

# **Deciphering the Second Wave of the American Militia Movement**



CARR POLICY INSIGHT

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## About the Author

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On October 8, 2020, six members of a Michigan-based organization known as the "Wolverine Watchmen" were arrested by the FBI and charged with conspiring to kidnap the state's governor, Gretchen Whitmer. Shortly thereafter, additional members were detained for "allegedly seeking to storm the Michigan Capitol and seek a civil war" as well as for plotting additional operations, such as the kidnapping of Virginia's governor, Ralph Northam.<sup>1</sup> The FBI operation against the "Wolverine Watchmen," which exposed that the group was engaged in fairly detailed planning and logistical preparations, was just the latest of a series of law enforcement actions that revealed the growing threat from the militia movement in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the first time Americans witnessed the willingness of individuals affiliated with the militia movement to perpetrate violent attacks against what they see as symbols of a 'tyrannical' American government. Earlier this year, many commemorated the 25 years that have passed since the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, which housed multiple federal agencies, by Timothy McVeigh and several other collaborators who had links with various militias groups.<sup>3</sup>

American anti-government militias are associations of civilians<sup>4</sup> engaged in the promotion of an ideology that undermines the authority and legitimacy of the federal government, military training, and accumulation of firearms and military technology.<sup>5</sup> What are the specific ideological pillars of the militia movement? How is it different or similar to other movements of the far right? And is this really the same movement that initially emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s? If not, how has it changed over time, and what are the main challenges it represents to law enforcement and American society today?

This article will aim to answer these questions and provide historical and operational context for the militias' contemporary evolution. The next section will identify the origins of the first wave of the militia movement, its early characteristics, and its eventual decline. Subsequent sections will explain the dynamics that led to the reemergence of the movement at the end of the previous decade and the specific threats and challenges it represents today for law enforcement and policymakers. The article concludes with policy recommendations which are especially relevant considering the potential risk of post-election violence.

## The First Wave of the Militias

While several anti-taxation groups emerged in rural America in the 1970s, the militia movement was mainly a product of the 1980s farm crises, combined with a backlash against rapid economic, cultural, and technological changes in American society and the growing political pressure to promote gun control and environmental legislation. Many of

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<sup>1</sup> David Eggret and Ed White, "13 extremists charged in plots to kidnap Michigan governor, spark 'civil war'" *Times of Israel*, October 9, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Kayla Epstein, Lindsey Bever, and Eli Rosenberg, "An armed militia was 'detaining' migrants at the border. The FBI arrested its leader," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2019, and Bruce Finley, "Loveland man linked to Colorado Capitol coronavirus protest arrested for possessing pipe bombs," *Denver Post*, May 3, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Brillbeck, "Michigan Militia Groups had Ties to Timothy McVeigh," *News 9*, October 9, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For the most part. As discussed later in the text, some also include active duty military.

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth discussion about the origins of American militias, see Daniel Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door, The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003); Richard Abanes, *American Militias: Rebellion, Racism, and Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996); and Robert L. Snow, *Terrorists Among Us: The Militia Threat* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1999).

the early leaders and members of the movement were affiliated with other far-right groups, and multiple studies also connect the movement's ability to mobilize support and engage in military training to its ability to attract veterans of the Vietnam war.<sup>6</sup>

