Arming for the Last Battle: Secular and Religious Millennial Impulses within the Militia Movement

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In 1995 Jeffrey Kaplan described efforts by the federal government and civil rights organizations to banish the ideology of the racist right from mainstream public discourse. The project of "dynamic silence," originating in the late 1940s, gradually embedded itself in the fabric of Cold War ideology as a species of domestic containment. Under this doctrine, the racist right was effectively walled off from access to mainstream media, and its ideas were systematically stigmatized in mainstream and academic discourse. In the late nineteen eighties, the controversy associated with the Senate candidacy of David Duke served to illustrate the success of containment. Duke, as a "stealth-Nazi," threatened to breach containment in a manner that more overt white supremacists had failed to accomplish. Buried under an avalanche of negative publicity, Duke's candidacy unraveled, and containment was sustained.²

In 1992 and 1993 the United States government used military equipment and military tactics to enforce fire arms regulations at Ruby Ridge, Idaho and Waco, Texas. Just as the American invasion of North Korea in 1950 served to undermine the containment of China, with disastrous consequences, so the assault on the isolated home of white separatist Randy Weaver breached the logic and integrity of domestic containment. The militia movement that emerged in the United States in 1994 represents the consequence of that breach. The deaths of Sam and Vicki Weaver appalled not only white supremacists, but also many of those active in the gun rights movement. In 1994 and 1995 it appeared that the racist right had escaped containment by joining with gun rights activists to form armed militias. Morris Dees and Kenneth Stern described a "summit" meeting of the leading figures of the racist right at Estes Park, Colorado, and claimed that this meeting marked the genesis of the militia movement. They pointed to

the presence of Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, as evidence of a sinister alliance between the gun lobby and the racist right.

Civil rights organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and the ADL quickly began the process of building new lines of containment designed to portray the ideology of the new militia movement as extremist and beyond the bounds of acceptable political discourse.³ They first claimed simply that militias were racist. As this argument began to loose traction, a second was added to it: in the aftermath of the freeman standoff, militias were portrayed as largely composed of anarchist sovereign citizens. Finally, several voices in the civil rights community also showed a disposition to draw the lines of containment around the second amendment movement in its entirety. In this estimation, militias were dangerous simply because they were armed.⁴

The study of millennialism can lend itself to this project of containment quite easily. One need go no farther than Thomas Flannagan's description of millennialism as an irrational departure from the "empirical truth" of liberal pluralism to see the potential.⁵ I submit, however, that the tools of millennial studies might be better employed to ask a broader and more basic question: to what extent do the militias actually represent an alliance between white supremacists and gun rights advocates? To what extent does white supremacist ideology permeate the militia movement? In other words, to what extent are the apocalyptic fears of Dees and Stern real?

In her analysis of the Earth First movement, Martha Lee draws a distinction between millenarian and apocalyptic factions within the movement.⁶ An accurate understanding of the militia movement must rest on a similar analysis. What follows is an attempt to distinguish between the millennial vision of the constitutional wing of the

militia movement and a more apocalyptic vision held by a smaller wing of the movement devoted to resisting the onset of the New World Order.

Before examining either of these, it seems appropriate to outline briefly the essential tenets of the racist apocalypticism represented by William Pierce's *Turner Diaries*. The novel depicts white America under siege from the multiple threats of integration, gun control, and canibalistic violence perpetrated by blacks and Jews.

Through the systematic application of guerilla violence, protagonist Earl Turner and his fellow Aryan warriors gain control of California. Immediately thereupon, the forces of evil, composed of minorities, jews, "mongrels," and race traitors are exterminated in the "Day of the Rope." Once the forces of the "Order" gain control over the entire nation, this genocidal rebirth in enacted upon the entire globe. After pogroms eliminate "the offspring of generations of dysgenic breeding" in Europe, the rest of the globe is "effectively sterilized" with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Thus is the "great dawn of the New era" born.⁷

In the *Turner Diaries*, whiteness is the supreme value to which all else is sacrificed. According to Martha Lee, for Earth First, wilderness uncontaminated by man was the cardinal virtue. For the constitutional wing of the militia movement, the doctrine of natural rights occupies a similar place of absolute good. The unalienable liberties of the individual are held as sacred, more sacred even than human life. The movement holds equally sacred Jefferson's precept that "all men are created equal," and they apply this ideal without regard to race, religion, or gender. They view these liberties as threatened by the corruption of the original constitution by power hungry politicians and special interests. They are uncompromising in their stance that the federal government

must be confined to the original eighteen powers granted under the constitution and that the individual liberties granted in the Bill of Rights must be respected. Indeed, they see in gun control legislation an attempt to disarm the populace as a means of imposing despotic rule.⁸

