

## Domestic Extremist Groups Weaker but Still Worrisome - Militias Waned After '95 Bombing

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A decade after the Oklahoma City bombing, which killed 168 people and turned a spotlight on violent anti-government extremists, the number of paramilitary militia groups has dropped dramatically and other radical-right groups have splintered and fallen into disarray, according to terrorism analysts and law enforcement officials.

But those authorities say the threat from domestic terrorists remains strong and is worrisome because of "lone wolf" actors who may have associated with extremist groups and remain committed and violent. They point to people such as Eric Rudolph, who pleaded guilty last week to attacks at an abortion clinic and the 1996 Summer Olympics that killed two people.

Two years ago, federal agents in Texas arrested William Krar, a white supremacist who possessed enough sodium cyanide to kill 6,000 people, half a million rounds of ammunition and 60 pipe bombs. Krar, who had ties to anti-government groups, pleaded guilty to possessing a chemical weapon and was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, much of the federal government's focus -- and the nation's worries -- has turned to foreign threats. But advocacy groups and experts in home grown terrorism say cases such as Rudolph's and Krar's show that domestic threats still bubble dangerously close to the surface.

"If Krar had a Middle Eastern name, we would have had the military in there," said Ken Toole, director of the Montana Human Rights Network, which tracks militia and hate groups. "The war on terror continues to focus on the external threats, but do not kid yourself. The hard core is still out there in this country."

Ten years ago today, Army veteran Timothy J. McVeigh -- fuelled by an intense hatred of the government -- blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in what was then the deadliest act of terrorism on U.S. soil.

Investigators initially suspected foreign terrorists, and Americans were stunned to learn that the attack was by one of their own. It drew unprecedented attention to the ferocity of anti-government sentiment in this country, as well as to the extraordinary number of extremist hate groups with a long reach.

Since then, terrorism experts and law enforcement officials agree that many of the militia and other organized radical groups -- such as white supremacists, neo-Nazis and Christian Identity adherents -- have weakened, in large part because they felt the heat of law enforcement and negative public perception after the Oklahoma City bombing. They said the number of militia groups has dropped from about 900 right after the bombing to 150 today.

In some ways, observers say, the domestic terrorism threat is broader today because of recruitment on the Internet, and because it comes not only from the radical right but also from left-wing radical environmental groups, which have caused tens of millions of dollars in property damage but no fatalities.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reported the existence of more than 762 hate groups last year, an increase from previous years. According to the Anti-Defamation

League, 15 law enforcement officials have been killed by anti-government extremists in the past 10 years.

"What has changed is that the numbers of the committed have steadily dropped since the Oklahoma bombing, but those who are committed have hardened views," said Daniel Levitas, author of "The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right."

David Trochman of the Militia of Montana said in an interview that members are "much more private" about belonging to a militia since the bombing but that his members remain unhappy about what is happening in the country, particularly what he sees as liberal border policies.

Officials at the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI acknowledge that since the Sept. 11 attacks they have viewed foreign threats as a higher priority than domestic ones. A recent department internal assessment of threats did not list militias, white-supremacist groups and violent antiabortion activists. The assessment, first reported by Congressional Quarterly, did mention radical environmental groups and animal rights activists as potential threats.

John Lewis, deputy chief of the FBI's counterintelligence unit, said authorities had seen the "resourcefulness" of foreign terrorists. "That being said, we are very committed to investigating domestic threats," he said.

Both agencies noted that in recent years there has been heightened communication with local law enforcement to help identify domestic-based threats. The official added that although the domestic groups have been relatively quiet since the 1995 bombing, the FBI has hundreds of ongoing probes involving extremist groups nationwide.

Lewis cautioned that the threat of "eco-terrorists" cannot be minimized simply because there have been no fatalities in their attacks. "When you're burning homes, buildings and ski slopes, it's just a matter of time," he said. "In my view, they have just been lucky."

Experts attribute the weakened state of most hate groups to the death of prominent leaders in the extremist movements that left a power vacuum and dwindling membership because of infighting. Others, they say, simply distanced themselves after the Oklahoma City bombing. "They didn't sign up to kill babies," said Mark Pitcavage, the national director of fact-finding for the Anti-Defamation League.

The current void in leadership on the radical right plays a major role in assessing the immediate threat of such activists, said academics and terrorism experts.

One of the most significant losses for anti-government zealots was the 2002 death of National Alliance founder William Pierce. Pierce wrote "The Turner Diaries," considered McVeigh's blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing, and has received virtual cult status among far-right extremists. Last fall, Aryan Nations founder Richard G. Butler died, dividing the once formidable group into two factions, hampered by lawsuits and arrests.

The conviction of white supremacist Matthew Hale in Chicago for threatening a federal judge gutted his World Church of the Creator, which advocated the premise that "white people are the creators of all worthwhile culture and civilization." And Robert Millar, head of Elohim City, a white-separatist compound in north eastern Oklahoma linked to McVeigh, died in 2001.

"The few leaders they have left can barely drag their oxygen tanks to the meetings," said Joe Roy, chief intelligence analyst for the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Consequently, there has been no one strong voice articulating a cause, which leaves angry but aimless dissidents. "It takes someone to preach the gospel," said Robert Heibel, executive director of Mercyhurst College Institute for Intelligence Studies and a former FBI chief of counterintelligence.

Others argue that the most dangerous times can be during a power vacuum. "You have more marginal people trying to act out and hard-core believers trying to fill the void," Toole said, adding: "Everyone has to understand that they are just regrouping -- a new generation will come in."

And maybe some of the old voices will bridge the gap. After notorious former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke was released from prison last spring, where he had served more than a year for fraud, 300 people turned out to hear him speak in New Orleans on Memorial Day -- and 67,000 tuned in through the Internet. "It just shows you just how hungry they are," Roy said.

Staff writer John Mintz and research editor Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

Edition: F

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Page: A3

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