

The Hutaree: Who They Are, How They Differ from Other Michigan Militias, and Warning Signs of Problematic Behavior

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“I’ve never heard any talk of any explosives. I never heard talk of killing a police officer, or hurting a police officer, and even if I did hear that kinda talk, it usually included, like, doughnuts and laughter and um, you know, ‘ha ha ha’—the typical stuff that people talk about.”

—former Hutaree associate (New Colony Media 2012)

This paper is about the Hutaree militia members who were arrested in spring 2010 on charges of allegedly plotting to kill law enforcement officers. It is important to delineate how this militia unit is different from the majority of units I observed in Michigan to better contextualize the movement as a whole and to assess what kind of militia units may pose potential problems for law enforcement. I first describe the events surrounding the Hutaree’s arrest and trial. I describe my contact with the group before explaining how the Hutaree is fundamentally different from most other militia units in the state of Michigan by comparing their behavior and ideology using Churchill’s (2009) militia typology. Finally, I identify a set of factors that, when present in a militia unit, seem to increase the likelihood of problematic behavior from that unit as a supplement to this typology.

THE HUTAREE AND THEIR ARRESTS

At the second militia meeting I attended in April 2008, the primary SMVM leader discussed the Hutaree. A member suggested purchasing or renting a porta-potty for an upcoming public event in a remote location, and the leader replied he was afraid of leaving a purchased one on-site because the Hutaree might “machine gun it.” I asked another leader to explain the context for this remark, and he said that Hutaree members had previously destroyed community property and had generally practiced unsafe behavior during the two SMVM-hosted trainings those members had attended.

Firearms should *always* be treated as though they are loaded and ready to fire as a safety measure, which in part means that the muzzle should always be pointed in a safe direction. The Hutaree members who attended SMVM training needed to be told repeatedly to observe this rule as they carelessly swept other people with their weapons, meaning they swung their rifle barrels in trajectories that crossed other people’s bodies. One Hutaree member did this to such an extent that a Vietnam veteran SMVM member told the man he was only allowed to participate in trainings with a stick, rather than a rifle, as he took the rifle from the man’s hands. This story has been told to much laughter (“What caliber was the stick?!”) during various militia gatherings at least half a dozen times during my fieldwork, including several times before the Hutaree arrests occurred.

Robert told me that SMVM leaders continued corresponding with Hutaree members after this “just to keep an eye on them.” What he did not tell me until later that year was that SMVM

leaders had already begun emailing a local FBI agent about the Hutaree's¹ behavior and apocalyptic ramblings. Other units who had also encountered Hutaree members emphasized how different they were from their own members as my fieldwork progressed.

The FBI responded to SMVM's concerns about the Hutaree by first paying a civilian informant to report on SMVM. Only one leader in that group has said he believed the man to be connected to law enforcement at the time he was embedded with the group; but, after it was announced that an informant had been placed in the group, leaders surmised who he had been and discussed this on their private forum more than a year before his name was publicly released. The FBI later determined that SMVM posed no threat and asked this informant to instead investigate the Hutaree² (Baldas 2012a). Based on what the informant reported, an undercover FBI agent eventually joined the group, acting as an interested member. The undercover officer apparently finally witnessed something troubling enough in April 2010 to initiate the arrests³.

The FBI conducted a large raid, following an act of theater where the undercover agent held a fake memorial service for the paid informant who was, in fact, very much alive. Most Hutaree members were in attendance at the "memorial service" and were questioned and arrested on site. A few others not in attendance were picked up over the next few days, including one member who sought refuge with the leader of another nearby militia unit. The leader refused him aid and instead notified the FBI, continuing the trend of other units' skepticism toward and distancing from the Hutaree. Nine Hutaree members were eventually charged with a variety of offenses including plotting to use "weapons of mass destruction" and "seditious conspiracy"—a very serious charge of plotting to overthrow the government. One arrestee was declared incompetent to stand trial and is undergoing psychiatric treatment. Another pled guilty in December 2011.

The State alleged that Hutaree members were planning to murder a police officer, then murder and injure other officers, perhaps with an improvised explosive device, at the first officer's funeral. The defendant who pled guilty testified that the group's goals included harming law enforcement and learning to make homemade bombs, seemingly supporting these allegations. Jurors also heard a taped conversation among some Hutaree members who said they would have no problem killing police officers' children and wives to further amplify their message of disdain toward law enforcement.

The ultimate goal that would undergird these alleged murder plots is not completely clear. It may be that Hutaree members believe law enforcement is corrupt, and by acting against them, they might spark a civil war of sorts that would eventually return the country to its roots as the Founding Fathers envisioned (Snell 2012). It may have been that evangelical Christian understandings of the End of Times played a role, and members thought they could initiate the return of Christ through violent action (Buchanan 2010). Perhaps the motives were mixed and unclear even to the Hutaree.

Some Hutaree affiliates originally denied having any conversations about harming officers, though many of the denials sounded like the unconvincing quote at the beginning of this paper. The defendants' lawyers argued that Hutaree members did talk about violent action, but said that it was protected speech under the First Amendment. They further insisted that there was

¹ Later, a local reporter was allowed to review and write about these emails (Higgins 2010), much to the apparent chagrin of the FBI, and I have seen some of them myself.