The millennial vision of the constitutional militia movement may be seen in a number of fictional pieces composed by members of the movement or widely circulated in militia newsletters. One short millennial fantasy widely circulated is "Sundown at Coffin Rock," by Raymond K. Paden. This is a dystopian vision of America after Constitutional liberty has passed from national consciousness. It centers on a grandfather explaining to his grandson the gradual erosion of liberty as no knock searches become routine, national gun confiscation is enacted, the freedom of speech is restricted, and the right to a lawyer gets subordinated to the needs of each new emergency. The grandfather ends by showing the boy where he has buried his guns, so that one day, when the country remembers "what it is like to be free," the boy or his descendants may take up arms once again. The story ends as the boy returns home and says to his father "you can call agent Goodwin tomorrow. Gramps finally showed me where it is."

What is interesting about this vision is its gentleness. Society has not descended into a state of nature. The government has kept an eye on the grandfather, but it has never sent him to prison or to a concentration camp. The electricity is still running, the environment is more or less intact, the father has a computer, and he is reading a newspaper when the boy gets home. All that has died is an idea.

Another piece of millennial literature emanating from the constitutional militia movement is *Cracking the Liberty Bell*, a novel by former Ohio militiaman J. J. Johnson.

Johnson, an African-American, may have conceived of this novel as an answer to the *Turner Diaries*. It proceeds from the premise that a separatist church in downtown Columbus, Ohio comes under assault sometime in the late nineties, after the militia movement has become well established in the Midwest. Essentially, Johnson asks what would happen if the Waco siege was re-enacted today. The initial assault on the church and most of the actions taken by the authorities are familiar to those versed in the details of the fiasco at Waco. A federal agency attempting to justify its existence in the budget season attempts a dramatic take down of a small isolated, multi-racial religious community. The community, however, is armed to the teeth, and the initial assault goes disastrously awry. From that point on, fear, egos, and a desire to revenge fallen comrades drive the authorities in ever greater circles of escalation.¹⁰

What is remarkable about Johnson's vision is what is missing. There is no New World Order manipulating events behind the scenes. There is no satanic evil lurking in the shadows. There are merely corrupt and incompetent bureaucrats covering their collective behinds as the bodies begin to pile up all around them. The militia is mobilized to come to the compound's defense. It does succeed in sabotaging local military facilities on a sufficiently wide scale to trigger a general dissolution of government authority in the state. The militia also succeeds in sneaking enough supplies through the perimeter to allow the church to continue to hold out. All in all, however, the militia as a military force is a notable failure. The siege is relieved only when the congregation succeeds in breaking through to the media and projecting its side of events onto national television. The people of Columbus, now understanding the causes of the

siege and disgusted by the excesses of the government's attempt to control the situation, demonstrate along the perimeter and eventually break the siege.

The rebirth of society in the novel proceeds on two levels. When government disappears from the streets of Columbus, a virtuous civil society is reawakened. Dazed FBI agents drive through the streets as civilians direct traffic and collect the city's garbage. Citizens peacefully carry their firearms to work, and drug dealers turn away casual users so as to supply customers with medical needs. When one officer leaps from the car to stop this open air drug trafficking, his partner restrains him, exclaiming, "Don't try to interact with these people! They're out of control." On another level, the nation is reborn when the people of Columbus break the siege. It is crucial that the militia does not impose a solution on the people at large. They merely allow the congregation to hold out and force the government to continually escalate the level of violence. When that violence encompasses martial law and a general round up of patriots, the people come to their senses. In the end, the President is forced to resign, the county sheriff arrests the federal agents within jurisdiction, and Congress takes up legislation that would effectively repeal the supremacy clause of the Constitution. 12

This vision of republican rebirth appeals to a broad range of constitutional militias. Among the prominent figures of the movement that, in my judgement, subscribe to this vision are J. J. Johnson and Tom Plummer in Ohio, Lynn Van Huizen and Tom Wayne in Michigan, Jim and Michael McKinzey in Missouri, Oral Deckard and John Hakes in Indiana, Jon Roland and Bill Utterback in Texas, and Mike Vanderboegh in Alabama.¹³

Sitting uneasily between the paramilitary wing of the white supremacist movement, animated by the *Turner Diaries* vision of genocidal authoritarianism, and the constitutional militia movement, which embraces this more revolutionary libertarian vision, there is another wing of the Militia movement. This wing of the movement also calls itself constitutionalist but is significantly influenced by common law ideology and sovereign citizenship. Major spokesmen for this wing of the movement, which I will refer to as the resistance wing, include Mark Koernke, John Trochman, Jack McLamb, and Joe Pilchak, who commands of the eastern faction of the Michigan Militia.

