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What's in a Name? American Exceptionalism and US Militias

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Although there is a vast literature on non-state armed groups (NSAGs), US militias are rarely considered within it. They are treated, mostly by default, as a distinctly American phenomenon rather than an American example of an NSAG. A similar pattern holds true in the discipline of Geography. NSAGs are not a common area of focus in the discipline, but to the extent they are referenced, it is usually in the context of conflicts outside the US. Between 2019 and October 2024, for example, *Antipode* published no articles with NSAG in the title or text, and only two with the word militia (neither of which is focused on the US). Even the federal government treads with caution when defining US militias with terminology associated with NSAGs, such as "extremist" or "terrorist" (Beirich 2011). These gaps are surprising given recent threats US militias have posed to civil liberties and democratic processes. During 2016 Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri, for example, the Oath Keepers militia patrolled streets carrying assault rifles, intimidating unarmed, mostly Black protestors (Lo Wang and Sanders 2015). In 2020 the FBI disrupted a militia plot to kidnap (and likely kill) Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Peiser 2021). And, on January 6th, 2021, militias staged a failed coup as Congress gathered to certify the 2020 election results.

In this paper, I argue that the collective nonchalance to US militias is based in part on how we name them, and through that, how we understand the threat of violence they pose.

Specifically, I argue that we understand militias through a lens of American exceptionalism. This is reflected discursively in our willingness to tacitly accept the term these groups use to define themselves (militia) and by extension the geo-historical imaginary they hope to convey through it. This imaginary, as described below, provides a form of legitimacy that academics, politicians, watchdog groups, and journalists do not afford similar NSAGs. It also distorts how we categorize the nature of the violence they enact. Given the inaccuracies built into this framing, I also argue that we should categorize these groups using two metrics from the NSAG literature—their posture towards the state and the nature of their relationship with the local population (see Gutiérrez-Sanín 2018). By these metrics, we would describe most militias as guerilla or insurgent groups. And for militias that participated in the failed insurrection on January 6th, 2021, we would use terms like paramilitary, praetorian guard, or rump state force (Pankhurst 2022).

Before proceeding to my arguments, I briefly discuss the history of NSAGs in the US and describe the far-right, where most US NSAGs are located today. I then provide a short history of the militia movement and its geo-historical imagination, demonstrating the exceptionalism that underpins it and the ways it denies the true nature of militias' relationship to the state and civilians within it. I conclude by discussing the categories we should adopt when examining the US militia movement.

America's Abiding Suspicion of the Federal Government

The Minutemen and other NSAGs were important players in the American Revolution. Although the number of NSAGs in the US has waxed and waned over time, they have been a durable part of the American political landscape. No one theme captures the goals of American NSAGs, but scholars note that most have one thing in common—distrust in the federal government (Hofstadter 1964; Stock 1996).

The nature of anti-government sentiments can vary, however. In some cases, anti-government views capture a desire to be left alone, to let local and state decision-making reign. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 provides a good example. The uprising began as a protest of the federal government's decision to tax whiskey, but grew violent when federal marshals arrived to collect unpaid taxes (Slaughter 1986). The rebels argued taxes would bankrupt small distillers

who operated in a cashless economy where whiskey was their main currency. They also resented paying taxes to a federal government that offered few services in return (ibid.). The federal government's decision to quell the rioting with soldiers heightened their resentment.

In other cases, anti-government sentiment is not about limiting federal power so much as redirecting it towards specific enemies. Anti-Mormon vigilantism after the Civil War offers a case in point (Mason 2010). Though Mormon converts in the South were relatively sparse, polygamy was seen as a threat to white male "honor"—a broad concept that guaranteed white male dominion over women (ibid.). As Mason (2010:543) notes, though Mormons were white, they were seen as "sexual predator[s] who seduced young women and lured them away to … [their] polygamous harem in the West". Anti-Mormon vigilantes claimed that extra-legal violence was a necessary corrective to federal laws that protected so-called Mormon "predators" at the expense of local churches and social norms.

Opposition to the federal government has also animated state-level politics. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, for example, the Democratic Party in numerous Southern states relied on informal armed gangs of white men to terrorize newly freed enslaved people and whites sympathetic to Lincoln's Republican Party (Lemann 2006). These groups behaved like subnational paramilitary forces, helping state governments circumvent the federal government's decision to end slavery and begin Reconstruction.