² It is not clear from the media reports of the trial exactly when this switch in focus occurred.

³ Militia rumor has it that the Hutaree leader showed the agent an assembled bomb in the woods near their training facility, but this was never confirmed in media reports of the trial.

no evidence members were really planning to harm anyone. Four of the 9 defendants were released on electronic monitoring while awaiting trial, apparently in part because the judge was unconvinced there was sufficient evidence of a plan for harm (Brayton 2012).

On March 26, 2012, exactly 2 years after the Hutaree members were arrested, the judge ordered the immediate release of the defendants. She ruled that the prosecution had failed to support the State's charges, and that there was not enough evidence to demonstrate Hutaree members had a specific plan for harm. This ruling was a surprise to many observers, including, apparently, the defense team; just days prior the defendants' lawyers had filed a motion for a mistrial because the FBI had not revealed information about their undercover agent's actions on a completely unrelated case. Two of the released defendants still face weapons charges, but the possible prison sentence for these charges is much shorter than for the ones that were dismissed. The status of the cases against the defendant who pled guilty and the defendant declared incompetent is unclear.

MY INTERACTIONS WITH AND ASSESSMENT OF THE HUTAREE

I did not attend the Hutaree trial, and instead relied on media reports and the feedback of three militia members who attended some of the proceedings. One attended mostly out of curiosity and fear that the government wants to eliminate all militias; the other two attended because they have loose friendship ties with one or more of the defendants and believe the charges are unjustified. Early in the trial, one of these members recently called me to ask my opinion on certain court proceedings. He knew I have publicly said the Hutaree ideology is unlike that of most militias and may lead to dangerous behavior. He nonetheless told me, "you have as much of a role for acquitting them as anyone else," because, he explained, I had circulated a paper in which I said that most militias in Michigan are not dangerous. He was certain that law enforcement had read the paper and that it was influencing their understanding of militias. It has always been my objective to portray the militia movement accurately, but the implication that I intended to be involved in the legal process of this case made me uncomfortable.

Before the trial was over, I found it difficult to believe that the defendants would be found guilty of all the charges they faced. According to activist and researcher Leonard Zeskind (2009), the government has never won a "seditious conspiracy" case against a right-wing group because they have had difficulty convincing juries that the group really intended to overthrow the government. In the Hutaree's case, this decision rested with the judge, rather than the jury. Local public opinion was also dubious of the government's claims. Nearly all comments on online news stories related to the case were in favor of the defendants, and online posters seemed to believe the charges against them were exaggerated, at best, and the result of entrapment, at worst. Defense attorneys lambasted FBI agents involved in the case for their behavior during the case, including joking and derisive name calling directed at Hutaree members both before and after their arrests in in-office email communications (Baldas 2012b). Defense attorneys were also been critical of Detroit's prosecutor for giving preferential treatment to their paid informant in his own serious legal troubles (Baldas 2012a).

All the same, it is indisputable that Hutaree members did *talk* about wanting "war" with the government and wanting to do violence to people, even though it was eventually ruled that they had no formal plan to do so. A jury hearing people talk about wanting to indiscriminately kill children would almost certainly be biased against them and want to find them guilty on at least some charges. This may have factored in to the judge's decision to dismiss the charges, rather than letting the jury make a decision on the case. The judge's decision was legally sound,

but nonetheless rather surprising given the range of charges against the defendants and the lengthy FBI investigation into the group.

As I mentioned, I first heard about the Hutaree in April 2008 when SMVM leaders expressed concern about their lack of safety standards. In contrast, very early in my fieldwork I observed how other units handled their weapons and taught others to do so. I was nothing but impressed with their safety standards and watchfulness of new shooters' safe handling procedures: most units always had a designated range officer (a position taken in shifts to avoid fatigue and to share responsibility), always covered range safety procedures with all attendees at the beginning of every training, and completely forbade alcohol at all events.

When I inquired about the difference in safety standards in the Hutaree, a member from the western part of the state referred me to the Hutaree's training videos, posted to YouTube. My eyes were not sufficiently trained to notice all the problematic weapons-handling issues they said the videos evinced, but I decided that I should take the reports of the Hutaree's problematic behavior seriously. I was trusting in the expertise of militia members, many of whom had military experience, and all of whom had many more years of consistent firearms handling than I did. Based on leaders' descriptions of the Hutaree's belief structure and my own viewing of their non-training YouTube videos, I further determined that the Hutaree members did not ideologically resemble the other units I had already contacted.

In short, they seemed very religious, more volatile, reactionary, and more like the militias of the 1990s than other Michigan groups today. They seemed a more appropriate target for the "extremist" label than any of the other groups I had encountered. I decided not to approach any of the Hutaree members for interviews, and they were the only group I intentionally avoided. This decision was not only because of safety concerns, but also because I wanted to study the "average" militia member—what most members of the contemporary militia believed and did—rather than the outliers who are most often the ones who end up in sensationalized media and academic reports.