The movement's ethos was dominated in its early years by "New World Order" beliefs in which the U.S. government is seen as an entity that has been hijacked by foreign "forces" or agents that aim to promote the merging of the United States into the United Nations or another version of global government. Such conspiracy theories were melded into various nativist, anti-immigration, and anti-globalist ideas. Moreover, in the early 1990s, many militia leaders also embraced more blunt white supremacy and anti-Semitic views, which further connected the militia to other components of the American far-right. Some of the militias focused on military training, while others were more engaged in building a base of support via propaganda efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1990 and 2000, various militias and associated individuals (who identified with anti-government ideology) plotted or perpetrated 49 attacks. And while many of those attacks failed, their characteristics illustrate the unique threat posed by the militia movement. Approximately half of those attacks were aimed against governmental targets (53%), and most of the rest were aimed against law enforcement/military (13%) and infrastructure (13%). Moreover, just 13% of those attacks were aimed against property. In comparison, the other active far-right groups at that time (Neo-Nazis, Skinheads, Christian identity, and anti-abortionists) focused the great majority of their attacks on minority people (39%), abortion clinics and physicians (26%) and LGBTQ (17%). Moreover, more than a quarter of the attacks were against property (28%).<sup>8</sup> These findings are in line with the fact that many of the militias' attacks were perpetrated by individuals experienced in the usage of various weapons and ammunition, who had at least some level of military training, while a significant portion of attacks by other groups on the far right were initiated by individual/s with limited operational experience, and were aimed against property for the purpose of intimidation.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a quick decline in militia activities. Most analysts attribute these dynamics to the increasing scrutiny from law enforcement following the Oklahoma City bombing, the economic boom of the 1990s, the failure of conspiracy narratives that predicted the collapse of U.S. infrastructure resulting from the Y2K computer bug, and the overall shift in attention to the threat of Jihadi terrorism.

## A Second Wave

The election of the first African-American President in 2008 led to a dramatic rise in the activities of groups on the far-right, including a spike in acts of violence and hate crimes.<sup>9</sup> This dynamic did not exclude the militias. Hence, it is not surprising that two of the most known current militia groups were formed circa 2008. The Three Percenters was founded

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<sup>6</sup> For more analysis on the early days of the militia movement, see Neil Hamilton, *Militias in America: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1996); Joshua D. Freilich, *American Militias: State-Level Variations in Militia Activities* (El Paso, TX: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2003); and Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Arie Perliger, *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 53-59.

<sup>8</sup> All data in this paper is based on UML's far-right dataset, managed by the author. See methodological details, see Perliger. 2020. Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

by Michael Vanderboegh, a former member of the Alabama militia.<sup>10</sup> The Oath Keepers also started to take shape during 2008, led by a former libertarian by the name of Steward Rhodes.<sup>11</sup> Other militias intensified their efforts to collect weapons and preparing for operations. For example, On June 8, 2008, six individuals associated with the Pennsylvania Citizens Militias were arrested after law enforcement uncovered that they were plotting multiple attacks while preparing homemade bombs and other improvised weapons.<sup>12</sup> By the summer of 2009, the Southern Poverty Law Center had also taken notice, publishing a report about the "second wave" of militias, reflecting that these two organizations were a part of a broader movement.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, between 2008-2017 militias' yearly number of attacks doubled on average in comparison to the period of 2001-2007. While between 2001-2007 Militias were involved in 19 attacks or plots (an average of 2.7 per year), between 2008-2017 they were involved in 54 attacks and plots (5.4 per year).

While still retaining its affinity for conspiracy theories about various cabals of elites who are controlling the U.S. government, the second wave of militias shifted to focus on the need to counter what they perceived as ongoing attempts by the federal government to erode constitutional rights. Specifically, they felt threatened by policies they believed limited civil liberties, undermined the Second Amendment, empowered federal law enforcement (especially in their ability to monitor and conduct searches of peoples' possession and property), as well as restrictive policies related to land ownership and environmental regulations.<sup>14</sup>

The new wave also included "border patrol" groups that focused on "protecting" the country from what they usually perceived as the invasion of America by illegal immigrants. During 2019, as conservative pundits intensely discussed human caravans arriving from Central America, groups such as the United Constitutional Patriots, Patriots of the Constitution, and Mountain Minutemen engaged in patrol operations along the border. A member of United Constitutional Patriots, was quoted in a police report from April 24, 2019, explaining what he thought should have been done to illegal immigrants: "Why are we just apprehending them and not lining them up and shooting them . . . we have to go back to Hitler days and put them all in a gas chamber."<sup>15</sup>

In retrospect, the rapid growth of the new wave of militias can be attributed to their ability to promote issues that are predominant in the public discourse and views that enjoy significant legitimacy among large parts of the American public, and especially among conservatives, such as gun rights, limiting environmental regulations, and preventing the expansion of the power of federal agencies. For example, the militias' opposition to gun control legislation has been largely driven by the perception of many that this represents a breach of the Second Amendment and a violation of a constitutional right, directly impacting the ability of many to preserve their common practices and way of life. In contrast, the opposition to environmental legislation has been driven by the economic consequences of such legislation, as perceived by the militia members, particularly the decline of economic sectors that are not environmentally friendly but crucial to the economy in rural areas. Such sentiments were clearly articulated in the words of Charles

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<sup>10</sup> Judy L. Thomas, "Longtime militia and 'Patriot' leader Mike Vanderboegh dies at 64," *Kansas City Star*, August 10, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> "The Second Wave: Return of the Militias," Southern Poverty Law Center, August 1, 2009, pg. 22.