The Far-Right Today

Typologies

For most of the 20th century, four ideologies dominated the far-right in the US: white supremacy; nativism; anti-communism; and ideological anti-Semitism (Pitcavage 2019). After the Cold War, anti-government extremism joined the far-right fray. Today, most movements on the far-right are *white supremacist* or *anti-government*, although anti-Semitism informs both ideologies. Increasingly, male supremacy intersects with these ideologies as well (see Leidig 2023).

Scholars and watchdog groups tend to view these two sets of movements as distinct, even though the broader public often views them as one and the same. They do so for three reasons. First, the dominant ideologies in these spaces are quite different. White nationalist ideology, for

example, is often statist. They believe a muscular, central government is necessary to ensure white dominance (e.g. by enforcing segregation or directing ethnic cleansing campaigns). Militias, by contrast, have traditionally argued that power should be concentrated locally, at the level of the county. They believe the bigger the government, the greater the likelihood of government tyranny (Cooter 2024; Pitcavage 2019). What government tyranny means, however, can vary by place and time. In the Intermountain West, for example, it means federal ownership of land (Walker 2016). During COVID-19, it meant mask mandates and online schooling (Mogelson 2020).

Second, while these groups sometimes share space, they do not have a strong history of cooperation or mutual respect. Leaked Discord chats where white nationalists planned the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, for example, show the event's planners did *not* coordinate with militias when organizing the event. They also illustrate the deep antipathy white nationalists have for militias. The rally's planners denigrated militia ideology and mocked their members as "cucks", "low testosterone" men, and "LARPy Tryhards" (Gallaher and Fox 2020).

Third, these two spheres approach race differently. Cooter (2024:16) argues that white supremacist identity is "proactively violent", and its adherents intentionally fight for "the primacy of whiteness". The "patriot" identity (embraced by numerous antigovernment groups) is not always violent, and its adherents "do not intentionally center whiteness or its preservation" in their actions (see also Gallaher 2003; Jackson 2020). Watchdog groups have made a similar assessment. The Southern Poverty Law Center, for example, distinguishes between ideologies based on hate and those based on antigovernment sentiments, though both are viewed as extremist (SPLC 2024a).[1] White nationalists and neo-Nazis are in the former category, while militias, constitutional sheriff groups, sovereign citizens, and overt conspiracy propogandists are in the latter. None of this means that militias' actions are neutral on race. By championing local (over federal) power, militias are undermining decades of federal efforts to level the playing field for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian communities. And by appointing themselves as the armed arbiters of local power, they erase the voices of those who are not white or male.

Making a distinction between white supremacist and antigovernment groups is important for analytic and political reasons. Acknowledging the different ideologies that govern these two

spheres, for example, helps us identify the different logics that guide their violence. White supremacists attack people and places coded as not-white (e.g. the attacks on the L'Simcha Congregation Synagogue in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina). Militias, by contrast tend to attack government buildings/property and government officials (e.g. Timothy McVeigh's attack on the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and the militia plot to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer in Ann Arbor, Michigan). Understanding these different logics helps us predict the kinds of violence that will erupt when particular groups rise in prominence. It also helps us determine circumstances in which these groups might cooperate or go to war with one another.

There are also political reasons to recognize these distinctions. Cooter (2024:17) argues, for example, that "categorizing militias as intentional white supremacists" has allowed society to dismiss them as "social outliers". This in turn explains why so many Americans were shocked by Donald Trump's 2016 election and by the failed coup attempt his militia supporters launched four years later. As Cooter (2024:17) argues, Americans had rhetorical license to ignore "the vast pervasiveness of nativist nationalism among US citizens".

Personalities

Scholars argue that adherents of far-right ideologies can also be categorized by their psychological orientation. Building on Adorno's co-authored book, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), for example, Bob Altemeyer (2008) identifies two orientations common on the far-right today—right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO). People who manifest an RWA orientation tend to willingly submit to established authorities (e.g. police, bosses, etc.), act aggressively to defend them, and follow social conventions. This orientation is also fear-based. Altemeyer's (2008:55) surveys indicate that people with high RWA scores are "more afraid than most people are". In particular, they see society's "others"—unmarried women, LGBTQ people, and non-white racialized/ethnic groups—as threats, and believe authoritarian leaders are best positioned to "keep them in their place".