I knew that it was still possible for one or more Hutaree members to contact me after hearing about my research from someone in another unit. I decided I would consider conducting an interview under these circumstances, but would be even more cautious than usual if I did so. Finding telephone interviews problematic for establishing rapport and assessing completeness of responses, I decided that I would insist on a meeting that happened during daylight hours in a very public location. I further decided to bring a friend along to observe the interaction from a distance (e.g., across the restaurant) even though this would breach the spirit of anonymity my IRB insisted I follow. I never enacted this plan.

I have been publicly quoted as saying I did not interact with any Hutaree members. This is true, but it is not the entire truth; I had no interest in becoming a witness in a federal trial and chose my public words carefully. The complete truth is that I had interactions with two people who eventually became affiliated with the Hutaree after my encounters with them. Both people were detained as a result of the initial raids, though only one was criminally charged. Neither contact was planned or intentional. Both interactions help explain how the Hutaree differs from other Michigan militia units.

The first Hutaree affiliate I encountered was in attendance at the very first militia field exercise I attended—Field Day in April 2008. I cannot detail this interaction without revealing the identity of the person in question, but suffice to say, I found this person rather odd, extremely off-putting, and paranoid about a variety of issues. Even so, this person was obviously well-

meaning regarding militia activity and disaster planning, and began participating in Hutaree events later that year.

The second affiliate arrived as an unexpected guest of a scheduled interviewee in December 2008. This person was very obviously angry with the government; again, I cannot discuss the precise source of this anger without revealing the person's identity. I can say that this person characterized their relationship with the government as a state of "war," and said they strongly desired a violent confrontation with the government to assuage this anger. I do not know exactly when this person joined the Hutaree, only that he was involved in a different militia unit at the time of our interview.

I never heard any other militia member intimate any similar kind of violence. No other member made me as uncomfortable as this person did during our interview; I very seriously considered whether I should contact law enforcement as a result of this exchange⁴. It is possible that some other members I encountered held similarly violent views, but no hint of that came through in any meeting, training, or camping function I attended, nor in any newsletter, forum post, or other reading over the three years of my fieldwork.

The affiliate who was on trial gave me more than 20 copied DVDs out of a large suitcase in which I could see what must have been hundreds of duplicates of the disks⁵. This person seemed to approach DVD distribution as a patriotic, or perhaps a moral, duty, and reminded me of a Gideon handing out a stack of Bibles. The DVDs had titles like "Liberty in the Balance," "Psychiatry: Industry of Death," and "In Lies We Trust" that detail different gripes with the government. A few were fairly well-researched critiques of a particular issue, such as one film about the proliferation of genetically modified foods, but most were rooted in pseudo-science, speculation, or outright fabrications. Their topics covered things like Linda Thompson's claims regarding the "real" causes of Waco and more recent conspiracy theories about the government's involvement in the 9/11 terror attacks.

I watched most of these DVDs (some did not work properly) over the next few months. I started with "Beyond Treason," which the interviewee had told me to view first if I wanted to understand what motivated the feelings of betrayal directed at the government this person had. Among other issues, this film made various claims about the government's testing chemicals on citizens and engaging in many layers of complex cover-ups to hide the evidence.

The experience of watching the films helped me understand how truly frightening it must be to believe all the details of these conspiracies theories as this interviewee did. It made me better able to understand the origin of this interviewee's anger and their desire to strike out at a vague government nemesis. This is not to say the anger was justified, or rooted in a science-supported reality, but rather, that fear of this level is a strong motivator and may have played a large role in Hutaree members' alleged plotting and eventual arrests.

As a result of my first-hand contact with these two Hutaree affiliates and with information from other units' militia members, I have little difficulty believing that at least some members could have been planning—not just talking about—violent action and taking

⁴ Later, when I realized I had interviewed one of the arrestees I again had a crisis of conscience about whether I should contact the FBI. I carefully reread my transcript and realized, however, that I could not provide any information that would bolster (or contradict) any case. Everything the interviewee communicated to me was simply too vague. All things considered, I am glad I did not talk to law enforcement because that would have had the potential to compromise other data from people who were completely disconnected from the situation and to make me look like an informant to other members who had yet to participate in my research, making it highly unlikely they would do so.

⁵ This case with DVDs was later listed on the government's evidence list for the trial ("Exhibit List" 2012).

preliminary steps to make it happen. I doubt there were highly detailed plans about a specific officer or setting up a specific altercation, but I do think that it would have required only a minor conflict—a traffic stop, for example—to trigger violent action from at least some members of the group.

I must emphasize here that I did not have the same degree of contact with Hutaree members in the field as I did with other units: I did not attend their trainings or meetings. While I did treat other units' assessments of the Hutaree as relative expert positions, I am not merely relying second hand reports of the group to form my assessment of them. I evaluated the Hutaree's own website materials (a public face of the group that was itself more exclusionary than other units') and DVD copies of films that some members of the group believed demonstrated their concerns. I had extended interactions with two Hutaree affiliates, which is a non negligible number considering that there were only 9 core group members. I also attended a large gathering of another unit—identified as Unit A below—that had close ties to the Hutaree, and in whose events the Hutaree often participated.

