louis Beam, "Leaderless Resistance," [www.crusader.net/texts/bt/bt04.html](http://www.crusader.net/texts/bt/bt04.html).

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32Coates, *Armed and Dangerous*, 11-12.

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33Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 220.

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34Coates, *Armed and Dangerous*, 41-76.

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35James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 2d ed. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995) 138-46; Coates, *Armed and Dangerous*, 104-10.

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36Coates, *Armed and Dangerous*, 41-76, 104-10.

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37Dyer, *Harvest of Rage*, 77, 82.

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38Ibid., 222; Abanes, *American Militias*, 51-55.  
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39Abanes, *American Militias*, 52.  
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