People with SDO and RWA orientations have some things in common. Both tend to be politically conservative and have higher than average degrees of prejudice against non-white people (Altemeyer 2008). However, instead of using power as RWAs do, to enforce religious dictates and social norms, people with SDO enjoy domination for domination's sake. They are often manipulative, amoral, and aggressively competitive. They also believe social inequality is natural because "some people were meant to dominate others" (Altemeyer 2008:164).[2]

Although Altemeyer conceptualized RWA and SDO as personality types, they are frequently operationalized as ideological orientations (Duckitt and Sibley 2009, 2016). As such, though most studies of RWA and SDO track orientation at the individual level, they can be mapped onto far-right ideologies (see Figure 1). As the discussion below demonstrates in greater detail, militias and an adjacent movement referred to as sovereign citizens[3] are anti-government and their ideology most closely aligns with RWA orientation (Altemeyer 1998).

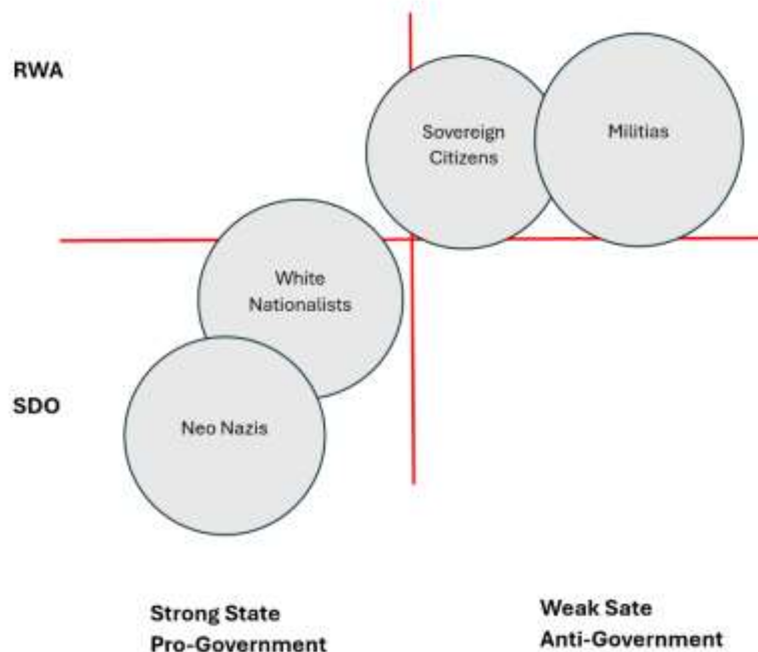

Figure 1: Author's placement of today's dominant far-right movements with reference to Altemeyer's psychological orientation schematic

A Primer on the US "Militia" Movement

Emergence

The "militia" movement is a relatively new actor on the US far-right, only emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Pitcavage 2019). Some scholars point to the 1980s farm crisis, when banks foreclosed on more than one million family farms, as the genesis of the movement (Dyer 1998; Levitas 2004). Others point to the federal government's botched raids at Ruby Ridge, Idaho (1992) and Waco, Texas (1993) where federal agents killed numerous unarmed civilians (O'Brien and Haider-Markel 1998). A year after the Waco siege, the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 131 active militias and an additional 93 groups with a similar "patriot" ideology (SPLC 2015).

The movement's momentum came to a near halt in 1995 after Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in retaliation for the Waco siege (McVeigh 2001). The bomb killed 168 people, 19 of them children (Memorial Museum 2024). Although many militias disbanded or went underground after the bombing, militia ideology did not die out (Neiwert 1999). Some militias continued to operate and some began to engage the political system (Gallaher 2003).

Movement numbers remained low throughout George W. Bush's two presidential terms but increased rapidly after Barack Obama was elected (SPLC 2009). After Donald Trump took office in 2016, numbers declined, but did not regress to Bush-era levels (SPLC 2018). Indeed, two militias participated in the failed insurrection on January 6th, 2021—Oath Keepers and Three Percenters (Duggan and Hsu 2023; Hosenball and Wolfe 2021).

