

## CHAPTER 2

### *Contextualizing the Militia: Origins, Demographics, and Principles*

"Let me put it in a simple way if I can: we do not advocate overthrowing the government. We advocate taking the government back to what it was supposedly supposed to be under the Founding Fathers, which is a Constitutional government mainly made up of the people who tell the government [what to do] and not the government to tell us."

- 36 year old Curtis

Our collective understanding of many social groups is shaped by the media, both fictional accounts and supposedly objective news sources. This is certainly true for the militia.

Most people—even many current militia members I have met—first heard about the militia in the wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing when bomber Timothy McVeigh was, ultimately erroneously, described as a Michigan militia member in numerous media reports. Since then, the proffered image of militias has largely remained the same: middle-aged, white men dressed in camouflage, running around the woods spouting paranoid conspiracy theories while plotting vaguely against the government. Although there was likely some truth to this depiction in 1995, the overall militia picture today is more complex. This evolution in no small part occurred *because* of the negative attention McVeigh's action brought to the movement.

This chapter is intended to expand on the introduction's definition of militias and to provide the information necessary for fully contextualizing the empirical chapters of this manuscript. I discuss the origins of the militia movement—the events and people

instrumental in the founding of modern day militias—and how the contemporary movement differs from its 1990s instantiation. I provide demographic information for current Michigan militia members and describe their political ideologies. Finally, I analyze how my observations fit with a relatively new typology for understanding different kinds of militia units.

### **ORIGINS OF THE MILITIA MOVEMENT**

In considering the collective consciousness of militia members, it is impossible to overstate the importance of WWII, Vietnam, and the particular sense of masculinized national identity that underlies both of them. Both wars symbolize national power and a supposedly unambiguous, moral position for the U.S. during international conflicts. Most members today were born in the 1950s or later, but their collective memories uniformly include the events and repercussions of WWII.

Almost all militia men—95% in my interview sample—have male relatives who fought during this war and remember hearing first-hand stories of its costs and victories. They share these tales at militia trainings as much to serve as a point of commonality over which to bond, as to keep the memories of those who fought alive. These near-mythologized stories serve as lauded examples of just use of force as well as of America's supposed superior technological and moral advancement relative to other nations. WWII's few remaining living veterans, as well as those now deceased, are vaunted as paragons of patriotism and moral uprightness, and as true heroes fighting for freedom and basic human rights who should be models for modern citizenship.

Relatively few militia members of today served in Vietnam<sup>1</sup> (though this number was likely higher in the militia of the 1990s) but members nonetheless revere Vietnam's veterans, too. Because Vietnam was essentially a loss for the powerful and resource-rich U.S. against a relatively small and distant Communist threat, the sentiment here is rather different. The militia views Vietnam veterans with more a sense of sympathy than of adulation, in that they see them as men trying to do their job, supporting their country, only to be betrayed by a lack of adequate resources to win the war, or to be reintegrated in society upon their return home (also see Gibson 1994; Schlatter 2006).

Some militia members, or their children, have participated in more recent military involvement in the Middle East. Most—though not all—members see these wars as ultimately justified and honor their veterans, but view the politics and governmental involvement as more parallel to that of Vietnam than of WWII. This was exemplified when one group in the western part of the state kicked out a new member who kept picking fights over the content of the trainings. As Roy explained:

'He had real problems getting along with people. Him and [the unit's leader] both have really strong opinions and always got into it. His Humvee took a direct hit in Iraq and pretty much all of his squad was killed. He was the one who had to drag their bodies outta there. That's what must have set off the PTSD. We learned a lot from him, but just couldn't keep him around. It was too much. Too much goin' around in his head, still.'

Regardless of their personal opinions of particular wars, militia members nearly uniformly believe that part of the function of war more generally is to defend an idealized

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<sup>1</sup> Zero interviewees participated in Vietnam, but Vietnam veterans are active in militias in Michigan. I have interacted with half a dozen self-identified Vietnam veteran militia members during training session and public meetings across the state. It seems to be the case that Vietnam veterans are more likely to participate in militia units that are more newly-formed, but have greater ideological and interpersonal connections to the militia of the 90s. Their units may be more likely to be of the Millenarian type—discussed below—and may be less likely to participate in formal interviews with either researchers or the media.

understanding of individual freedom and liberty, particularly within the borders U.S., even if that war is half a world away. They further believe it is a patriotic and moral duty of young men to participate in war as a defense of these principles and the nation. Family histories of involvement in past wars heighten this belief among militia members, and their militia participation is in no small part an expression of this same patriotism, as a Chapter Three further explains. Although it is unlikely that the modern militia movement would exist without the loss of Vietnam in recent national memory (Churchill 2009; Gibson 1994; Schlatter 2006), it is not alone a sufficient condition. Three other events, all in the early 1990s, were critical for the modern militia's formation.

### **Ruby Ridge**

The first event was the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) siege of the Weaver family in Ruby Ridge, Idaho. Randy Weaver was ex-military, had at least superficial ties to neo-Nazi organizations, and had moved with his wife and three children to a remote cabin in Ruby Ridge to be distant from a society they saw as corrupt and likely headed for a Biblical apocalypse (Crothers 2003). Prior to the siege, Weaver had a decade-long involvement with the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) stemming from allegations a neighbor made following a land dispute as well as possible illegal firearms handling.