Based on these sources and the two affiliates in particular, I think some Hutaree members are incredibly angry at the government at least in part because it represents so many things that are beyond their control, such as their health or their economic situation. I think it would have required very little provocation for some of them to lash out at a representative of the system they understood to be repressing them; as SMVM's leader recently said, '[They] talked a lot of big talk. It gave [them] some kind of validation they were denied in other places.' I do think it possible that a police officer or someone else could have been injured or killed. I do not, however, think that the group had the ability (either mentally or tactically) to successfully conduct a mass killing at a funeral as they allegedly planned, primarily because I am certain they would have been caught after whatever first violent action they initiated. I think the FBI probably acted reasonably and responsibly in assessing the group's risk, and I am glad they did so before anyone was injured. I also think the judge acted reasonably in dismissing the charges against the Hutaree based on the State's case.

OTHER MILITIAS' RESPONSES

Like the judge for the trial, some non-Hutaree militia members question whether there was a plan for specific harm; they believe that a concrete plan for harm would be necessary for a conviction and that the Hutaree members were instead “just blowing off steam.” Others believe that the extreme nature of the conversations is not covered under the First Amendment, much as yelling “fire!” in a crowded building would not qualify as free speech. As Paul noted at the March 2012 public meeting:

‘I don't know whether talking about killing police officers, about “popping” them at the side of the road is covered under the First Amendment. I personally don't believe it is. But here's the thing: evil may not be illegal, but it's still evil. It's just plain *evil* to talk about killing anyone like that—especially kids—and if you're gonna talk that way you'd better stay away from me.’

Up until the trial began, militia members in non-Hutaree units, including SMVM, expressed other concerns about a lack of evidence regarding illegal weapons or weapons modifications. The State's evidence includes long lists of firearms that each defendant owned (111 total, by my count; “Exhibit List” 2012), but none on the list were marked as being illegally

owned or modified. It was finally revealed in court on March 6, 2012, that additional fully automatic weapons were omitted from the evidence list, and most militia members agree that these firearms were not legally owned⁶. Many militia members, even those who believed the Hutaree would serve long prison sentences, still worried the State was trying to use the sheer number of firearms in the courtroom to intimidate anti-gun jurors into voting against Hutaree members and to inflame anti-gun opinions more generally.

Non-Hutaree militia members were also concerned that the jurors for the trial had been made anonymous, meaning little is known about their identities or potential prejudices. The State did not clearly or publicly articulate why they believed the jurors' identities should be kept secret, but it reasonable to assume they believed there was a risk of retaliation against jurors by other militias in the event of a guilty verdict. Some militia members said it does not a reasonable concern because all Hutaree members were involved in the trial.

However, shortly after the arrests, SMVM leaders and the leader who refused to help the Hutaree member avoid the FBI received very negative comments and a few outright threats from a couple non-Michigan militias. Most of these comments expressed the sentiment that militias should always band together, no matter what, because the government would soon come after all militia units if they did not. These passions started to cool as soon as more evidence was made publicly available. Negative attention from out of state groups has ceased, though a few members expect they may receive further backlash as a result of the charges' being dismissed.

Given the aggression against people who merely cooperated with authorities, it is not difficult to imagine some retribution against a jury reaching a guilty verdict. It is interesting that inter-militia negative commentary and threats came almost exclusively from out of state groups who were more removed from the situation and had no direct connections to Hutaree members. Only one in-state unit criticized militia leaders who cooperated with the FBI; I discuss this group in greater detail below.

Non-Hutaree militia members have a variety of responses to the acquittals. Some are relieved that the First Amendment seems to have been bolstered. Some expect they will need to be "vigilant" against potential retribution for their roles in the investigation. Others are more circumspect. One man on the forum accused the government of handling the case poorly, even while making fun of the Hutaree's conspiracy theory orientation:

"I guess the "Evil New World Order" had a change of heart? [...]The Feds blew this, in every aspect. They wasted a lot of money and time and energy. Maybe just the arrest and trial will keep folks like this from doing stupid shit in the future. I hope so."

I believe there may have been a case to be made against the Hutaree, but agree that the State may have overreached by bringing a "seditious conspiracy" charge. There were also possible missteps during the investigation itself (e.g., relying on an informant who engaged in unrelated criminal activity, having an undercover agent perhaps became too close to the people being investigated, having inter-office communications that eventually looked bad in court). Nonetheless, the Hutaree members deemed most potentially problematic served a 2 year sentence while awaiting trial, and the others were under electronic monitoring restrictions during

⁶ Fully automatic firearms may be owned by civilians with the purchase of certain federal licenses. These are usually expensive and require a greater degree of interaction with certain government agencies than most militia members prefer. I have only met one member in the entire state who reports to have such a license.

that time. Perhaps these punishments were enough to send a message. It could also be the case that a conviction on these charges could have led to violent backlash from other millenarian militia units, or non-militia extremists.

HOW THE HUTAREE IS DIFFERENT

Even with the acquittals, a question remains: how much does the Hutaree resemble other militias? Or, more directly, what kind of risk do most militias pose to law enforcement or society more generally? One of the defendants' public defenders was quoted in local papers as saying early in the trial, "Calling this group a militia is pushing it. It's really a social club" (Bunkley 2012). He had a point, although the differences did not work in the defendants' favor, as their attorney was trying to imply with this statement. It is true that, despite their firearms training, Hutaree members do not resemble other militias in Michigan on many dimensions, and these differences correspond well with Churchill's two broad types of 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*).

