

THE TERRORISM RESEARCH CENTER

Discussion paper provided by
The Terrorism Research Center, Inc.
www.terrorism.com
trc@terrorism.com

Sebestyén. L. v. Gorka

Fellow at the Terrorism Research Center

Vice-President of the Hungarian Policy Institute

Gorka@terrorism.com

Militias and Millenarians: a preliminary typology

*“Terrorism is changing. New adversaries, new motivations
and new rationales have surfaced in recent years
to challenge much of the conventional wisdom!...”*

Dr. Bruce Hoffman, Director of RAND Washington

“The Cold War is dead, long live the New World Disorder!” Whilst not exactly the official battle-cry for rogue-states or non-state actors, the sentiment behind this version of events is one that has become more and more a prevalent view amongst security analysts and threat assessors as they look at the international security scene at the end of the 1990s. With the absence of the paradoxical stability that the threat of all-out war between two ideologically driven alliances (NATO and the Warsaw Pact) brought with it, most analytic communities now agree that many new or older, revitalized threats have emerged to endanger the democracies of the West and that this re-emergence is categorized by a gross lack of predictability plus a great variety. Amongst the panoply of (new) threats they cite can be found: proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related know-how, which can lead to the threat of biochemical terrorism (or Catastrophic Terrorism as some have called it), as well as the threat of a general resurgence in nationalism and ethnic conflicts and the revitalization of classic territorial disputes – such

as between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands, or the powder-keg that is the Korean peninsula.

One sub-set of this new group – the existence of which has helped justify the continued, and at times increased, funding of Western intelligence and security services – is the threat of a rise in domestic terrorism as opposed to the international variety that we were so accustomed to in the 70s and 80s. As the country most often targeted by terrorists, the US has most to fear with the rise of such a phenomenon. This is reflected by the fact that US federal funding to combat terrorism jumped to almost \$10 billion this year, in comparison to 6.5 billion just the previous year.² The recent changes in the nature of terrorism have brought new emphasis to bear on those not motivated in the classic political sense such as were PIRA, HAMAS or ETA. Following recent media-flooded events such as the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in March of 1995 and the Heaven’s Gate massacre, a fear has been fanned that there exists a threat of militias and millenarian cults rampaging across the US without a clear political aim but rather with the intent of satisfying their own peculiar beliefs or exacting revenge against what they see as an unjust and overly powerful government. What follows is a closer look at this joint phenomenon and an attempt to assess the veracity of current claims of impending pandemonium within the U.S.³

Round Numbers, Predictions and Violence

One does not have to be a proponent of Nostradamus to recognize that neat numbers bring out certain unusual reactions in human populations. Even the turn of an average century focuses public attention and expectations. The arrival of a new Millennium is

¹ The Confluence of International and Domestic Trends in Terrorism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Summer 1997, pp.1-15

² For a full breakdown see: “Federal Funding to Combat Terrorism”, Chemical and Biological Weapons Resource Page, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies. www.cns.miis.cns.

³ Religious terrorism is purposefully left out of the study for reasons of space and typology. Whilst an argument conflating cult executed and religious terrorism could be made, the recent rise in the latter warrants a separate study in and of itself. Growth in the latter is highlighted by Hoffman, op.cit.

apparently all the stronger psychological force and has been used in the last sixty years to help sects and cults recruit more and more adherents to their unique belief systems, a “boom time in the doom market” as Simon Hattenstone has called it.⁴ Lest one immediately think that this refers only to the extreme elements of society, it should be remembered that even the modern Christian community has elements within it which fully adhere to the prognostications of the Book of Revelation.⁵ Such beliefs are reinforced by the general expectation that Jesus Christ will return and that since he rose on the third day, the approach of the third millennium is all the more significant.

If one takes into account the fact that in the last few years we have seen special institutions founded specifically chartered to monitor and analyze millenarian groups (such as Millennium Watch and the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University), then the phenomenon seems all more substantial, especially given the Swiss/Canadian massacre of 53 of Luc Jouret’s Solar Temple followers and the Tokyo Subway nerve gas attack by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in 1995, which killed eleven and reputedly injured thousands. As if this were not enough, at the same time, the shock-waves from these real-life occurrences, combined often with popular expectations, have been exploited by the media and entertainment industry. Not just its tabloid sector, but the eminently mainstream also, ranging from the television series the X-Files to the multi-million dollar film, Armageddon and the works of the author Tom Clancy. Add to this everyone’s concern over the Y2K computer threat and the level of millennial expectation increases even more. But what exactly should we be preparing for. And from where could threats be coming.