A grand jury indicted Weaver for making and possessing illegal firearms in December 1990, after the ATF initially made false statements about Weaver's criminal history; this happened after Weaver refused to act as an informant against a local neo-Nazi organization ("Raid" 1995). A series of procedural delays and miscommunications

from the court resulted in a bench warrant being issued for Weaver in March 1991, but it was not until 1992 that U.S. Marshals started to stake out the Weaver home in an effort to apprehend him for a court appearance (Walter 2002).

Although the sequence of events at the beginning the siege is somewhat disputed, the results of day one were very clear: one federal agent was dead, Weaver's teenage son who had gone to retrieve the family dog was dead—shot in the back—and an adult male family friend, Kevin Harris, was wounded (Crothers 2003). FBI hostage rescue arrived following the agent's death, leading to more bloodshed on day two of the siege. This time, Weaver himself was shot while tending to the body of his dead son. As he fled back into the house after the first round, more FBI sniper bullets followed, and one went straight through the head of Weaver's wife, who was indoors and holding their ten month old daughter at the time (*ibid.*). Weaver, his two daughters, and family friend Harris all surrendered a week later. A jury eventually acquitted Weaver of all charges except failure to appear at his original court hearing and violating bail conditions.

Much of the nation was horrified as they watched these events unfold on the nightly news. Many people saw the events of Ruby Ridge as a sign that the government could not be trusted and might act violently toward its own citizens with little justification or provocation—as a sign of tyranny in what was supposed to be the land of the free (Walter 2002). People were specifically upset about three things. First, that charges leading to Weaver's interaction with federal authorities were exaggerated and, in part, likely retribution for his refusal to act as an informant. Second, that federal agents would surround and essentially hold hostage a private citizen and his family on his own land, especially when he was not accused of dangerous offenses. Finally, that, given these

conditions, federal agents would use a "shoot on sight" directive and murder a teenager and mother, neither of whom was facing any charges (*ibid.*)

The Department of Justice performed an investigation of the siege, while the Senate held hearings and ultimately found that federal agents had in fact acted unconstitutionally and with excessive force. Several federal agents were professionally disciplined for their roles in the siege, but none were criminally prosecuted. Weaver, his daughters, and Harris all eventually received substantial civil damages from the federal government (Crothers 2003).

## **Waco**

Well before the Department of Justice and Senate investigations were complete, a second siege began in Waco, Texas in early 1993. This time, a religious sect known as the Branch Davidians, led by David Koresh, was suspected of child abuse and illegal weapons possession. Just as with Ruby Ridge, it later became clear that most the allegations used to justify an initial raid of the Davidian compound in February 1993 were exaggerated (Kopel and Blackman 1997). Additionally, news of the raid reached the media and eventually Koresh before it happened, allowing the Davidians to prepare by arming and securing themselves within the sect's compound, which the raid's blueprint could not accommodate. Four ATF agents were killed in the ensuing firefight, as were sixteen Branch Davidians. The FBI took control of the scene, and a fifty-one day siege followed while Koresh tried to bargain for time to finish his religious treatise (Crothers 2003). Some children were released from the compound during the siege, but little overall progress was made.

A second raid began April 19, 1993, resulting in fires throughout the compound and the deaths of at least seventy-five more Davidians (*ibid.*). Once more, Senate investigations concluded that the FBI had acted improperly, this time losing evidence and not acting within clearly-defined hostage scenario protocols (Kopel and Blackman 1997). Happening so soon after Ruby Ridge and only a week after Weaver's trial had begun, many people's fears of a tyrannical government only increased. As politics and government professor Lane Crothers notes:

"Thus believers in the evil of the federal government not only had evidence of what government might do to anyone who deviated from its rules—especially regarding guns—but also had proof of who the primary actors in the coming oppression would be" (2003:99).

The Weavers and the Davidians became not heroes, as some have described (Levitas 2004), but rather martyrs for the burgeoning patriot movement.

### **The Brady Bill**

Just seven months after the Waco siege's violent end, people most worried about their ability to protect themselves from government tyranny felt even more threatened when President Clinton signed the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act into law. The law went into effect in February 1994 and set certain limits on the sale of handguns. Its major result was to implement required criminal and psychiatric background checks for individuals purchasing firearms, and it also instituted a mandatory five day waiting period between purchase and receipt of a handgun until background checks were made instantaneous in 1998.

It is worth noting that most militia members with whom I have interacted would prefer that criminals and deranged individuals not have access to any type of firearm, but they—as well as other non-militia, pro-gun rights advocates—strongly believe that any restriction on the widest possible interpretation of the Second Amendment (the right to bear arms) is 1) unconstitutional and 2) likely to



Figure 7: A portion of the weapons present at a summer training session; all are unloaded. Photo from <http://s657.photobucket.com/profile/SMVM>

lead to other limitations on Second Amendment *as well as other "intrinsic" rights*. This was the same belief structure that undergirded opposition to the Brady Bill<sup>2</sup>. These concerns were only amplified by the impending Federal Assault Weapons Ban, which ultimately passed in September 1994 and made it illegal to possess a variety of semi-automatic weapons made after September 1994 without additional collectors' licensing (Churchill 2009).