Most militia units in Michigan are constitutionalist. They have public meetings that they advertise on various websites. Their membership requirements are primarily limited to gear and training details, though people legally disallowed from owning firearms are prohibited, and some groups run background checks on new members to ensure they meet this standard. Most units allow and encourage non-members, including friends, family, and media representatives, to attend meetings and trainings alike. SMVM is the most transparent group in the state because it has members who have been active since the 1990s who say they learned lessons following false reports after the Oklahoma City bombing. Most other units in Michigan nonetheless more closely resemble SMVM and the constitutionalist type than they resemble the Hutaree.

The Hutaree fit well within the millenarian definition. They were organized around religious principles that referenced apocalyptic ideology. Before it was taken down⁷, their website was replete with quoted Bible verses and other religious references, especially to the book of Revelations. They had a section entitled "Beast Watch" that must have been intended to have frequent updates on modern signs of the apocalypse. It contained only three listings: one on implanted microchips, another on European integration, and a list of jokes⁸ about the number 666 that seemed to make fun of apocalyptic ideology—a point clearly lost on the poster. The webpage "About Us" section includes language about the End of Times, though it is not entirely

⁷ The Hutaree website is archived and much of its content may still be viewed through <http://web.archive.org/web/20100401191403/http://www.hutaree.com/>. Some subpages of the archived site need to be highlighted using <ctrl + a> to view the white text on a white background.

⁸ Included on the list were, for example, "00666 - Zip code of the Beast" and "\$566.66 - Price of the Beast at Costco."

clear if the Hutaree believed it was their job to bring that about, or to use violence to “defend” God’s plan until that time occurred:

“Hutaree; Christian warrior. [...] Jesus wanted us to be ready to defend ourselves using the sword and stay alive using equipment. [...] Being Hutaree is to stay [*sic*] the Testimony of Christ alive, and follow a motto, John 15:13, “Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” [...] The Hutaree will one day see its enemy and meet him on the battlefield if so God wills it.”

Militia members in other units report that the Hutaree looked exclusively to David Stone as their authority for interpreting biblical passages and general religious precepts. For example, a militia member from another unit who converted to Islam enjoyed training with other militia units to have as much experience with different training styles as possible discussed his experience with them. When he and two other members of his unit once attended a Hutaree function for this purpose, he was told that he would be unwelcome around the group because of his religion. The other two men were told they would have to start attending one particular church if they wanted to interact with the Hutaree regularly. Given this reaction, it seems very odd that the Muslim man was the person one Hutaree member approached for sanctuary from the FBI. Perhaps he believed the Muslim member would be the last person authorities would suspect of harboring him, but it could simply be that the Muslim member was one of the first non-Hutaree contacts in his cell phone.

It is worth noting that most militias in the state agree that calling the Hutaree a militia is “pushing it.” Perhaps a quote from the Michigan Militia Corps of Wolverines’ handbook best illustrates this:

“The nature and purpose of a citizen militia is defensive and concerns itself with the preservation of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. We may be regarded as serious and ever vigilant, but we are not militant. However, there are individuals or groups that claim to be militias that are determined to be engaged in combat and are aggressively active. These individuals or groups are not militias – they are militant” (“Handbook” 2011:31).

Most Michigan militias echo this sentiment, saying that any group who wants to infringe on anyone else’s life and liberty, or who wants to sidestep the law out of anger is not a militia. These militia members differentiate between people who want to be “vigilant” against offenses violating the Constitution and the national mythos, and people who want to engage in violence—essentially reflecting to Churchill’s (2009) constitutionalist-millenarian typology.

OTHER PROBLEMATIC GROUPS & RISK FACTORS FOR DANGER

Two militia units in Michigan nonetheless have some similarities, which most other units do not share, with the Hutaree. I hesitate to identify these groups by name or region of the state, for both legal and safety reasons. One—Unit A—is the one that criticized militia leaders who cooperated with law enforcement during the Hutaree investigation and arrests. Unit A was loosely associated with the Hutaree and apparently acted as a starter organization for it, as both of the eventual Hutaree members I encountered first began there. Unit A’s ideology most resembles that of the

Hutaree: they are fond of government conspiracy theories, idolize a single leader (who has had past altercations with law enforcement), are extremely wary of outsiders, and are not open to the public.

The second group with similarities to the Hutaree—Unit B—is largely defunct at the moment, but was active during much of my fieldwork and has the potential to garner membership in the future. They focused their attentions around a single leader, did not publicly advertise their meetings, used a rank structure, and excluded women and non-Christians. Unit B had a major falling out with several other units in the state when its leader forbade members from training with other units; many of Unit B’s members defected to other groups or quit participating in the militia altogether.

Many of the factors shared by the Hutaree, Unit A, and Unit B are also present in different groups that other authors have described as problematic (e.g., Aho 1995; Churchill 2009). Below, I suggest a set of risk factors based on the Hutaree and the two similar units identified above. Factors that were present in these three groups but were absent or very rare in other units are included on the list. I believe these factors might be used to identify militia units that could be prone to violent or other problematic behavior. These are not intended to be a rigid typology but rather to serve as a further specification of Churchill’s (2009) millenarian ideal type⁹. Table 2 includes a visual representation of the factors and what major Michigan militia units possess them¹⁰.