<sup>13</sup> "The Second Wave: Return of the Militias," Southern Poverty Law Center, August 1, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-59.

<sup>15</sup> Perliger, pp. 144-145.

Shumway, an Arizona Militia member: "Unless the 'curse' of the Endangered Species Act was repealed, there would be 'rioting, bloodshed, rebellion, and conflict that will make the Serbian-Bosnia affair look like a Sunday picnic.'"<sup>16</sup>

## The Growing Threat from Contemporary Militias

While ideological changes explain some of the popularity of militias today, recent developments transformed the movement into a more substantial security threat than it ever was before. While the militias of the 1990s rarely operated outside of their states and mostly focused on regional recruitment, some of the militias operating today have demonstrated their ability to operate all over the country. In the fall of 2013, Rhodes, the leader of the Oath Keepers, indicated his intention to deploy his 'troops' all over the United States to provide security "during a crisis," as well as to assist and train local militia groups.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Oath Keepers showed up in Ferguson, Missouri, to "support" the city during the unrest of summer 2014,<sup>18</sup> as well as in Medford, Oregon, in April 2015 to support gold miners who were in dispute with the federal authorities.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, following the Newtown school attack in 2012, the Three Percenters sent threatening emails to law enforcement in Connecticut,<sup>20</sup> and in 2014, Vanderboegh and members of the Three Percenters actively participated in a standoff in Bunkerville, Nevada, between Cliven Bundy's supporters and federal agents from the Bureau of Land Management.<sup>21</sup> Thus, some of the militia groups can no longer be seen as local organizations, but more as a nationwide movement, which can 'deploy' into multiple areas.

Another concerning characteristic of the new militias is the prominence of law enforcement and military veterans in their ranks. While earlier militias included some veterans of the Vietnam war, the synergy between the contemporary militias and some law enforcement/military is unprecedented.<sup>22</sup> A recently uncovered database reveals that 10 percent of Oath Keepers members are actually on active duty military or active officers of civilian law enforcement agencies. Another significant portion of the group's membership is retired military and law enforcement personnel.<sup>23</sup>

The growing involvement of law enforcement in the militias' subculture is also reflected in the emergence of new associations that directly challenge the government and explicitly

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<sup>16</sup> Testimony of Susan Schock, Director of Gila Watch, in front of the Montana House of Representatives, July 11, 1995, accessed November 2, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> "Extremist Files: Stewart Rhodes," Southern Poverty Law Center, retrieved on May 23, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Amanda Sakuma and Bradley J. Rayford, "'Oath Keepers' Armed with Guns Roam Streets of Ferguson," MSNBC, November 11, 2015; Terrence McCoy, "The Oath Keepers: The Little-known Militia Now Roaming the Streets of Ferguson," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Kasey Kershner, "Tension Between BLM and Mining Operation, Oath Keepers Set Up Camp," KDRV.com, April 14, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Paxton, "Retaliation: Home Addresses of CT Legislators Who Voted in Favor of Gun Registration Posted By Patriot Activists," *Freedom Outpost*, February 28, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Cliven Bundy is an American cattle rancher who clashed with federal agents from the Bureau of Land Management over defaulted grazing fees. The conflict escalated into an armed standoff in January-February 2014, as family members and supporters joined Bundy. The FBI was able to eventually arrest Bundy at the Portland International Airport while he was on his way to support another standoff as an armed group of far-right extremists seized and occupied the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon. On December 20, 2017, he was released after his trial ended with a declaration of mistrial resulting from prosecutorial misconduct violating the federal Brady rule. Chris Gentilviso, "Cliven Bundy Supporter Threatens to Rip Harry Reid's Balls Off," *Huffington Post*, May 1, 2014; David Montero, "Judge dismisses case against Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and his sons," *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Mike Giglio, "A Pro-Trump Militant Group Has Recruited Thousands of Police, Soldiers, and Veterans: An *Atlantic* investigation reveals who they are and what they might do on Election Day," *Atlantic*, November 2020.