Just after the Brady Bill passed into law and while the Assault Weapons Ban was still making its way through Congress, the Militia of Montana (MOM) formed in February 1994. MOM was the first of its kind, though the Michigan militia's future leadership—primarily Norman Olson and Ray Southwell—were already discussing starting their own group. Olson and Southwell held a planning meeting in March 1994. The official first militia meeting happened April 22, followed by the first training the last

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<sup>2</sup> Some even in the broad gun-rights community also interpret anti-gun rights legislation as potentially leading to United Nations' control over U.S. law, or even a state similar to Hitler's Nazi Germany.



weekend of April 1994, as original documents<sup>3</sup> from Olson indicate, and the Michigan Militia Corps of Wolverines (MMCW) was born, (fax from Olson to several MI sheriffs, April 7, 1995; fax from Kenneth Adams to "all Brigades," April 14, 1995; letter from Olson to Bob Burns, Undated; handout from Olson of upcoming training dates, April 29, 1994).

Importantly, some authors place the emergence of the modern militia movement prior to 1994. This is due to three factors. First, some authors (e.g., Stern 1996) imply that the militia had to have an earlier start date because attorney Linda Thompson from Indiana sent a fax in response to Waco over the American Patriot Fax Network (APFN) asking that all members of the "Unorganized Militia" assemble at the Davidian compound as a show of support. However, this was in fact an early, and ultimately failed, attempt to *start* a national militia from the ranks of the APFN—a loosely organized group of individuals who started corresponding during the Randy Weaver trial out of concern over the government's actions at Ruby Ridge.

Thompson has been portrayed as a proverbial queen of the militia movement (e.g., Kaplan 1995; Wright 2007), and while she did very publicly try to inject herself into the movement, internal militia documents tell a slightly different story. Thompson only connected with the APFN when Koresh apparently gave one of its leaders, Gary Hunt, his power of attorney, and Thompson offered her assistance (Crothers 2003). Many militia leaders were glad of the attention Thompson brought to early movement efforts and some still praise the "true story" documentary she compiled of the Waco siege;

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<sup>3</sup> In this manuscript, I cite these documents as personal communications to give more detail as to their origin. After I finished my initial review of the documents I received from Mr. Olson, I put them in electronic format then donated them to the Bentley Historical Library in Ann Arbor, MI, per Mr. Olson's request, where they may be found in the collection titled, "Norm Olson Papers."

however, leaders were actually very wary of her motives and methods. Few of them seemed to know who she was in the early days, and faxes across on the APFN seem to indicate an acrimonious relationship with Thompson, at best (faxed copies of documents regarding a lawsuit between Thompson and a militia figure named Joseph Ditzhazy, February 4, 1995; a fax from Ditzhazy calling Thompson a "charlatan," and accusing her of "questionable or illegal activity," March 20, 1995; an email from Thompson to Olson accusing him of "being played like a violin," "doing damage to the movement," and "losing any and all credibility," May 5, 1995). Olson told me that, to his knowledge, Thompson was never affiliated with any militia group, but instead tried to insert herself into national debates of militia interest (personal communication, January 29, 2011).

A second source of a misidentified militia start date is a lack of access to original militia documentation, which Norm Olson gave me, that shows meaningful conversations to initiate militias did not occur until 1994. Third, and most importantly, there is frequently a conflation between the militia and various precursor groups. Specifically, many authors (e.g., Crothers 2003; Ferber 1999; Ferber and Kimmel 2004; Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Stern 1996; Wright 2007) do not adequately differentiate between militias and other so-called patriot groups, a problem I explain in more detail below.

### **Oklahoma City Bombing**

The militia movement was extraordinarily successful during its first year of life in 1994, with militias active in at least thirty-six states (Stern 1996:96), and garnering membership in the thousands in Michigan alone (Churchill 2009). April 19, 1995—the anniversary of Ruby Ridge as well as the anniversary of Paul Revere's midnight ride—brought the

movement to its proverbial knees. On this date, Timothy McVeigh, an Army veteran of the first Gulf War detonated a bomb in a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, many of them children. McVeigh was initially linked to the MMCW, and though the FBI later cleared the militia of all involvement (e.g., Duffy and Brantley 1997),<sup>4</sup> some academic and media reports alike continue to make the connection. This was (and often continues to be) a major strain on the movement.

Kenneth Stern notes that four different militia reactions emerged following the Oklahoma City bombing: 1) complete group dissolution, 2) no structural change but avoidance of the label "militia," 3) membership *growth*, and 4) change from an open, public orientation to a secretive, underground status (1996:209). While it is likely that all four reactions did distinctly occur in some militias around the country, the MMCW—the militia at the center of negative attention—responded a bit differently. A core group, concentrated in the south-eastern part of the state remained largely intact, keeping "militia" in its name while disavowing the "Wolverines" connection. As 47 year old Adam said, "Well, we coulda changed the name. But then I think, in that circumstance, I would be surrendering. That would be giving in. And I was not one to give in."