What is a Cult?

⁴ *Apocalypse Now or Maybe Later*, The Guardian, 8th April 1995. A similar convergence of irregular social behavior has been chronicled by scholars studying the years just prior to the last millennial change of 1000 AD. One can even find period accounts of mass apocalyptic visions and portents, the most famous being the *Histories* of the tenth century monk Raoul Glaber.

⁵ Such groups are already causing concern for the Israeli security forces since they have already begun to gather in the Holy Land with expectations of Armageddon and subsequent salvation.

To begin with any threat –including cult threats- it is necessary to identify the subject. Given the fact that the line between cult and religion is a very hotly debated topic – with in many cases the prestige and financial sustainability (and tax-free status) of a group depending upon its approval as the latter – an airtight definition may be impossible.⁶ What is easier to define and more useful a category for the authorities, is the phenomenon of the destructive cult. Most cults are defined around a central figure, a leader. Should that individual have unusual levels of organizational and personal authority, then we should begin to be concerned. Should the group regularly employ what have now become technically termed *influence techniques* (the layman’s “brainwashing”) and deception, then the authorities may expect to have problems with that group in the future. It should also be recognized that the recruiting success of cults, or the total number of cults active at any one time is rarely accidental or cult-specific. As leading cult-author Margaret Thaler Singer and others have pointed out, cults tend to flourish at times of social upheaval and turmoil, as recognized cultural or community structures are strained or are beginning to actually collapse. As a result of this confluence we saw a explosion in the number of cults after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in Eastern Europe, in the US during the 1960s, in Japan after WWII and even during the fall of the Roman Empire (this also correlates to the fortunes of cults in China, most especially the newly-found Falun Gong, which has grown to 10 million at a time while the nation vacillates between market economy and communism).

According to Kelton Rhoads, a writer who specializes on cults which exploit the more unsavory of influence techniques, the number of destructive cults alone currently functioning in the US is 3000 with a total membership of 4 million.⁷ Does this mean that the US is faced with 4 million individuals who are potential threats to the establishment? Hardly. One of the most important defining characteristics of a cult is the predominant inclination towards introversion. Cults are most often hermetically separated communities tied to a single leader. Destructive cults have been defined as such foremost

⁶ It may, however, be useful to note that unlike religions, which are orientated externally as well as internally, most cults are almost exclusively internally orientated. They have no desire to commune with the uninitiated, they most often want to be isolated and concentrate on the vision of their leader and they rarely feel compelled to have to explain their logic to the outside world.

because of the danger that they represent not to those outside of the group, but those actually within it. Likewise, whilst there may indeed be 3,000 or more cults operating in the US, far from all of them will have any millennial theology to speak of. Careful examination of the relevant data, devoid of the hysteria surrounding the subject, is most illuminating here, and helps one gain a perspective on the possible threat. To date there exist two truly comprehensive unclassified databases which chronologically list and categorize terrorist acts over a series of decades. One is the general RAND/St. Andrew's database, the other is a work in progress under the direction of Dr. Seth Carus of the National Defense University in Washington, which focuses on biological weapons use and capabilities. In both instances, it is clear that a thorough compilation of actual attacks leaves one with the conclusion that "outward" attacks by cults (such as the Aum attack and the Rajneesh cult's food-poisoning incidents in Dalles, in 1984) are very much the exception to the rule. In most cases, especially if one limits analysis to cults functioning in Western Europe, or the US alone, it is clear that should a cult choose to use lethal methods to fulfill its goals, then those weapons or substances are almost always used against cult members in mass-suicide type events. The only caveat here would be the special case of incidents such as that in Waco, where the Branch Davidians did not necessarily commit suicide, but where their death could be argued to have been precipitated by the stand-off initiated by the forces of the BATF and FBI, a view much in the public lime-light once again.

The Militias: America's Homebred Fifth Column or Constitutional Defenders?