<sup>23</sup> "Inside the Oath Keepers: Active Cops Among The Militants," *Crime Report*, October 1, 2020; Justine Sharrock, "The Oath Keeper and the Age of Treason," *Mother Jones*, March/April 2010.

aim to recruit law enforcement personnel. For example, the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers of America (CSPOA), an organization which asserts that the federal government should be subordinated to the local authorities (i.e., local sheriffs), released in 2016 a call for local law enforcement to refuse to enforce gun control laws that they believe infringe on the Second Amendment.<sup>24</sup> It is not completely clear how many local sheriffs are members of the organization. However, there is evidence that around 60 sheriffs adopted some of the organization's guidelines,<sup>25</sup> which is a concern when considering that the organization instructs its members not to enforce federal laws. Recently, the CSPOA also ordered its members not to impose what they see as medical regulations that infringe on civil liberties, mainly mask policies during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>26</sup>

The prominence of law enforcement and military veterans within the new militia groups represents two major security challenges. First, it helps the militias to construct a more legitimate image and branding and facilitates their efforts to mobilize support, especially as they emphasize the fact that their members are individuals who risked their lives to protect the nation or their communities. Thus, it is more difficult for authorities to address these groups as potential domestic security threats and gain public legitimacy to promote countermeasures. Second, the popularity of the militias among a population with significant military and security experience may indicate their potential ability to execute sophisticated and impactful operations, as well as to maintain practices that may make it more difficult for federal agencies to monitor and counter their activities.

Interestingly, the growth in the presence of law enforcement within the militias led to an increase in their attacks against law enforcement and military targets. While until 2000, just 13% of militia attacks were pursuing such targets, between 2008-2017, their portion spiked to 40%, while another 38% were governmental targets. Such dynamics are a source of concern as it seems that law enforcement are facing challenges both from within (the recruitment of their personnel to militias) and from the outside (direct attacks by militia members).

## New Decentralized Groups

Alongside the more formal and hierarchical militia groups, the second wave of the movement also includes more loose associations that originated in online communities before transitioning into real-world activities. Probably the most known such network is the Boogaloo movement. After coalescing in 2019 mainly in online forums, the recent wave of public unrest, which began with the demonstrations against police brutality following the May 2020 killing of George Floyd, led its members to participate in counter-protests and anti-lockdown rallies. Comprised of many former militia members and members of the more veteran extreme far-right groups, the "Boogaloo boys" promote various anti-government ideas, including support for violent resistance against attempts by the government to undermine civil liberties and constitutional freedoms. It seems that at least some groups of Boogaloo also aim to exploit the social unrest in order to expedite national struggle, a kind of second civil war. They believe that such a war will allow them to restore

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<sup>24</sup> Tom Jackman, "National Sheriff's Group, Opposed to Federal Laws on Guns and Taxes, Calls for Defiance," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Jason Wilson, "US sheriffs rebel against state mask order even as Covid-19 spreads," *Guardian*, July 31, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

what they believe is the appropriate and traditional American way of life and culture, as well as the privileged status of white Americans.<sup>27</sup>

The emergence of the Boogaloo and similar networks indicate that while the traditional militias were more inclined to maintain a hierarchical military structure and paramilitary practices, a new form of militias had transitioned to a more decentralized and informal structure. On the one hand, it seems to facilitate more effective local recruitment and mobilization. Nonetheless, it is one reason why the movement has not yet been able to develop a coherent ideological framework. It is also not clear how many of its members are affiliated with additional extreme far-right groups and only identify as Boogaloo members just for specific activities. Boogaloo's decentralized nature also means that various affiliates operate independently in terms of engagement in violent activities.<sup>28</sup> While some of the Boogaloo groups tend to engage in more spontaneous acts of violence during demonstrations and rallies, there were some cases in which members were plotting more high-level operations.