However, some members, including co-founder Olson, did leave after public statements and televised Senate hearings on the militia created some embarrassment. In short, Olson initially attributed the bombing to a terror attack by the Japanese, based on information received through the APFN (fax from Debra von Trapp to Norm labeled "Re Japanese Bombing/Oklahoma," April 24, 1995; fax from von Trapp to APFN, titled

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<sup>4</sup> McVeigh's co-conspirator Terry Nichols did attend either one or two militia trainings. However, two militia members I have talked with who claimed to be in attendance when McVeigh and Nichols were present further claim that the two were quickly asked to leave after handing out racist literature and espousing violent ideology.

"Oklahoma Bombing Linked to Japanese Retaliation for U.S. Gas Attack," April 24, 1995). Olson tried, without much success, to start other smaller militias independent from the remaining original members, before moving to Alaska in 2004. Other members who left the group in 1995 did quit altogether, while yet others operated in more exclusive, more secretive militias, including Mark Koernke, a former University of Michigan janitor who gained notoriety via short-wave "patriot" radio.

At this point, the Michigan militia became a movement in abeyance (Taylor 1989; Zwerman et al. 2000): although members' underlying belief structure largely stayed the same, the socio-political climate was not conducive to militia activity, and remaining activity became increasingly difficult to observe. There certainly were notable incidents of militia members in the news during this time where, for example, leaders very publicly protested government regulations of privately owned land or staged stand offs on behalf of individuals refusing to pay income taxes (for example, a "press release" from Olson "Feds Rule Against State in Manufactured Housing Feud: Homeowner's Defiance Has Town Zoning Board Crying Uncle," August 14, 1995). Incidents like these were largely headed by one or two former leaders (often Olson), trying to reinvigorate the movement.

There were also a few cases of self-identified militia members, including Koernke, evading police or being arrested for illegal weapons possessions (Chermak 2002). Again, however, these were actions taken by rogue individuals or small groups with only two to three members, rather than by the main thrust of the dormant movement. At most a few hundred, and perhaps more likely a few dozen, people in Michigan would have identified as militia members through most of the late 1990s and early 2000s<sup>5</sup>. The

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<sup>5</sup> The movement experienced a slight bump in membership in mid-late 1999 as people across the country became concerned over "Y2K"—over what would happen with computer systems when the new

period of abeyance did not truly end until early 2009, following months of unrest over the Iraq War, the beginning of a global economic recession, the inauguration of the first black President, Barack Obama, and the release of a controversial Department of Homeland Security report on "right wing extremism." Summer 2009 brought attendance at militia events that was easily double that of the previous year and left one leader saying, "This is what the militia should have looked like 15 years ago!" In my observations, attendance as of early 2011 decreased somewhat, but was still consistently higher than pre-2009 levels.

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CONTEMPORARY MILITIA AND THE MILITIA OF THE 1990s**

Although in many ways a continuation of its 1990s instantiation, the militia movement today nonetheless has several important differences, all derived from lessons following both successes and failures in the '90s. First, in the words of a key leader who has been continuously involved in the militia since 1994, they are "less angry...smarter and calmer, less prone to knee-jerk reactions." In other words, they are better informed about both legal and political issues relevant to the movement, are less likely to become involved in altercations between the government and private citizens, and less likely to be confrontational with law enforcement than they were in the past. My interactions with past members, present members, and members involved in both time frames strongly support this claim, as does documentation from both periods.

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millennium arrived; however, as soon as everyone realized their fears were unfounded, these new adherents largely fell back out of the movement according to leaders who were active then (Chermak 2002). Members today also report that there was a steep increase in attendance at meetings the first three months following the September 2001 terror attacks, but few lasting members came from this.

A second difference between the militia movement of today and that of the '90s is that little remains of the strict hierarchical structure. In the '90s, it could be said that there was one unified Michigan Militia—MMCW. It had a state commander, a county commander for most of Michigan's 83 counties, and multiple brigades per county, the number of which was based on overall participation, with each having a brigade leader. Brigades operated relatively independently on a month-to-month basis, though the state leadership tried to set standards for general training procedures, and leaders met for both county- and state-wide meetings a few times yearly. As the language here suggests, all members held a "rank" parallel to that of military branches, regardless of prior military involvement, that reflected their position in the hierarchy.

Today, the exact number of distinct militia groups is difficult to establish. While there is no state-level structure, and much less adherence to rank labels, different militia groups still train with each other regularly. Additionally, if someone decides to start a militia in their own area, it is not uncommon that they receive attention from three or four members for several months before those newcomers lose interest or are simply too busy to participate; in that instance, the original founder of the start-up group often returns to a larger, more established militia. As a result, a count of active militias (by my definition, ones that host trainings and have at least three members who participate in most trainings) one month may dramatically vary from the count the following month.