Militias may be as difficult, if not even harder to define than cults are. To generalize about this uniquely American phenomenon is pointless. It would bear the same weight as if one were to generalize about environmentalists, or animal rights activists, since – as in those cases also – we are dealing with an immensely wide range of beliefs and practices. Instead it may be more useful to look at how the broad movement developed and what some of the more common characteristics are.

⁷ Kelton Rhoads: Cults: Questions and Answer, www.influenceatwork.com/matrix.html

To begin with, we must recognize that militias per se derive a distinct legitimacy from the period of the establishment of an independent America. The now so controversial right to bear arms as enshrined in the 2nd Amendment to the American Constitution, was in fact less a right directed towards the individual and self-defense, but rather the sine qua non for the creation of armed militias which could protect the ex-colony from another (this time homegrown) dictatorship. The United States was created out of revolt against an English authority that was deemed to be unrepresentational, too harsh in its taxing policies and generally alien. As a result, the citizens of the new land had a great disdain for government in any form and wished to have the option to forcibly remove its own, should it prove to be unworthy. This legacy of a collective (as well as individual) right to armed defense and a concomitant distrust of government is the driving force behind the militias of today.

At the same time, certain of the modern-day militias – but by no means all – have combined a distrust in central government and general bureaucracy with an extreme supremacist theology, especially after the recent drop in popularity of the Ku Klux Klan. The most famous of these ideologies is that of the Christian Identity movement, which itself is a distortion of much earlier religious fad born in England which saw white Englishmen as the only true Israelites and today's Jews as pretenders to be done away with, along with other "inferior" races. The most extreme elements of today's militia movement have taken this ideology to a point where the belief is that there is a Great Conspiracy in which the Jews, Bankers and Industrialists secretly control each successive US administration, in the form of a Zionist Occupation Government, or ZOG (this is exactly what Randy Weaver, target of the federal assault on Ruby Ridge, believed in). The people of the country, so goes the theory, subjected to harsher and harsher taxation and gun legislation are being softened for the eventual invasion of the US by forces of the United Nations led by the BATF and FBI, as ZOG creates a Communist-style dictatorship on mainland USA. As a result, true believers should prepare for this eventuality and remove themselves to remote locations with their families, where they can stockpile survival needs and train in the arts of guerilla warfare.

What it is essential to remember at this point, is the fact that the most important characteristic of the militia scene, is that it is highly disparate and unstructured. There is no central organization, or even core ideology. As the FBI's recent Project Megiddo study notes: "Even well-structured militia, which tend to organize along military lines with central control, are characterized by factionalism and disunity." The Montana Freeman differ from the Michigan militia, they follow different leaders, there is no central authority that could direct them or any other such movement. Whilst some core beliefs are very widespread (anti-taxation, pro-gun), the individual groups do not rely on canonical texts. Some read Mein Kampf, others the now infamous and apocalyptic Turner Diaries – said to have been Timothy McVeigh's inspiration for the Oklahoma bombings. Many, however, subscribe only to Soldier of Fortune and the NRA's monthly American Rifleman, as they study US Army issue Field Manuals on survival and unconventional warfare. Founded as it is on the American tradition of "rugged individualism", the militia phenomenon does not encourage central authority, it disdains it. A man joins a militia so as to be able to obtain information on the continuing conspiracies, train with others and acquire bulk equipment and supplies. This is done exclusively with the end goal, not of fighting for someone else, but to be able to protect his own family. When violent militia related incidents have occurred, they have been almost exclusively linked to two rare categorical exceptions: the tight militaristic groups with charismatic leaders (such as CSA – the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord) or to loners or small groups of the unstable (such as McVeigh) who do not really need the militia to realize their irrational, often revenge orientated goals. This is how militias should be categorized. For the most part they are unprovocative groups that enable and feed the desires and needs of individuals and their families. The only threat they pose is when they either take on the characteristics of a character-driven militaristic cult, or when they act as homes for the crazed individual with his or her own agenda of pre-emptive anti-government violence. Each of these cases represents a sub-set, which has to be dealt with in its own special fashion. What binds the two categories and our response to them, is the need for high quality and timely intelligence, so as to allow authorities to identify and interdict those prone to violence before it erupts.