Violent or Dangerous Behavior¹¹

Obviously, any discussion or enactment of violent action is cause for concern. The Hutaree discussed violent action against police officers in particular, but more broadly referenced “war” with the government. Groups who may be understood through their rhetoric as “offensive” in relation to the government, groups who describe themselves this way, or who say they *want* some altercation with authorities warrant immediate investigation.

This is in contrast to the many constitutionalist militia members I encountered who describe themselves as “defensive” toward the government. These members mean they would be willing to defend themselves and their families if the government decided to confiscate firearms or somehow tried to limit the First Amendment, for example, through shutting down the media. They recognize that these are remote possibilities and emphatically state they do *not* want these events to occur. The level of anger and suspicion toward the government is much less than that in “offensive” groups; the level of anger and suspicion is typically easily determined in conversation with members and in review of their written materials.

⁹ Churchill’s book implicates some, but not all, of the factors I list here but in an historical context.

¹⁰ Table 2 does not represent all units that were active during my fieldwork here, only ones that evidenced at least one of the listed risk factors.

¹¹ To elaborate on the non-Hutaree dangerous behavior in Table 2, Unit C used real tear gas during a gas mask training. A member who did not have a mask apparently believed he could participate anyway and began having severe difficulty breathing. He jumped in a nearby lake (in lieu of a safety shower) and had to be removed from the area. Units D and E included alcohol at a camping event prior to a training exercise. A member in each group suffered injuries the next day when they fell—one into a fire pit—while still hung over. All three of these outcomes were the result of carelessness, but were not repeated by the units in question, unlike the Hutaree’s repeated problematic handling of firearms. Unlike the Hutaree’s unsafe behavior, Unit C’s, D’s and E’s incidents did not involve firearms.

Table 2. Risk Factors for Identifying Potentially Dangerous Militia Units

	Unit:						
	Hutaree	A	B	C	D	E	F
<u>Violent or Dangerous Behavior:</u>							
Evidence of Planned Violence	*						
Offensive Stance Toward Government	*	*	*				
Dangerous Behavior in Training	*			*	*	*	
<u>Exclusionary Beliefs and Practices:</u>							
Excludes Based on Religion or Gender	*		*				
Tolerates Exclusionary Speech	*	*	*				
<u>Conspiracy Theories:</u>							
Advocates Conspiracy Theories	*	*			*		
Many Members with Low Education Level	*	*					
<u>Structural Characteristics:</u>							
Religious Orientation	*	*	*				
Emphasis on One Leader	*	*	*				
Rank Structure	*	*	*	*			
Three or More Related Members	*						*
<u>Total Risk Factors:</u>	11	7	6	2	2	1	1

Somewhat less obvious than overtly violent rhetoric and action is dangerous behavior. Many militia groups identified Hutaree training practices as unsafe, with one active duty veteran I encountered even calling them “scary.” Any evidence of unsafe behavior during trainings that is not identified and corrected by the group itself is another warning sign. Accidents may happen during any activity and become learning opportunities, but repeated, unrecognized, and publicized (via YouTube, for example) misbehavior indicates a fundamental problem with the group.

This has not been in media reports, but according to one militia member who has been attending the trial, the paid informant testified about other dangerous Hutaree behavior. Once, according to his report, a bullet was fired very near the head of the undercover officer during a training, and the paid informant accidentally shot himself through the hand on another occasion. Repeated and extreme carelessness of this nature may indicate a disregard not only for safety, but also for human life that could carry over into other interactions.

It is worth noting that very few accidents have occurred in other groups’ trainings in the last three years. The ones that have happened did not involve gunfire or incompetent firearms handling, and were not potentially life-threatening as the Hutaree accidents above were. For example, one member, an Eagle Scout, cut himself when his pocket knife’s locking mechanism failed and the blade closed on his hand as he was using it to cut a rope during training.

Exclusionary Beliefs and Practices

Tolerance of exclusionary beliefs and practices is the next set of factors that indicate a militia unit could become dangerous. Specifically, militia units that exclude non-Christians, women, non-whites, or some combination of those categories merit more scrutiny than those that do not. When units participate in exclusionary behavior, it likely means members are strongly invested in stereotypes about the groups they exclude; their units may thus be breeding grounds for harmful stereotypes or even hate speech and, at the extreme, eventual violent action against these excluded groups. Exclusion of this nature is in violation of the principles that militias proclaim to uphold, including equality.

In contrast, constitutionalist groups in Michigan welcome all citizens who are legally able to own a firearm. I have witnessed multiple units talk to women and non-whites at public events to try to make them feel comfortable and welcome. I have seen several active recruitment attempts of women and non-whites who were listening at the periphery of such events.

Similarly, constitutionalist groups have little tolerance for racist or sexist speech in public spaces. Most say something like Paul, who noted,

‘You can believe whatever you want. It’s your constitutional right to be a racist if you want. But if you get up here and start spouting off about it, we will mock you. We will mock you until you leave.’