However, there are twelve distinct groups that have experienced a high degree of stability and participation during my fieldwork, the largest and most stable of which is the Southeast Michigan Volunteer Militia (SMVM). This group has the most direct leadership ties to the earlier MMCW group and capitalizes on that legacy to maintain legitimacy within the overall movement<sup>6</sup>. SMVM's trainings are the most attended in the state of Michigan, and members from other units come to them for training and leadership input, not the other way around. Additionally, militias in other states are in frequent contact with SMVM; many have used SMVM's training manuals word-for-word



Figure 8: Members from five different units chat and look at new gear during a break at a fall training. Photo by Amy Cooter.

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<sup>6</sup> There are approximately two dozen individuals across the state trying to reinstate the old MMCW and its hierarchical structure, but so far, the majority of these people are primarily stay involved in distinct local militias. Only one group of about eight to twelve members is consistently training under the "Wolverines" banner, but this certainly is not the state-wide participation of the '90s, capable of maintaining an all-county presence. The state commander of this group was recently ousted after barely a year of service, further demonstrating a lack of group efficacy.

as their own, and, around once a year on average, a militia unit from another state will participate in an SMVM training after making a lengthy drive to do so.

Cross-training is in no small part facilitated by the third major difference between the movement of today and that of the '90s: communication facilitation through the internet. Primary militia communication in the '90s happened among leaders over faxes or landline telephones, with county leaders passing important messages on to brigade leaders, who in turn passed them to brigade members. Information of interest to the entire movement could frequently be heard over shortwave radio stations, like Koernke's "Liberty Tree Radio" and at occasional gatherings during gun shows or similar events, which were the primary site for face-to-face member recruitment according to those active in the militia at that time (also see Gallaher 2003).

Today, leaders do communicate—though more informally—with each other about major issues at leadership meetings or via cell phones, and communication to all members in this less hierarchical structure happens instantaneously over the internet. Message boards, usually private, are the primary interface, supplemented with occasional emails or social networking messages as relevant. Attempts at in-person recruitment to the militia still happens, but now it is largely limited to members' existing networks of family and acquaintances. It is also largely unsuccessful in producing new members. There is virtually no recruitment at gun shows or other non-militia public events. Newcomers are instead attracted through webpages such as [www.michiganmilitia.com](http://www.michiganmilitia.com) and social media sites—MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube. Potential recruits then either contact leaders via email addresses listed on these sites, requesting more information, or simply show up to a local militia meeting in their area, information about which is listed



on those webpages. Only one of my interviewees knew someone involved in the militia prior to joining himself.

A final crucial difference between the militia of today and its first iteration is its overall size. Instead of the thousands of members in its heyday, I estimate that there are no more than 500 active militia participants in the entire state of Michigan today. I emphasize "estimate" here because no membership rosters are maintained and it is impossible to know with certainty how many militia members there are in a given state; I define a member as a person who attends meetings or training functions regularly (at least four times a year).

Militia leaders provide a dramatically different answer to the question of size—anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000, depending on the respondent. However, they tend to count as members either all people who have *ever* met the qualifications for membership, or people who have met the qualifications in the last one to three years. I find it much more reasonable to only count individuals who have been involved in the last year. It is important to keep in mind the larger number of once-connected individuals, however, as people who sympathize with the militia's message and who could return to militia participation if political or other circumstances induce them to do so.

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MILITIAS AND OTHER NOSTALGIC GROUPS**

Some authors and militia members alike describe militias as being part of a larger "patriot movement," but this term is most often used disparagingly by watch organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center to refer to a cluster of nostalgic and politically conservative organizations (e.g., "Cross Talk" 2010). The common element across groups

that fall under this term is that they all strongly believe the U.S. and its Constitution need to be protected from threats to their fundamental identities. The sources and severity of these threats, as well as desired solutions to them vary dramatically across different groups in the movement.

There is often little communication or political action, alongside large amounts of discord between groups described as being part of the patriot movement, such that movement status is highly questionable. For example, some groups falling under this label claim strong religious motivations while others do not, and many groups have no firearms training whatsoever. Other authors have also recognized the distinction between groups of the patriot movement groups and suggested we need more nuanced labels for different groups with different behaviors and ideologies (e.g., Berlet 2004; Berlet and Vysotsky 2006; Crothers 2003; George and Wilcox 1996; Wright 2007).

In Michigan, militia members have few ties other groups that fall under the umbrella term "patriot movement," even relatively mainstream groups like the Tea Party. It is true that militia members and Tea Partiers alike may support Libertarian political perspectives, and that militia members tend to favor Tea Party candidates like Ron Paul. However, it is very rare that militia members participate in Tea Party events, or vice versa. They also only rarely participate in the Oath Keepers organization, which is a network of former and current law enforcement and military personnel who swear to uphold the Constitution, even if their superiors order them to violate it. Militia members likewise vow to support the Constitution, and many are former military, but only one member I encountered became a part of the organization—an act which requires going to a website, signing up for free, and printing an instantly generated membership card.