Millenarians and Militias: The Capabilities and the Threat

Thus we can with some confidence say a few things about the nature of the threat, in each case, as posed by cults and militias. Firstly, the introverted nature of all cults, especially the most disturbing and destructive ones, means that if they pose a threat to anyone, it is most likely to be to themselves, in toto, or to those members who have fallen from grace in the eyes of the cult's leader. Should, for some reason such cults be brought into confrontation with the authorities, then there are a few things that should be remembered. Cult members by definition have a total commitment to a concept of "ultimate things," and live in daily expectation of the "end of history"⁸ - if their community is based around an apocalyptic message. However, it has been pointed out by commentators such as Michael Barkun, that successful cults are successful because, not only do they have an internal logic, or theology, but that logic is plastic and malleable, able to be shaped into whatever its leader requires at any one given time. If there were no internal logical pattern at all, if a cult leader simply ranted random nonsense, recruiting followers from the outside would be nigh impossible. The challenge therefore, is less to confront and control any actual cult-versus-authority event with overwhelming force, but to lead the given cult in a direction whereby it bends its own logic so as to make surrender to the authorities complimentary to its own theology/belief system. This is the work of behavioral scientists and negotiators, not armed entry-teams.

We must remember that whilst such groups do not fit into what the average person would consider a rational pattern of behavior, their actions are rarely random, or without their own specific rationale. It is this consistent, but peculiar, mode of thought that must be understood and exploited if preemptive intelligence has been insufficient to identify and defuse a threat prior to the fact.

⁸ Michael Barkun: "Millenarian Groups and Law Enforcement Agencies: the lessons of Waco", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Spring 1994, pp. 75-95.

Extremist militia groups must be handled differently. Such organizations are looser in nature and less ideologically fixed to an individual leader, rather to a shared view of what is “wrong” with the world and how committed individuals can insulate themselves from society’s collapse. It appears from past cases that whilst members of such groups resent and even fear the government and its power, they prepare themselves for an eventuality, an arrival of chaos, that importantly is not triggered by them unilaterally but instead, either by the government or the “underclasses” of society as they define them. It is for this reason that modern American militias should not be compared to the classic proactive category of the anarchist.⁹ This is important, because as long as this characteristic holds true, the militias only truly provocative actions will likely be those that express their disrespect for bureaucracy and authority, such as non-payment of taxes, refusal to register their motor vehicles or hold valid driver’s licenses, and so on. The most obvious way in which such a silent protest can transmogrify into a confrontation, is if local authorities decide to address such transgressions with the full force of the law and in doing so make the given group feel threatened, fulfilling their expectations of government assault and leading to a potential unleashing of what some have termed “frustration violence.”

In both the cases of militias and millennial cults, potential capabilities are similar. These are not state actors, or even state-sponsored groupings. They have but their own resources to rely upon. Whilst biochemical weapons have become the bête-noire of late, the relevance of threat assessments that emphasize them is questionable. Whilst some cults and individual militia members have experimented with acquiring biological agents, for example, we are still left with only one recorded successful use of a biological agent (Rajneeshes) and one chemical agent (Aum) in the last 100 years. Fatalities in the former case were zero, in the latter number, less than a dozen. The deaths in one lone incident where conventional weapons were used (Oklahoma City) far outweighs either.

⁹ Whilst proactive anti-establishment violence is an extant phenomenon in the US, it must be stressed yet again, that its perpetrators (such as the Unabomber or Oklahoma’s Timothy McVeigh) have not been successfully linked to any grand, or even regional militia conspiracy. Such violence appears to remain the prerogative of the loner or the small, isolated group.

Here the key characteristics are clear. Most cults and militias which would prepare for violence related to some end-theology, do so almost exclusively by stockpiling conventional weapons. Given the United States' history of unfettered legal access to small-arms of a quality to match weapons fielded by any modern army, along with a developed black-market in more sophisticated weapons (such as plastic explosives and fully-automatic weapons), it is not surprising that both cults and militias have been able to arm themselves formidably. In fact, it is often such stockpiling activities that have acted as the catalyst to make law-enforcement actively confronting them (Waco, Ruby Ridge). The Branch Davidians, had an impressive arsenal of military weapons with which to protect themselves.¹⁰ But stockpiling does not in itself present a clear and present danger (militias were in fact originally mandated in the US to provide modern arms and fighting skills to their members). The key question will remain: what is their intent? Do cults and militias have proactive, preemptive plans to deploy such weapons against the authorities or against civilians? If weapons are legally acquired with the intent to use them in self-defense under some post-apocalyptic scenario, then the authorities may disagree with the vision, but cannot label the intent as a criminal one, nor do they have a legal avenue by which to disarm such groups.