Ideology

Militia ideology is succinctly captured in two commonly used slogans in the movement—"New World Order" and "Deep State". Both catchphrases are shorthand for conspiracy theories about so called "globalists" infiltrating the federal government.

The term New World Order predates the rise of the "militia" movement. President George H.W. Bush and televangelist Pat Robertson both used the phrase in the early 1990s. For his part, President Bush used the term positively. In an address before a joint session of Congress, Bush

(1990) argued that the Iraq War offered an opportunity to build a new world order based on shared goals of prosperity and peace. Robertson (1991) took a more apocalyptic view, arguing that the end of the Cold War was an augur of the end times.

Militias adopted Robertson's gloomy view of a new world order and updated it for a secular audience. They argued that the federal government had been taken over (with the help of insiders) by a shadowy cabal of international forces whose goal was to create a one-world, communist government run by the United Nations. The theory was sufficiently broad that various groups could be slotted into the theory, including the Trilateral Commission, the World Trade Organization, the Illuminati, and "International Banks" (often code for "Jewish bankers"). In Gallaher's (2003) ethnography of Kentucky militias, one follower even suggested aliens from the third dimension were part of it.

The "deep state" is an updated version of the new world order conspiracy. The term was first used in the early 2000s to describe the network of politicians, military generals, and criminal actors who ran Turkey's government from the shadows (Gingeras 2010). Donald Trump adopted the term early in his presidency and applied it to the US, arguing that civil servants embedded across the federal government were plotting to undermine him.

Although the New World Order conspiracy focused on the UN, Trump's "deep state" was primarily focused on his domestic enemies (Gallaher and Fox 2020). Indeed, even though some civil servants targeted by Trump worked in the State Department—most notably his ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch—their presumed "sins" were less about advancing "globalism" than refusing to undertake legally murky actions designed to give him domestic political advantage.[4]

Despite these differences, the coherence between these two conspiracies was strong enough that militias eagerly embraced Trump's revised terminology (Gallaher and Fox 2020). Indeed, both conspiracies were broad enough that adherents could alter and merge them as they saw fit. After the QAnon conspiracy emerged in 2017, for example, many militias integrated QAnon's preoccupation with pedophilia (SPLC 2020) into existing conspiracies about corrupt federal officials (Gallaher and Fox 2020).

Given the breadth of these conspiracies, it can sometimes be difficult to identify a coherent set of militia grievances. In its nearly 40-year history, the militia movement has often supported things that do not fit neatly in the anti-government category. They have consistently opposed federal background checks for gun purchases, for example, but largely stayed on the sidelines when President George W. Bush introduced the Patriot Act, which dramatically increased federal surveillance power inside the US. Likewise, even though militias saw pandemic era restrictions as a "pretext for government tyranny" (Mogelson 2020), they cheered when local and federal police used aggressive tactics at Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder (Chaudhary and Richardson 2022).

These inconsistencies have caused internal tensions (Levitz 2018) and prompted critics to ask whether militias' concern for gun rights do not extend to Black Americans (Ali 2020). As I note in the next section, militias' discursive strategies gloss over these tensions and contradictions by adopting a name that is heavy on symbolism but light on specifics.

Militias' Geographical Imagination

The concept of "geographical imagination" is used descriptively and analytically. It can describe a narrative that groups use to define their place in the world, or it can be a method for "pry[ing] open the power of assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations associated with space and place" (Gieseking 2017). Geographers have used this concept to unpack social movements supporting white supremacy (Luger 2023; Wright 2021) and other far-right ideologies (Essex 2024). I use it here to focus on militias, and their naming practices.

Naming and Placing

Outside of the US the term militia is a generic term for a non-armed state group. For example, both the Janjaweed in Sudan (Etefa 2019) and the Muqawama in Iraq (Nevola and Feyli 2023) have been labeled as militias, even though their interests vary (the Janjaweed, for example, supported the Sudanese government, while the Muqawama targets US interests on behalf of Iran).