Further, only 20% of my interviewees are involved in the National Rifle Association. The majority of militia members see the organization as "too political," or as not forcefully defending the Second Amendment without making political concessions. More members express a preference for a lesser-known, but harder-line organization called Gun Owners of America. Still others like Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership—a group that advocates gun ownership as a way to avoid a second Holocaust—even though no Michigan Member I have encountered claims Jewish heritage.

The reason that most members are not involved in multiple political outlets with similar goals is often because they do not have the time or money to do so. Militia members typically take any opportunity to work overtime shifts that may arise at work, attend two or three militia functions a month (ranging from 12 to more than 30 hours of participation a month, depending on the events), and spend their remaining free time with their families. Militia participation reflects, for them, the ideal expression of their political perspectives while offering physical activities that members find enjoyable and that most of the above organizations cannot offer.

The one exception to this lack of cross-participation is the Open Carry movement. This movement encourages law abiding gun owners to visibly carry their handguns in places they are legally allowed to do so. Their argument is, first, that if this right to open carry is not exercised, states may move to restrict it, and, second, that if other law abiding citizens see normal people with handguns, they may begin to be less fearful of them. Militia members uniformly support these positions and many routinely openly carry their handguns when conducting daily business. Participation in this "movement" notably

requires no additional time commitment and thus allows militia members to be involved without compromising time spent on other activities or requiring additional financial expenditures.

There are two groups with which militias are most often conflated that merit further differentiation here. The first is white supremacist and other racist groups. Racist groups' major guiding principle is the belief that Whites are intellectually and culturally superior to all other races. These groups often advocate violence toward non-Whites and Whites who participate in race mixing because they believe that both threaten the very future of the white "race," and of the nation itself. As Chapter Four shows, Michigan's militias are not racist at the group level, meaning that individual members may still harbor varying degrees of racism, but that racism is not a goal for militias as a group (also see Berlet 2004; Chermak 2002; Churchill 2009; George and Wilcox 1996). In fact, Detroit's sizable neo-Nazi population has derisively dismissed the Michigan militia as working against white interests by encouraging minority membership and as probably being aligned with their "Jewish enemies" ("Michigan Militia" 2008).

The second group with which militias are often conflated are the Minutemen who patrol the southern border of the U.S. and watch for illegal immigrants. Members of the Minutemen often wear camouflage and carry firearms while talking about illegal immigrants' negative impact on the economy and culture of the U.S. (Shapira 2011). It is understandable that, at first glance, Minutemen would be assumed to be the same as militia groups, but there are very important differences that set the groups apart.

First, Minutemen do not participate in any kind of paramilitary or weapons training. Sociologist Harel Shapira conducted an ethnography with several segments of



Figure 9: A militia member prepares to shot at a target during a competition at a public range. Photo by Amy Cooter.

the Minutemen in Arizona and reported that, contrary to stereotypes, firearms are almost never involved in Minutemen activities (*ibid.*). Individual Minutemen occasionally target shoot at nearby shooting ranges, but never practice as a group and do not routinely use their weapons to confront people they observe watching the border; instead, they use high tech night vision and other equipment to observe from a distance and alert border patrol and other law enforcement (*ibid.*). In contrast, training is crucial for militia members who believe they should use their shared time to keep their weapons and other skills honed and ready for use in the event of a disaster or some other situation in which they are needed. Collective training is thus essential for militia status, in my definition.

Second, the Minutemen exist solely to combat and protest illegal immigration. Many militia members I encountered supported the Minutemen's goal of limiting illegal

immigration, but none had illegal immigration as their sole concern<sup>7</sup>. Instead, militia members follow and are invested in a variety of socio-political issues. There is also evidence that the Minutemen's singular focus on illegal immigration gives them greater linkages to white supremacist populations than I have observed in the militia. Several notable figures involved in both the Minutemen and racist organizations have been in the news in the last few years, usually following a violent crime (e.g., Myers 2012).

It is important to note that some Minutemen units, some white supremacist organizations, and other groups may occasionally use the term "militia" to describe themselves, even though they would not qualify as such under my definition. For example, the Militia of Montana obviously includes "militia" in its name, and has even been described as a "prototypical" militia (Kimmel and Ferber 2000:586). The Militia of Montana was incredibly prolific and ideologically influential in terms of producing training texts and video tapes that are of interest to nation-wide militia groups to this day. However, the Militia of Montana had no meaningful training component and no organized firearms proficiency requirements, making "militia" an inappropriate label for this group (personal communication, Norm Olson, January 29, 2011).

As another example, James Aho's (1995) work on an Idaho group, a study which is often considered foundational in the militia literature<sup>8</sup>, in fact concerns a Christian Identity sect. This religious system posits that Whites are the true descendants of the Biblical Adam, while other racial groups are less biological and spiritually evolved

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<sup>7</sup> No Michigan militia members ever became involved in the Minutemen effort, but a militia unit in Florida spent a week with a Minutemen unit at the Arizona border in an effort to network and to express support for their actions. Members of that Florida unit told me the Minutemen were "doing good work," but confirmed the Minutemen never trained together and were less equipped than militia members to deal with other problems; one member said the time spent in Arizona was "pretty boring," and that militia unit has not returned for further cross-training.

<sup>8</sup> Notably, Aho himself does not use the term "militia" to refer to his group of interest.