But if one lives in a community that perceives itself to be living on the brink of Apocalypse, in the "Last Days", confrontation with the orderly, non-millenarian authorities may seem inevitable. As a result the powers-that-be must learn as much as they can from past experiences, many of which have been abysmal failures (including the Ruby Ridge and Waco sieges) but some of which – such as the resolution of the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord (CSA) raid in 1985 – were not. Hysteria needs to be tempered. Trends must be identified. According to the RAND / St. Andrew's database and other analyses such as the annual report on terrorism by the Department of State, terrorist incidents have actually been lessening in frequency. What has, however,

¹⁰ Edward Frances, leader of Church Universal and Triumphant, was convicted in 1989 of illegally acquiring \$100,000 worth of smallarms, including several .50 calibre Barret anti-material rifles, pieces rarely fielded by even developed armies. Now some legislative voices are calling for such weapons to be banned completely in the US.

occurred is that the lethality of the average terrorist incident – employing, it should be noted, conventional means - has increased. Atrocities such as the 168 deaths caused by the Oklahoma City bombing represent inordinate “spikes” on the graph of quantified terrorism. According to the ex-director of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, the DIA’s own people interdict 6 terrorist incidents per day on mainland USA, so perhaps anti-terrorist techniques are proving more successful and so halting the development of incidents before they become media-flooded tragedies. Even so, resources should remain focused on the greater threat of religious or ethnically motivated acts of violence which have political or revenge-type goals. For as long as cults remain a danger mostly to themselves and as militias patiently wait out a scenario that is to be precipitated by forces greater than themselves, then the security forces would be negligent in their duties if they spent limited intelligence resources on them as opposed to groups with more outwardly active and immediately destructive intentions.

Classic Terrorism versus the New Millenarian/Militia Threat: a preliminary typology

	Cold War Era Terrorist Groupings	Destructive (Millenarian) Cults	Militias
Members:	permanent vocation / professionals	“lifestyle”	secondary activity / amateur
Structure:	hidden cells, separated but with unitary command chain. Members are either active terrorists or planners/commanders	overt but often isolated socially. Authoritarian command structure/pyramid. Membership diffuse, includes whole families, children	Semi-overt, quasi-military command structure. Diffuse membership, including families
Skill level:	high. Often sponsored and trained by nation-states	minimal. Self-trained (Waco), if at all	self-trained, often by members with military backgrounds
Motivation:	extreme politics (left and right), or ethnicity/religion. Committed to a cause, an end-state	unique, often apocalyptic, internal, “logical” theology serving a single leader. Members committed to the leader, who alone defines cause	anti-government, supremacist, tax-evasion mantras. Members committed to a cause, most often on their own terms (sometimes a charismatic leader is involved). Almost always right-wing or survivalist
Target(s):	representatives of the establishment relevant to the realisation of their goals, as well as civilians	almost exclusively a threat to their own members, (Aum and Rajneeshes remain the two atypical exceptions)	most often involved with conflict as a result of being challenged by authorities as a result of “minor” illegal activities (Waco, CSA)
Attribution:	classically take public responsibility for atrocities, explaining their reasoning	internal nature of atrocities reflect internalized logic and lack of a need for attribution	so far have not taken responsibility for atrocities
Activity Levels:	intensity of operations in proportion to “injustices” experienced at the hands of the authorities	intensity of activities most likely to grow as millennium nears, or as and when leader deems it necessary to do so	similar to classic political terrorists, i.e., operations of extreme groups will most likely increase in relation to “injustices” experienced
Response:	cannot be reasoned with. Either wins the battle (Israeli terrorists after WWII), or is invited to negotiate (PIRA), or is eradicated (Action Directe)	has to be reasoned with via on logic, made to see confrontation as counterproductive to ultimate “theological” goals	confrontation difficult to successfully resolve given militia expectations. Good pre-incident intelligence key to management. Overt challenges should be avoided if at all possible.