The dystopian vision of an impending New World Order invasion dominates the vision of the Resistance wing. The scenario painted by all of these figures is starkly apocalyptic, and in a sense projects the genocidal impulse behind the *Turner Diaries* onto the unseen enemy. Jack McLamb describes a plan "for an oligarchy of the world's richest families to place ½ the masses of the earth in servitude under their complete control, administered from behind the false front of the United Nations. To facilitate management capabilities, the plan calls for the elimination of the other 2.5 billion people through war, disease, abortion, and famine by the year 2000." An advertisement for John Trochman's video *America's Judgement: What Lies Ahead?* features the same essential elements: deliberately induced famine, military invasion, and extermination by biological and chemical warfare. Joe Pilchak, a longtime member in the Birch Society who has believed for decades that John Robinson's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* explained it all, articulated a similar vision when I spoke with him last year. As he put it, "they want to have the New World Order in place by the year 2000, and they're running behind."

What then does victory look like within this vision? Does it involve revolutionary rebirth? Those most involved in this wing of the movement are remarkably reticent on the subject. Jack McLamb argues in *Operation Vampire Killer* that the New World Order cannot succeed without the active cooperation of the military and local law enforcement. Educating these segments of the population and persuading them to commit themselves to resisting the project deprives the New World Order of the necessary tools and thus defeats the conspiracy.¹⁷ Joe Pilchak argues that if America looks like it does today in five years time, then the militias will have won their battle against the New World Order.¹⁸

The resistance wing of the militia movement is also heavily influenced by premillennial eschatology. Members of the movement are almost obsessed with survivalist preparation. There is also a strong impulse towards quietist withdrawal within this community. The Pilchaks, for example, are intrigued by the sovereign citizen ideal of withdrawing from all contracts and obligations with the larger society and establishing an alternative, self-governing society sustained by barter.

Nevertheless, as Michael Barkun has noted, the synthesis of religious and secular impulses within New World Order discourse mitigates against quietism. Because the New World Order represents not only the onset of satanic tribulation but also the forces of worldly tyranny, the impulse to resist rather than duck and cover is strong. Alongside education and survival, resistance is integral to the purpose of this wing of the militia movement. The 1998 arrests of three members of the Battle Creek based North American Militia provide a glimpse of what that resistance might look like. According to affidavits from a confidential informer and an ATF agent, the defendants planned attacks

on a local military base, the Battle Creek federal building, a TV station, and a highway interchange, and the assassinations of prominent federal officials. What exactly did these men hope to accomplish? The informants gave two accounts. In one, Ken Carter is alleged to have claimed that the objective was "to attack, create chaos and hold on for three or four days, at which time the entire country would rise up against the government." In another conversation, Carter allegedly said that he expected 15% of the population to join him, which indicates that he expected a more protracted struggle to overcome the will of the vast majority of the American people. ¹⁹

It is possible that Carter's plans were contingent on some specific act of aggression, such as invasion or law enforcement atrocity. According to the ATF agent involved in the case, however, Carter had set a tentative date for his strike, indicating that he was ready to act independent of any other provocation.²⁰ In the end Carter's plans speak of a vision of rebirth that lies uneasily somewhere between that of William Pierce and that of J. J. Johnson.

To what extent then has the ideology of the racist right penetrated the militia movement? For the constitutionalist wing of the movement, formed in response to Ruby Ridge and Waco and composed largely of veterans, libertarians, and second amendment advocates, the answer is hardly at all. The roots of this movement lie in government provocation and in a rather problematic set of ideals that is as old as the nation. For the resistance wing, influenced in part by leaderless resistance theory and constitutional theories originating in the Posse Comitatus movement, the answer is that white supremacist ideology is an important ingredient in an unstable mixture of libertarianism, anarchism, and pre-millennial apocalypticsim.

In assessing the potential for violence, then, I would take issue with the recent report issued by the Justice Department entitled *Operation Megiddo*. What this document demonstrates above all else is the degree to which the discourse of containment has come to dominate government understandings of the militia movement. The following is from the executive summary:

Militias, adherents of racist belief systems such as Christian Identity and Odinism, and other radical domestic extremists are clearly focusing on the millennium as a time of action. Certain individuals from these various perspectives are acquiring weapons, storing food and clothing, raising funds through fraudulent means, procuring safe houses, preparing compounds, surveying potential targets, and recruiting new converts. These and other indicators are not taking place in a vacuum, nor are they random or arbitrary. In the final analysis, while making specific predictions is extremely difficult, acts of violence in commemoration of the millennium are just as likely to occur as not.²¹

The report goes on to state that "the majority of right wing extremists" are motivated by the *Turner Diaries*. On page 22, the report does concede that the vast majority of militias are reactive and pose no threat. It offers no criteria, however, with which to distinguish between "good" and "bad" militias. Finally, the report concludes that "Law enforcement officials should be particularly aware that the new millennium may increase the odds that extremists may engage in proactive violence specifically targeting law enforcement officers."