Inside the US, however, the term has a positive, even romantic connotation. America's early militias are described as heroes in school curricula and commemorated at National Parks (National Park Service 2021). Every year hundreds of citizens participate in Revolutionary War reenactments (Boddie 2023).

By adopting this term, today's so-called militias are donning the "heroic garb" of the Revolution (Neiwert, quoted in MacFarquhar 2020). The network of militias who call themselves "Three Percenters" provides a good example. Their name refers to the factually unproven claim that only a small fraction of the colonial-era population—3%—was able to overthrow the British (SPLC 2024b). By invoking a revered (if revised) history, the group signals its legitimacy *and* positions today's government as an imperial power.

Militias also use Revolution-era symbols to telegraph their connection to America's founding history. The Gadsden flag is the most common part of militias' symbolic repertoire. Militia groups commonly fly the Gadsden at protests and wear Gadsden patches on their uniforms and backpacks. Likewise, though contemporary militias typically carry military-grade weapons (Cooter 2022), they often use images of colonial era muskets to decorate their webpages, crests, and logos.[5] Images of the Constitution are also part of militias' symbolic repertoire.[6]

The Second Amendment also figures prominently in militias' symbolic arsenal. It is common for militias to justify their existence simply by pointing to the first clause in the Second Amendment—"A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State…". In 2020, for example, several militias in Virginia successfully pointed to the Second Amendment to justify and win formal recognition from their respective county governments (see Gallaher and Dixit 2024).

Bringing History into the Present

The historical and geographical imaginary that militias adopt is a sanitized vision of colonial and early republican America that includes no reference to native dispossession or slavery. And just as this history masks the tyranny of settler colonialism, its contemporary reimagining also masks the unequal systems of power militias want to reinforce and, in some cases, expand today.

Two militia stand-offs with federal officials in 2014 and 2016 provide cases in point. Both involved the Bundy militia, headed by Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and two of his sons, Ammon and Ryan. The first standoff began in 2014 after the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) moved to impound Cliven Bundy's cattle for failure to pay nearly 20 years of grazing fees. When the elder Bundy received word that his cattle were about to be impounded, he mustered a militia to block federal agents from taking them. *The Nevada Independent* described Bundy's militia as "armed to the teeth" and "pointing their semi-automatic rifles down range toward federal security officers" (Smith 2022). The standoff ended when the BLM released Bundy's cattle and retreated, hoping to avoid a violent confrontation (Turner 2014). Nearly ten years later, Cliven Bundy continues to graze his cattle on BLM lands without paying grazing fees, in effect establishing *de facto* ownership of public land (Ketcham 2023).

In the second standoff two years later, Ammon and Ryan Bundy staged a takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon, with a militia that included many of the same actors from the 2014 standoff (Templeton et al. 2016). The siege lasted 41 days. At its end, one occupier was killed, and the remaining holdouts were arrested; a jury later acquitted them in court (ibid.).

In both standoffs, the Bundy militia argued that it is unconstitutional for the federal government to own land outside of the District of Columbia or specific lands ceded to it by the states (Walker 2018). The question the Bundys failed to answer was who should own the land instead.

During the Malheur siege, reporters posed this question on multiple occasions. Sometimes the Bundys said it belonged to "we the people", referencing the preamble to the US Constitution (Walker 2016). Other times, they replied that the land should revert to locals or ranchers (House 2016). Efforts to get a clear answer were only successful in ruling out one group. When a local reporter reminded the Bundys that Malheur's original owners were the Burns Paiute Tribe, and asked if the militia would return it to them, Ryan Bundy replied: "The Native Americans had claim to the land, but they lost that claim. There are things to learn from cultures of the past, but the current culture is the most important" (House 2016).

Though Bundy's response exposed the settler colonialism at the center of the movement's geo-historical imaginary, it still failed to identify who the militia thought should control it today (Gallaher 2016). There are good reasons, however, to be suspicious of the Bundys' claims that they were acting on behalf of locals. Indeed, local ranchers in Harney County were angry at the Bundy occupation and refused to join them once it began (Walker 2016). A more likely answer rests in the Bundys' participation in a network of activists, funded in large part by oil and gas interests, who want to privatize all federal lands (ibid.).