On June 6, 2020, Air Force Sergeant Steven Carrillo—who was a member of the “Phoenix Ravens,” an elite unit designated to secure military personnel in foreign countries—was detained after allegedly firing at police officers who arrived at his residence in Santa Cruz, California, to investigate his connection to a May 29 shooting in Oakland that killed a Federal Protective Service officer. During the shootout, a deputy sheriff was killed, and a sheriff sergeant was injured. Carrillo himself was injured and tried to run away on foot before hijacking a car, which he abandoned minutes later. He eventually was detained while trying to steal another car from a nearby home. He is currently awaiting trial after he was charged with 19 felonies, including murder and attempted murder. According to the FBI, Carrillo was associated with the Boogaloo movement, and investigators found a ballistic vest with a Boogaloo patch in his vehicle. Moreover, Carrillo wrote the word “boog” in blood on the hood of the vehicle he had hijacked.<sup>29</sup>

The decentralization of at least some militia groups may also explain the apparent changes in the movement's target selection. The militias traditionally targeted the federal government's symbols of authority and power. However, if the main focus was on federal targets in the past, the shift to focusing on state-level governmental targets represents somewhat of a new trend. It is not clear yet if this is a temporary trend that is more related to the fact that state and local governments were the main enforcers of COVID-19 related regulations or a new operational element that will gain momentum in upcoming years and thus will demand modifications in the strategies developed to deal with such threats.

## Rhetoric and Recruitment of Contemporary Militias

Considering the changes in the nature and structure of the militia movement discussed above, it is not surprising to see some interesting new trends in the movement's rhetoric. One of the most observable changes is the new militias' attempts to engage in more

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<sup>27</sup> For additional sources on the Boogaloo, see “The Boogaloo Movement,” Anti-Defamation League; Dale Beran, “The Boogaloo Tipping Point,” *Atlantic*, July 4, 2020; and [Khrysgiana Pineda](#), “The boogaloo movement is gaining momentum. Who are the boogaloo 'bois' and what do they want?” *USA Today*, June 19, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Kriner and Colin P. Clark, “Eclectic Boogaloo: The anti-government extremist movement's loose structure and adaptability is the key to its growth,” *Slate*, August 19, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Nate Gartrell, “Steven Carrillo, Boogaloo-associated suspect in killing of two CA officers, has first court appearance in federal death penalty case,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 23, 2020; “The Boogaloo Movement,” Anti-Defamation League.

mainstream activities and rhetoric to enhance their legitimacy and visibility. For example, in recent years, militias ‘offered’ to extend their services to communities in crisis. Following several active shooter incidents in schools between 2017-2018, the Oath Keepers expressed their willingness to deploy in order to protect schools all over the country.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the Three Percenters created an organizational, national disaster relief team, which was supposed to provide assistance in cases of natural or man-made crisis.<sup>31</sup>

Relatedly, for the same reasons, contemporary militias also encourage their members to engage in non-violent political protests, which can increase their visibility. When democratic Congresswoman Maxine Waters was quoted as saying, “*Let’s make sure we show up wherever we have to show up. And if you see anybody from that Cabinet [President Trump’s cabinet] in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd. And you push back on them. And you tell them they’re not welcome anymore, anywhere,*”<sup>32</sup> the Oath Keepers tweeted in response in their official account: “*Oath Keepers Call to Action: Protest Terrorist Inciter Maxine Waters Thursday, July 19. Oath Keepers, stand against terrorism, stand for Freedom of Speech, freedom of association, and in support of ICE/Border Patrol as they enforce constitutional immigration.*”<sup>33</sup>

The involvement of militias in mainstream political discourse also led them to adopt some of the relatively new trends that seem to be proliferating within certain parts of the American right. Among them are the perception that institutions of higher education are engaged in indoctrinating young Americans to left-wing liberal ideas, resentment toward globalism and policies that are seen as undermining American traditional customs and norms, and hatred toward “mainstream” media platforms. For example, a Three Percenters member stated in a post on the organization’s message board that “To be vigilant means to kill your T.V. and think for yourself.”<sup>34</sup> In this context, it seems that contemporary militias adopted the common perception among far-right association and parties that the left’s cultural influence may pave a path to the destruction of the conservative and traditional way of life and represent a form of oppression that needs to be resisted, even violently.

