

MILITIAS' ERA ALL BUT OVER, ANALYSTS SAY

Boston Globe, The (MA) - April 19, 2005

Author: Brian MacQuarrie Globe Staff

[THE GRAPHIC INFORMATION THAT ACCOMPANIED THIS STORY IS INCORRECT. PUBLISHED CORRECTION - DATE: Saturday April 23, 2005:

Correction : Because of a graphic artist's error, a map of US hate groups that accompanied a story in Tuesday's Nation pages on antigovernment militias mislabeled Milwaukee as Minneapolis.]

Ten years after Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck bomb that killed 168 people at the Oklahoma City federal building, the antigovernment militias that attracted intense police scrutiny after the bombing have all but disappeared, according to analysts who track the groups.

"There really are no groups out there now doing paramilitary training," said Mark Potok, who monitors the militias for the Southern Poverty Law Center. From a high of 858 militias and other antigovernment groups in 1996, the number withered to 152 in 2004, Potok said.

The deaths of innocent civilians including 19 children in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building a decade ago today began the steep decline in the membership of grass-roots militias that had multiplied after deadly sieges by federal agents in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and Waco, Texas, in 1993.

Analysts also said the decline was accelerated by the successful prosecution of militia members across the country on weapons and financial fraud charges in a federal crackdown, and the fact that none of the anticipated catastrophes from computer failures actually occurred on Jan. 1, 2000.

"The last blow was Y2K," said Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, based at California State University in San Bernardino. "When the world didn't go to hell in a hand basket, these people were stuck with a stockpile of bread, cheese, and bottled water."

Although militia membership has shrunk dramatically, observers said, the number of what they describe as race-based "hate groups" that do not engage in paramilitary training has increased steadily. The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Ala., reported 762 such groups existed in 2004, compared with 474 in 1997.

Anger over immigration and globalization has helped fuel this growth, analysts said, among people who see a grave threat to the American way of life, which they see in racial terms. Their appeals to hatred have found a home on the Internet.

"The Net has allowed these [hate-based] movements to transform themselves from organized movements that had geographic centers into diffuse, localized movements where people script their own version of hatred," Levin said. "It's really across the spectrum."

Despite a law enforcement crackdown that has uncovered dozens of major domestic terrorism plots since the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, Potok said, an attack that originates in a militia is inevitable. "The hardest-edged groups are in quite an unstable situation," he said. "And it's often in these situations that we see outbursts of criminal violence."

Last month, the FBI discovered explosives hidden in the former Kansas home of Terry Nichols, who is serving multiple life sentences for his role in the bombing. McVeigh was executed in 2001. An imprisoned mobster had provided a tip that the explosives might be used for an attack to coincide with the Oklahoma City anniversary.

"What we have left is this hardened core of extremely hateful individuals who now have access to both the folklore of the movement and, more important, the operating instructions," Levin said. "The number of dangerous people is much less, but their commitment and their ability to carry out terror attacks is as great as it's ever been."

But the sight of the self-styled militias conducting field drills with weapons has become rare.

Kellysue Thomson, a commander in the Michigan Militia Corps Wolverines, which was investigated after the bombing, said the Oklahoma City attack had a dramatic effect on that organization.

"A lot of people went underground after the Oklahoma City bombing," recalled Thomson, who said that Nichols falsely claimed membership in the Michigan Militia. Neither was McVeigh found to be an active member of any militia, but he circulated in their orbit, attending dozens of gun shows.

Of coconspirators McVeigh and Nichols, she said: "They were nasty. Obviously, what kind of people would do something like that?"

But Thomson said she can understand why the attack by federal agents near Waco, where an estimated 80 people died after a 51-day siege, and Ruby Ridge, where white separatist Randy Weaver's wife and son were killed by an FBI sniper, had prompted McVeigh to act. Deputy US Marshal William Degan from Quincy, Mass., also was killed in the Idaho standoff.

"It was the government that killed those people, and everybody believes that," Thomson said of the fire that destroyed the Branch Davidian compound near Waco.

These days, Thomson said, the Michigan Militia spends much of its time on "homeland security" preparations, providing training on how to survive a terrorist attack by foreign perpetrators. "What we do out here is we are prepared to defend ourselves if martial law or anything like that occurs," she said. "Basically, what I work on is making sure that in case of a terrorist attack or a natural disaster, you're prepared to stay in your home for three to seven days or flee."

Despite their recent growth, hate-based groups have in the last few years lost several prominent leaders, losses that spurred the turn to the Internet as an organizing tool. Jeff Weise, the Minnesota teenager who killed nine people and himself on an Indian reservation last month, had been attracted to an Internet site that glorified Nazi ideology.

Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center cited the death of William Pierce, leader of the National Alliance, a white supremacist group, in 2002, and the 2004 death of Richard Butler, who founded the Aryan Nations. In addition, Matthew Hale, who founded the white supremacist World Church of the Creator, was sentenced April 6 to 40 years in prison for soliciting a hit man to kill a federal judge. The judge's husband and mother were murdered in February in Chicago by a man not connected to the movement.

A plethora of such race-focused sites can be found on the Internet, including one marking its 10th anniversary as the first "white nationalist" website. The site, which hosts discussions with white supremacist David Duke six times a week, has about 47,000 registered members, Levin said.

"The gift of the Internet meant an alternative to the controlled news media," said website administrator Don Black in a message on the site. "And we continue to grow, transforming an online community into real-world activism."

Another race-based site is the Internet home of the White Aryan Resistance. Although the site prominently features a skull and the movement's initials W.A.R., founder Thomas Metzger said that calling his white separatist group a "hate" organization is wrong.

"We don't want to kill anybody. We just want to be separate," Metzger, who lives in Fallbrook, Calif., said in an interview. "I don't promote violence as a normal part of our activity, but I would not shrink from violence if it came between us and people trying to destroy us."

"I'm proud to be a racist," he continued, "one who believes in the best interests of his race."

The racist appeal, Potok said, often finds a receptive home among people who see a dangerous loss of sovereignty in globalization and immigration. "If there's a debate about national security, immigration, or religion, this is going to be twisted and contorted in the hate world," Levin said. "It's always a contorted carnival-mirror reflection."

SIDEBAR1:

ACTIVE US HATE GROUPS

PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA.

[SEE ATTACHED CORRECTION]

SIDEBAR2:

ACTIVE GROUPS

PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA.

Caption: MAP PHOTO

Edition: THIRD

Section: National/Foreign

Page: A1

Index Terms: CORRECTION

Record Number: 0504190166

Copyright (c) 2005 Globe Newspaper Company