New Terminology

The Bundys' aims and the means they used to meet them are not analogous to those of Revolutionary-era militias. For starters, Revolutionary militias were fighting a colonial power; the Bundys are fighting the state those militias fought to put in its place. Second, Revolutionary militias were mustered in the context of war. This provided a type of legitimacy—however partial and problematic—that contemporary militias do not have. Indeed, even though contemporary militias claim to be working for "the people", they self-muster, an act which can put them at odd with state forces, such as police or state-level National Guard units. The police chief in the Ferguson BLM protests mentioned above, for example, described the Oath Keepers' presence at the protests as "unnecessary and inflammatory" (Lo Wang and Sanders 2015). Finally, though contemporary militias do have some things in common with colonial-era militias, these negative commonalities have been whitewashed from mainstream accounts of Revolutionary militias. Dunbar-Ortiz (2018) argues, for example, that before the Revolutionary War, colonial era militias were often used to attack native settlements so they could seize their land. The Bundys' armed seizure of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge provides a clear echo of these earlier militia actions. However, contemporary narratives of Revolutionary militias fail to mention these realities, instead venerating and romanticizing them (Cooter 2024). It is this fictional account that contemporary militias draw on for legitimacy.

Though other active militias in the US are not focused on federal lands, they too claim legitimacy they have not earned. The Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, and a host of other state-based militias have used the threat of violence, rather than the political process, to meet

their objectives. And, by self-mustering, they position themselves as the arbiters of public good by armed fiat. It is time for academics, journalists, watchdog groups, and politicians to use terms that better capture who militias are and the threat they pose. I propose two metrics commonly used to differentiate NSAG groups—their posture towards the state and their relationship to the civilian population (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2018; Pankhurst 2022).

Posture Towards the State

One of the primary metrics used to define NSAGs is their posture towards the state. Groups who fight the state are labelled with terms that signify that opposition. The two most common labels are guerilla and insurgent, though terms like resistance fighters and rebels are also used. In contrast, groups that fight on behalf of, or in parallel to, the state are labeled as paramilitaries, autodefensas, mercenaries, or localized names that suggest pro-state orientation (e.g. the Janjaweed in Sudan).

Based on this metric, the militia movement should be classified as an insurgent movement. Indeed, fighting the state has been militias' modus operandi from the beginning, as Oklahoma City and the two Bundy sieges discussed here demonstrate. Using the term insurgent is also important because it signals unlawful activity. Indeed, the positive association with the word militia means that many Americans think groups who call themselves militias today are lawful organizations, even though all 50 states have laws that prohibit or severely curtail militias (ICAP 2020). Indeed, most states do not allow militias to self-muster (only Congress or governors can call up a militia) and all have anti-paramilitary statutes that curtail their activity during peacetime (ibid.). The term insurgent telegraphs illegality in a way the word militia does not in the US context.

The failed insurrection in January 2021 underscores the importance of labelling these groups properly. As I note above, at least two well-known militias participated in this bungled coup attempt. Focusing on US militias' posture towards the state on January 6th, 2021, also allows us to more clearly recognize an important shift occurring in the militia movement today. In fact, for the first time in the movement's history, some militias on January 6th were fighting *for* a sitting president, and *for* his aggressive use of federal power. That is, they morphed from

insurgents to pro-regime paramilitaries. This is a worrying development not the least because paramilitarism, as Michael Mann (2004) argues, is one of the four pillars of ascendent fascism.

This shift has been in evidence since at least the 2020 election season, if not before. The Oath Keepers, for example, often provided "security" at Trump's rallies and acted as bodyguards for VIPs in Trump's orbit. In the summer of 2020, numerous militias also started offering to assist federal agents policing Black Lives Matter protests that erupted in the wake of the George Floyd murder. Instead of protecting local citizens from so-called "jackbooted thugs", militias were offering to join them. The portrait that emerged of militias on the eve of the 2020 US election was of a praetorian guard defending a sitting president determined to stay in office. It is difficult to pin down why the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters abandoned their suspicion of the federal government and violently defended Donald Trump's lies about the 2020 election. The spread of disinformation cannot be discounted. Many likely believed the election really was stolen and saw their actions as righting a wrong (Van Tatenhove 2023). The rapid rise of conspiracy theories depicting Democrats as "the party of pedophiles"—a script that draws heavily from antisemitic conspiracies about blood libel—also likely played a role (Donegan 2020). These theories put the election onto zero-sum, good-versus-evil discursive terrain. Opportunism may also have played a role. Jason Van Tatenhove, a former Oath Keeper, argues that the group's founder, Stewart Rhodes, did not initially view Trump with enthusiasm but came to see him as useful for transforming his militia into a legitimate paramilitary organization (Van Tatenhove 2023).