However, it is important to note that the two issues that still drive much of the militias’ discourse are the public dispute regarding the Second Amendment and immigration. These are the two most prominent rallying cries of such groups, and in some cases, they lead them to overreach and directly challenge federal authorities’ sovereignty. For example, the United Constitutional Patriots, Patriots of the Constitution, and Mountain Minutemen collaborated to engage in vigilante operations along the border. On October 19, 2018, they issued a press release claiming: “The Invaders are now being trucked to the border. Several thousand expected. We do understand that Trump is deploying troops but, in the meantime, it is imperative that we have boots on the ground ... Not only are the Invaders being trucked, they coming by boat to San Diego and they are also coming from Africa then up through South America to our border.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Eltagouri, Marwa. 2018. “A Militia Group Hopes it Can Stop Shootings by Posting Armed Volunteers Outside Each School,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 2018, see at - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/02/27/a-citizen-militia-hopes-it-can-stop-shootings-by-posting-armed-volunteers-outside-each-school/>.

<sup>31</sup> Perlinger, p. 141.

<sup>32</sup> Jamie Ehrlich, “Maxine Waters encourages supports to harass Trump administration officials,” CNN, June 25, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Perlinger, p. 142.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142-143.

<sup>35</sup> “United Constitutional Patriots,” Southern Poverty Law Center.

Interestingly, and somewhat worrisome, the growing popularity of the militias led to the adoption of some of their rhetoric and ideas by other far-right associations. An example is a newsletter which was issued in July 2018 by “America’s Promise Ministries,” a Christian Identity organization, which addressed Cliven Bundy’s dismissal being appealed by federal prosecutors. It stated that the government, DOJ, FBI, BLM are all corrupted and are acting as tyrants while comparing their actions to the policies of King George III “...This government tyranny was a flashback to the years, months and days leading up to the American revolution...these colonists, exercising their right to bear arms, like the Bundys many years later, defeated an oppressive sovereign.”<sup>36</sup>

## Policy Recommendations – Addressing the Root Causes and Facilitators of the Militias’ Violence

The militia movement has been part of the American militant landscape for more than 40 years. Its growing popularity, increasing geographical dispersion, and its ability to attract members with substantial operational experience make it one of the most concerning components of the violent American far-right and a challenging policy problem. A response should focus both on addressing the environmental factors that facilitate the growth of the militia movement, as well as on undermining militias’ ability to enhance their capabilities and recruitment efforts.

The characteristics of the American contemporary political culture that provide space for the militias’ growth are the increasing political polarization, widening rural-urban divides, and contentious political discourse, which frames political competitions in absolute terms. Several steps can be taken to address how such dynamics are exploited by the far-right. However, it is important to note that these are long-term solutions since political culture cannot be shaped by the utilization of short-term tactical policies. Moreover, some of the suggested policies may be controversial or deemed unrealistic; however, there is still a utility in providing an overview of such policies as well:

1. **Development of social and political mechanisms that can incentivize cross-partisan interaction and discourse**, which in turn can counter further political polarization. Leaders in the communal, state, and federal levels should promote agendas and policy enterprises that can address bi-partisan needs and challenges. Once such shared engagements enhance bi-partisan trust, negotiated agreed policies on more controversial issues can be promoted. Such mechanisms can reduce the perception that electoral competitions are a zero-sum game, encourage dialogue, and reduce contentions rhetoric.
2. One of the major triggers for the rise of the militias was failing or lack of policies that address specific economic and social crises in the labor market and relevant economic sectors. **More nuanced federal policies that can address the specific financial and structural needs of rural and agricultural sectors** can go a long way in restoring trust in federal policies and agencies’ potential positive impact.