(Walters 2000). Militia members are not generally guided by any particular religious system, especially racist ones. There is also no evidence that Identity followers conduct paramilitary training as militia members do.

### **CONTEMPORARY MICHIGAN MILITIA DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>9</sup>**

It is also important to have an accurate mental image of what current members of the Michigan militia are like to properly understand the remainder of this manuscript. White men comprise between 90% and 95% of the movement in Michigan, and likely nationwide, keeping in mind that precise numbers do vary over time, with women somewhat more likely to participate during warmer months. From what I have observed, only about 2% of regular militia attendees across the state are non-white. There are other people of non-white backgrounds who attend regularly and others who attend a particular public "Field Day" event once a year. Many of the white members are in interracial marriages, typically with Asian women, and several proudly reference their own racially mixed heritage—great grandparents who were Native American, or grandparents who were Asian—when the conversation has little to do with race overtly. Such was the case when one member said, "I tan easily because I'm 1/4<sup>th</sup> Asian," following another's remark about needing sunscreen during training.

The average age of a militia member is about 38 years old, though they range from 18 to 60 years old. Twenty four (60%) of the 40 militia members I interviewed are married, another six (15%) are never married, while the remaining ten (25%) are divorced, separated or widowed. Two thirds of interviewees have at least one biological

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<sup>9</sup> Percentages in this section may not add to 100% because of rounding.

child, and about 20% of those also help care for at least one child from their partner's previous relationships. Three interviewees (8%) are also grandparents. My interviewees are *more* educated than the average U.S. population (see Table 1), but while they do work in a variety of occupations, most have delivery service or trade jobs like carpenter or electrician making "lower-middle" the best class descriptor of the Michigan members.

Michigan militia members are far from religiously uniform. Seventeen (43%) of my 40 interviewees identify as Christian, while another ten (25%) further specify as Catholic. Another twelve (30%) are Atheist or Agnostic, and the remaining interviewee is Muslim (2% of the interview sample). These percentages also roughly reflect militia members I did not interview but interacted with in the field. Although many militia functions begin with a pledge to the flag and a non-denominational prayer, typically supplicating for a return to a constitutional Republic, religious content is never the focus of meeting or training conversation in the majority of militia groups.

Table 1. Educational Attainment of U.S. Population and MI Militia Sample

	U.S. Population*		MI Militia Sample	
	% With Only	% With At Least	% With Only	% With At Least
<b>High School</b>	31.24%	87.14%	12.82%	97.37%
<b>Some College</b>	16.84%	55.90%	56.41%	84.62%
<b>Associate's or Bachelor's</b>	28.53%	39.06%	25.64%	28.21%

\*Compiled from Census 2010 data



Unsurprisingly, no militia member I have encountered identifies with liberal politics, though many claim they did so in the past, or that they would be open to liberal members. Two of the people I interviewed even admitted to voting for Obama during the 2008 Presidential election, though they say they now regret that decision. Nine (23%) of my interviewees identify as Independent, five (13%) as broadly Conservative, two (5%) as Republican, fifteen (38%) as Libertarian, and nine (23%) as Constitutionalist. Libertarianism is a political position that is sometimes described as socially liberal but fiscally conservative. Militia members often interpret it to mean that people have a right to do whatever they want to do, so long as it does not interfere with anyone else's freedom, and that the government should have a minimal role in regulation and in people's lives. Constitutionlists are very similar, though their ideal role of government is even more limited to that which a literal interpretation of the U.S. Constitution explicitly provides.

Some Michigan members are strongly anti-abortion and anti-gay marriage. However, the majority do support the above interpretation of Libertarianism, meaning, as 45 year old truck driver Aaron framed it, even if they "don't agree with it personally, and no one in [their] family would ever do it," they would not oppose a woman's right to an abortion, for example. As with all my characterizations in this manuscript, it is my position that these are genuinely expressed beliefs<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> As any freshman political science student will learn, however, beliefs and attitudes may not necessarily correlate with action. I explore throughout the manuscript the extent to which members' beliefs translate into egalitarian action.

## A MILITIA TYPOLOGY

Some militia researchers have observed a distinction between what they term "underground" and "above ground" militia groups. Underground groups operate secretly and privately with a high degree of mistrust of outsiders. This is often because what they are doing is illegal or at least unpopular, and possible subject to State repression (Zwerman et al. 2000). The implication is typically that groups are operating underground so that they may continue participating in illegal behavior while evading authorities. Above ground groups, in contrast, are considered to be less dangerous, largely legal and relatively transparent in their motives as well as methods (*ibid.*).

Reality is not this clear cut, however. So-called above ground groups may indeed have websites and easily identifiable members but nonetheless be movement outliers in terms of their ideology. The most recent militia group to garner notoriety, the Hutaree in southern Michigan, had publicly accessible websites and YouTube videos that clearly showed members' faces and sometimes real names, but they were arrested and tried for allegedly plotted to kill police officers<sup>11</sup>—an "underground" strategy. Additionally, above ground groups may have many members who do not come to public events, not because they do not want to publicly acknowledge militia affiliation, but because distance or work schedules prevent it. These people stay in touch via message boards or email, and would be, by the classical definition, "underground" members in an above ground group, which makes little contextual sense.