Units who do not respond in a similar fashion, who tolerate racist or sexist speech may be more likely to be exclusionary and exhibit problematic behavior. These units may be more susceptible to infiltration or cooptation by white supremacist or other more nefarious groups.

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories were a hallmark of Michigan militias in the 1990s, and many accounts of militias continue to include references to them. In my observation, few Michigan units today are

particularly invested in conspiracy theories, and often make fun of people from the past who would “run and hide from black helicopters,” for example. However, it is sometimes the case that individual members, even within constitutionalist militias, may strongly believe in certain conspiracy theories. Members who do not possess at least some college education are much more likely, from what I have observed, to believe in conspiracy theories, especially those that rely on pseudo-science and politics. Belief in conspiracy theories among the less educated members seems to be further amplified if they are veterans (especially of Vietnam) who have a lot of anger about their military participation.

Conspiracy theories seem to be most problematic when they are unchallenged or reinforced by unit leaders and are integrated into the unit-level ideology, as was the case with the Hutaree’s references to the New World Order. Endorsement of these conspiracy theories often amounts to an implicit rejection of critical thinking. Continual discussion of these theories heightens the sense of distrust and confusion that conspiracy-oriented or under-educated individuals may have regarding the government. Unit-level support for conspiracy theories likely feeds into paranoid thinking about a range of government activities and may even foster violence in some individuals. This seemed to be the case with my interviewee who eventually joined the Hutaree and found a group of individuals who shared the paranoid beliefs evinced in his copied DVDs.

A unit that emphasizes the “New World Order” conspiracy theory may merit particular concern. This theory states that there is a broad group of world elites (and sometimes law enforcement) who want to set up a single, global, authoritarian regime that undermines individual rights and national sovereignty. The theory usually implicates the world financial systems, including the Federal Reserve, as part of the process to “enslave” most citizens. Recent versions of this conspiracy theory seem to include a heavy focus on the United Nations, at least among potentially problematic Michigan militia units who believe the U.S.’s participation in the organization is unconstitutional and threatens to replace the laws and self-determination of the U.S. It has been my experience that militia members who believe in this particular conspiracy theory evince the highest degree of mistrust and disdain toward the government.

Importantly, just because a member of a unit uses the term “New World Order,” it does not necessarily mean they believe in the traditional conspiracy theory. In recent years and in part because of right-wing radio hosts Alex Jones’ contributions, “New World Order” may sometimes be a benign proxy for “globalization,” and increasing U.S. entanglement in foreign issues, which they dislike. It is crucial to understand the speaker’s context to differentiate among usages of the term. In my experience, members who use the term only as a reference to globalization are much less likely to harbor a general anger and suspicion toward the government than those who view the Order as an intentional conspiracy on the part of some cabal of international elites.

Structural Characteristics

Militias that are overtly organized around religious principles are a cause for concern (see Aho 1995; Churchill 2009). By this I mean that religion is a central focus of the unit’s functions and may be part of the stated reasoning for the unit’s existence, as was evidenced in the Hutaree’s “About Us” section. These units often call themselves “Christian militias,” though sometimes they are neither Christians nor militias.

It is worth remembering here that Norm Olson, a pastor, originally envisioned a much stronger religious element in the militia when he started the Michigan units in the 1990s. He

wanted each major unit to have a “militia chaplain,” and many did so. The records he sent to me include many religious references and prayers apparently used at meetings.

Today, most units allow and encourage individual members to have their own religious beliefs, and some even hold a non-denominational prayer at the beginning of some functions. However, religion is rarely discussed in these groups, even casually during downtimes in training. This is in stark contrast to groups, like the Hutaree, who made religion a central motivating factor for the unit’s existence. It seems to be the case that religion, just as sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) so artfully described, provides these units with an appeal to a higher power that makes them much less likely to question their belief structures, or to peaceably or meaningfully engage with law enforcement or anyone else holding a different opinion.

Militia units that have an excessive focus on a single leader may have a similar problem. Most units in Michigan focus on the unit, or on multiple people’s skills and contributions to the unit. In more problematic units, the leader is often very charismatic and members may begin to believe his opinions cannot be questioned. Members may thus become more likely to participate in groupthink and not realize they are participating in increasingly violent or dangerous behavior. A leader like this may eventually become viewed as a spiritual leader for the unit as well as a militia leader, often resulting in the unit having a religious focus. This was the case with Norman Olsen in the 1990s, David Stone in the Hutaree, and is the case currently in Units A and B that I describe above as being most similar to the Hutaree within Michigan.

Units that use rank structures are prone to this problem. Ranks emphasize a hierarchy that prioritizes a single leader and subservience to him. Militia ranks usually have nothing to do with military service and many militia members find ranks incredibly disrespectful to military veterans who have earned some rank-based title. The Hutaree and the two groups I flagged above as most problematic in Michigan all use rank. Only one constitutional unit uses a formal rank structure to my knowledge, and it has been plagued by infighting and constant membership losses.