Given the successful conviction of Stewart Rhodes on seditious conspiracy charges, it is difficult to predict if paramilitaries will be willing to fight on behalf of Trump or other MAGA-aligned politicians, going forward. It is also worth noting that most militias in the country did not attend the rally or participate in the failed insurrection on January 6th, 2021. Whether they did so on ideological grounds (i.e. they continue to oppose a strong federal government) or practical one (i.e. they live too far away) is unclear.

But, the 2024 re-election of Donald Trump may change their calculus. Indeed, if Trump pardons Rhodes and other people convicted for January 6th-related crimes, they may yet

reposition themselves as paramilitaries, and with their statist bona fides established, begin cooperating with white supremacists and neo-Nazis.

Relationship with Civilians

A second metric we should consider when choosing terminology for groups calling themselves militias is their relationship with civilians in their midst. Although most NSAGs use violence against civilians, guerrillas are more likely to foster relationships with civilians because they need their support to takeover and eventually hold the state. Paramilitary groups, by contrast, are often tasked with doing the state's dirty work and are thus permitted to rent-seek from the civilian population as a reward (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2018).

Historically, US militias have tended to act with at least some civilian support. Numerous scholars note that militias are embedded in local communities that support their views, if not their violence. When militias have intimidated local populations, they have often done so with the permission of local powerbrokers. This is consistent with the RWA orientation discussed above (see Figure 1).

However, the failed insurrection of January 6th also suggests that some militias' relationship with civilians is changing. As the Oath Keepers moved further into Donald Trump's orbit, for example, they began identifying Trump's enemies as their own and supporting violence against them. Given Trump's antipathy towards people of color, independent women, and anyone who disagrees with him (including police and other traditional authority figures), this represents an important shift in militia targeting. It is more in line with SDO orientation. The degree to which this shift continues bears watching. If militias move into the SDO space, they will be in greater alignment with the white nationalist groups they have tended to keep at arm's length. United, these groups could pose a higher-level threat.

Conclusion

Accepting US militias' preferred terminology may seem harmless, but the discourse that frames it does material work. The term provides legitimacy to groups who break the law and puts federal officials defending those laws in a defensive crouch, as the government's decision to allow

Cliven Bundy to keep his cattle illustrates. Americans are lucky that the material power of this discourse has largely been confined to small amounts of territory. Given militia-cum-paramilitaries' growing acceptance of federal power, and their willingness to dominate civilians who oppose them, we may not be so lucky in the future.

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[1] On the SPLC's "hate map", users can filter by ideology. The map makes clear that this list is "limited to distinct hate and antigovernment ideologies tracked by the SPLC".

[2] While people with SDO and RWA psychological orientations both tend to be ethnocentric, the primary concern for people with RWA is submission to authority. Altemeyer's research demonstrates, for example, that when overt racism is rejected by civic and religious leaders, levels of prejudice among people with RWA personalities declines.

By contrast, levels of prejudice among people with SDO remain high and stable even when leaders oppose overt racism.

[3] Sovereign citizens are usually classified as anti-government by watchdog groups. They do not believe that the federal government is legitimate and as such do not believe they are subject to its laws and regulations. Sovereign citizens are not always members of armed groups, but like militias they believe that guns are important for defending themselves against government agents (Everytown Research and Policy 2022).

[4] President Trump wanted to remove Yovanovitch because he believed she would prevent him from intimidating President Zelenskyy into launching a fraudulent investigation of Hunter Biden, the son of Trump's competitor in the 2020 presidential election.

[5] See e.g. https://campbellmilitia.com/ (last accessed 5 December 2024).

[6] See e.g. https://palightfootmilitia.com/2018/08/24/it-is-legal-to-be-a-member-of-the-light-foot-militia/ (last accessed 5 December).