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<sup>36</sup> Klyaman, Larry. “Bundy Dismissal Appealed by Sessions’ Prosecutors,” Accessed September 2nd, 2018. [americanpromiseministries.org https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c16941\\_d3cb3ab31f794308999e8b32161454bc.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c16941_d3cb3ab31f794308999e8b32161454bc.pdf)

3. **The U.S.'s federal structure should be utilized to ensure that social and cultural cleavages do not translate to a contentious political environment**, which provides a breeding ground for militant groups. Since much of the popularity of the militia movement relies on emphasizing grievances related to the marginalization of conservative cultural and social values and norms, allowing states or local communities to manage social and normative transitions at their own pace can alleviate some of the tension which drives individuals to join militias.
4. Studies identified that veterans are one of the main reservoirs of recruits for militias. Authorities need to **identify which deficiencies in the current policies prevent effective integration of former military into the civilian environment** and thus make them more vulnerable to recruitment.
5. Some American political leaders' growing willingness to operate against core principles of democratic practices reflects a need to **re-think the potential introduction of legal and constitutional mechanisms that limit such dynamics**. The 2020 elections, which ended with fairly close and competitive results in some battleground states, further confirmed the country's growing divide and polarization. In the days after the elections, some of the militias seem to embrace and promote President Trump's argument that the electoral process was manipulated to prevent his re-election.<sup>37</sup> I would argue that their support of such arguments can be explained not just by their frustration with the election of the democratic candidate for the Presidency but also by their perception that the President is a potential vehicle for the destruction of the current political system and its rebuilding according to their vision. In other words, they see the current administration as what political scientists designate as an anti-system party.<sup>38</sup> Like other democracies, Americans should consider the implementation of legal protections against anti-system movements. The increasing frustration from the election results, coupled with the continued rhetoric from political leaders about the stolen elections, solidifies the delegitimization of the results in militia members' eyes and thus provide them the normative justification to perpetrate violent attacks. Stewart Roads words in an interview with Alex Jones, provide an effective illustration of such dynamics - *"We have men already stationed outside D.C. as a nuclear option in case they attempt to remove the president illegally, we will step in and stop it"*<sup>39</sup> The militias, it seems, are unwilling to accept the results of the election without a fight.

Several methods should be considered by law enforcement to undermine the capabilities of militias in the short-term (some of them are already being employed on some level by different agencies):

1. In the past, the usage of civil lawsuits for damages by victims of far-right violence was proved to be a highly effective tool in the fight against the far-right. Such lawsuits led to the collapse of the "Aryan Nations," Robert Shelton's "United Klans of America," Thomas

<sup>37</sup> Nguyen, Tina. 2020. "MAGA Nation Tries to Rally Around Trump with MAGApalooza," *Politico*, Nov. 11, 2020, see at - <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/11/maga-rally-washington-dc-435958>

<sup>38</sup> For more on anti-system parties, see Mattia Zulianello, *Anti-System Parties: From Parliamentary Breakthrough to Government* (London: Routledge, 2019), and Giovanni Ciapoccia, "Anti-System Parties: A Conceptual Reassessment," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 14:1 (2002): pp. 9-35.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, Timothy. "Militia leader Stewart Rhodes says he has men stationed outside of D.C. ready to engage in violence on Trump's order," *MediaMatters*, Nov. 12, 2020, see at - <https://www.mediamatters.org/infowars/militia-leader-stewart-rhodes-says-he-has-men-stationed-outside-dc-ready-engage-violence>

Metzger’s “White Aryan Resistance,” and others. Such legal initiatives are also in many cases promoted by human rights organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

2. Most militias have similar pre-attack practices, including the stockpiling of ammunition and firearms, paramilitary training, prep of safe houses, etc. Such behaviors are highly visible and, thus, should not be difficult to monitor by law enforcement.
3. Since the data on militias’ operations find a strong correlation between their rhetoric and discourse and target selection, ongoing monitoring of their communications may not be just useful to identify the leading narratives that dominate their rhetoric but also their specific potential targets of interest. While such an approach can improve the prioritization of law enforcement’s resources, it will also demand from law enforcement to improve the use of data mining protocols and linguistic analysis.
4. Since many of the militias seem to shift their focus to state and local targets, it is imperative to further invest in local law enforcement training and education in the ideological pillars, operational characteristics, and organizational structure of militias and related groups.

The combination of long-term measures focusing on undercutting the elements of the political environment and culture, which are of benefit to militias, with effective short-term tactical practices, can provide a practical road-map as political leaders, practitioners, and law enforcement fight to protect American citizens from far-right violence.