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<sup>11</sup> In early 2012, a federal judge dismissed charges against Hutaree members, saying the prosecution had failed to demonstrate the group had a specific plan for harm. Evidence in the case did clearly show that some members did talk about killing officers and their families in general terms, but these facts were not support the charges of seditious conspiracy with which they had been charged.

A final reason to view this model with skepticism is that, by definition, underground groups are impossible to count and accurately assess. It is very easy to claim that these groups are more numerous and more problematic than any existing data would indicate for political and other reasons. Some reports on militias and other unpopular groups may be exaggerated to garner financial support for watch organizations (see Chermak 2002 and Appendix 1, this volume, for a discussion), and social scientists wanting an accurate assessment of militias or other movements who are similarly labeled should be wary of relying on this concept.

A more useful distinction, which corresponds with my empirical observations, is made by historian Robert Churchill between "millenarian" and "constitutional" militias:

*Constitutionalists* began to organize militias on the basis of public meetings and open membership. They saw the growing threat of state-sponsored violence as a symptom of a corrupt and abusive government, and argued that the militia, if public, could act as a deterrent against further government abuse. *Millenarians* began to organize on the basis of a closed cell structure hidden from public view. Their vision was millennial and apocalyptic: they saw militia organization as the only way to survive an imminent invasion by the forces of the New World Order (2009:188 *emphasis added*).

Millenarian militias, in other words, much more closely match the stereotypical image of militias as secretive, dangerous, focused on paranoid conspiracy theories, possibly religiously-motivated, and racially or otherwise exclusionary. These seem to have greater potential for violence and more links to racist or other problematic groups. They may also have less of a focus on political involvement than constitutional militias. Constitutionalist militias more uniformly resemble the definition of militias I laid out above and represent the majority of militias in Michigan.

Millenarian and constitutionalist militias should nonetheless be understood as ideal types because constitutionalist militias may still have members who strongly believe in a variety of conspiracy theories, and because millenarian militias may overtly claim some constitutionalist principles as well. However, constitutionalist militias tend to be more internally uniform and have more in common with each other than with millenarian militias, and vice versa. This distinction does not hold so clearly for the traditional above/below ground model.

Churchill's model also places focus on militia ideology, which is a major causal factor in how likely a given militia is to operate transparently, giving the model more explanatory power. To be clear, "millenarian" is not parallel to "underground," nor is "constitutionalist" parallel to "above ground." Returning to the example of the Hutaree, their ideology was very religiously- and conspiratorially-motivated, but was nonetheless readily and publicly available through the internet. This defies the above/below ground typology, but explained perfectly under the millenarian label.

Importantly, Churchill's model implicitly contradicts a claim usually made by authors using the above/below ground model as applied to right wing groups generally (e.g., Stern 1996): that above ground groups maintain a positive public face while nearly always having a below ground component to do their dirty work. By focusing on group ideology, it becomes clear that millenarian and constitutionalist groups frequently *cannot* cooperate because the rift is simply too large. Michigan's militias are a very clear example of this. The constitutionalist groups see themselves as monitoring agencies for the millenarian groups. They maintain superficial contact with millenarian groups to

know their upcoming plans, and may report these plans to law enforcement authorities when they perceive a possibility of threat.

Contrary to previous authors claiming that such "snitching" happens when above and below ground groups have a falling out (Stern 1996), the ideological component of Churchill's model brings a more accurate understanding. Not only do millenarian and constitutionalist militias have fundamental disagreements that rarely lead to a cooperative situation that could be breached, but as already discussed, constitutionalist militias believe it is their duty to help protect their communities. They accordingly think it is their responsibility to report information to authorities when they believe there is a viable threat of dangerous or illegal action that could lead to someone's being hurt. Calls to the FBI from two different Michigan constitutionalist militias were major factors leading to the infiltration and eventual arrest and indictment of the millenarian Hutaree (Baldas 2012; Higgins 2010).

Understanding this ideological difference that separates millenarian from constitutionalist militias is critical for a complete picture of exactly what the modern militia movement is. This in turn, is important for understanding basic characteristics of who militia members are and what they hope to accomplish and how they interact with the changing social world around them. Importantly, some of my claims here regarding militia origins and demographics differ somewhat from previous militia researchers. I discuss these differences and reasons for them in Appendix 1. My primary focus in remaining chapters is on constitutionalist groups and members because they represent the majority of the movement in Michigan. They are also the members most trying to adhere to evolving social norms.

In the next chapter, I show that the reasons men say they join the militia all fall in four broad categories, each of which may be understood through a lens of traditional, American masculinity. I contrast the masculinity implicit in men's motivations for joining the militia with non-traditionally masculine modes of interaction evident at trainings and other militia functions. I argue that the militia is similar to historically all-male groups like the boy scouts in facilitating masculine bonding, but, in contrast to these earlier groups, the militia also provides a safe space for experimenting with masculinity and masculine expression in the context of evolving social norms.