There is one other factor that contributed to members’ not questioning the Hutaree leader. One of the unit’s 9 key members was engaged to leader David Stone and became his wife in a ceremony that included the undercover FBI agent as best man. Stone’s son and step son were also members. This means that 4 of the 9 primary members of the group were related to each other and spent time together not only in the militia and in the church services Stone apparently required members to attend, but also in their home, during family events and other informal gatherings. The other 5 members also spent considerable time with the group at many of these events as pictures of the Stones’ wedding show.

Thus, Hutaree members’ primary social contacts only happened with each other. They were largely isolated from other people who were not members of the unit and were effectively withdrawn from many aspects of civil society. No other militia unit I have encountered in Michigan exhibits this degree of isolation. It is, however, reasonable to assume that this kind of insular activity could further promote leader worship and groupthink in other units.

CONCLUSION

To reiterate, the above risk factors are not intended to be a firm typology, but rather indicators of militia units most likely to evince socially problematic behavior. It is possible that any single factor in the second through fourth categories above (exclusionary behavior, belief in conspiracy theories, and structural characteristics) could be present in a unit without it necessarily being prone to problematic behavior. Concern and further investigation is merited when the factors

begin to cluster such that several are present in a single militia unit, and I believe this may be especially true when this clustering occurs across the categories. In conjunction with Churchill's (2009) constitutional-millenarian typology, I believe these risk factors could be useful in identifying militia units that are most likely to become violent or otherwise pose a danger to society.

I think of potential militia violence as working like a diathesis-stress model for mental illness: there is some internal defect that only becomes problematic when an external stress is applied. In the case of the Hutaree, the diathesis was multi-faceted. It consisted of anger toward the government, a strong religious bent, belief in conspiracy theories and over-reliance on a single leader. The FBI intervened before an external stress occurred and thus prevented the "illness"—violent action. I believe that a stressful event like a traffic stop, a domestic violence report, or any other interaction with law enforcement could have been interpreted as hostile and could have been a sufficient stressor to provoke violent action. Identifying likely diatheses facilitates preventing violent action before it happens, and the risk factors I delineate above could be used in this process.

One other issue bears consideration here in light of the Hutaree and their actions. Some past militia researchers (e.g., Stern 1996) have claimed that "above ground" militia units like SMVM often have an "underground" component like the Hutaree to carry out illegal, violent activity. The implication is that the two units are really the same organization, and the "above ground" unit maintains a normative public face while ideologically supporting dangerous activity in the secret "underground" unit. "Above ground" units purportedly funnel resources, including extremist members, to their "underground" components.

Elsewhere, I have described how there was no evidence to the "above ground"- "underground" model in the contemporary Michigan militia. I explained that Churchill's (2009) typology was much better fit for the groups in this state, and explained here how the Hutaree fit the millenarian type of militia. I want to emphasize that, while the Hutaree was not open to the public, it still did not qualify as an "underground" unit in the way past researchers have described.

First, the Hutaree maintained an easily accessible internet presence; they had their own website, MySpace pages, and YouTube postings. Second, other militia units in the state were acquainted with Hutaree members. Individuals with interest in militia participation are a relatively small community; they reach out to one another (even to Units A and B who do not maintain internet presences that facilitate communication) in an effort to share resources and communicate their shared interests and concerns; they *want* to know about other units in their state and beyond. Third, militia units do not have financial resources to funnel to other groups; members purchase their own personal gear and often struggle to do so. Fourth, with the exception of Unit A, other militia units in Michigan were very wary—not accepting—of the Hutaree members and their beliefs and behaviors. Members of two distinct units approached the FBI with information on the Hutaree.

It is true that both Hutaree affiliates I encountered started their militia tenure in Unit A before transitioning to the Hutaree. At first glance, this might appear to be a case of membership funneling to a more extreme organization that the "underground" theory implies. However, it is important to remember that Unit A is not an above ground organization. They are not open to the public and do not advertise to them. Rather, this is a case of two millenarian units who interacted with each other.

It is true that the Hutaree eventually became more extreme than Unit A, but ideology is not the only reason members may have left Unit A for the Hutaree. The leaders of both groups are very strongly personalitied, charismatic men. Hutaree's leader focused more on religion and his supposed spiritual role in the group, whereas Unit A's leader focuses more attention on political treatises. One of the affiliates I met expressed a strong interest in evangelical religion and may have been attracted to the Hutaree because of this difference.

Additionally, Unit A conducts training exercises only very rarely¹². Members instead attend meetings where they listen to their leader discuss political issues and related conspiracy theories. They discuss and show off their firearms but rarely use them when together. Individual members often shoot on private land and report back about their weapons' performance. Only a subset of the younger members gathers and conducts paramilitary practice sessions (e.g., moving together through the woods as a group) in the way most other units do. This often happens with Unit A's leader completely absent, or standing on the sidelines, and only happens a few times a year.

Militia members in other units report that the training is the most enjoyable part of their experience in militia. Some of them enjoy shooting, "dressing up," learning first aid or survival skills, or generally engaging in shared activities in the field. People who left Unit A for the Hutaree may have wanted more of this hands-on participation, rather than merely hearing a leader talk for hours on end.

¹² As I explained in Chapter 2, I believe a unit must engage in some kind of training—a physical enactment of the principles of preparedness they purport to uphold—to be considered a militia unit at all. Unit A barely meets this qualification.

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