I believe that the threat of proactive millennial violence stems from precisely the same political forces that it stemmed from twenty years ago, the combination of paramilitary organization and Christian Identity theology within the racist right. The threat is perhaps somewhat larger in scope today because of the small possibility that if white supremacist insurgents stage an uprising, some members of the resistance wing of militia movement may join in the struggle. Nevertheless, in my judgement, violence

from any segment of the militia movement is most likely to be triggered by an overaggressive law enforcement response to either the potential or the reality of millennial violence.

From this perspective, I regard the release of *Operation Megiddo* as counter productive. Informing local law enforcement across the nation that they are "as likely as not" to be the targets of violence from "right wing extremists" utilizing the apocalyptic tone inherent in the discourse of containment can only reinforce an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. Members of the racist right may well seek to remake the world with blood over the new year. Contrary to the government's call to arms, the militias are not coming. They will, however, be watching the government's response very, very closely.

¹ Jeffrey Kaplan, "Right Wing Violence in America," in Tore Bjørgo, ed., *Terror From the Extreme Right* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 75-79.

² On Duke see Morris Dees, *The Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 59-61.

³ Anti-Defamation League, "Armed and Dangerous: Militias Take Aim at the Federal Government" (New York, 1994); Southern Poverty Law Center, "False Patriots: The Threat of Antigovernment Extremists" (Montgomery, 1996); Thomas Halpern and Brian Levin, *The Limits of Dissent: The Constitutional Status of Armed Civilian Militias* (Northampton, MA: Alethia Press, 1996).

⁴ Major contributions to this literature of containment include Richard Abanes, *American Militias: Rebellion, Racism, and Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); Anti-Defamation League, "Vigilante Justice: Militias and 'Common Law Courts' Wage War against the Government' (New York, 1997); Dees, *Gathering Storm*; Halpern and Levin, *The Limits of Dissent*; and Kenneth S. Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: the American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁵ Thomas Flanagan, "The Politics of the Millenium," in Michael Barkun, ed., *Millenialism and Violence* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 174.

⁶ Martha F. Lee, "Violence and the Environment: The Case of Earth First!" in Barkun, ed., *Millennialism and Violence*, 109-127.

⁷ On the *Turner Diaries*, see Abanes, *American Militias*, 147-50 and Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) 225-27.

⁸ For prominent statements of constitutional militia ideology, see Norm Olson, "Is the Citizen Militia Lawful;" J. J. Johnson, *The Ohio Minutemanual* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Patriot's Educational Network, February, 1995), 1, provided courtesy of Political Research Associates, Cambridge, MA; Michael S. Mickinzey, Co-founder of the Missouri 51st Militia, "Militia Confronts FBI," *Necessary Force* (April 1998), 3; Doug Fiedor, "Unalienable Rights," *Heads Up*, November 29, 1996, available on the Michigan

Militia website at http://militia.gen.mi.us/headsup/hu-11.txt; the Ohio Unorganized Militia Assistance and Advisory Committee, "Basic Facts on the Militia," provided courtesy of Tom Plummer. Jon Roland, "The Patriots Dilemma" and "Reviving the Ready Militia," *The Texas Militia Papers* (Constitution Society, 1995), http://www.constitution.org/mil/tmp.htm;.

⁹ "Sundown at Coffin Rock" is reprinted in E Pluribus Unum newsletter, January 1995; Mike Vanderboegh's *Why We Will Fight* #8, May 21, 1998; and is mentioned in *Necessary Force*, August, 1997.
¹⁰ J. J. Johnson, Cracking the Liberty Bell, http://www.jj-johnson.com.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Chap. 4-m.

¹² *Ibid.*, Chap. 8.

¹³ My association of these figures with the Constitutional wing of the militia movement is based on their own public writings and on oral history interviews with Tom Plummer, Jim and Michael McKinzey, and Oral Deckard.

¹⁴ Jack McLamb, *Operation Vampire Killer* 2000 (Phoenix: American Citizens and Lawmen Association, 1992), 3.

¹⁵ Advertisement for *America's Judgement* provided courtesy of the Anti-Defamation League.

¹⁶ Interview with Joseph and Clara Pilchak, November 2, 1998.

¹⁷ McLamb, Operation Vampire Killer 2000, 51-52

¹⁸ Interview with Joseph and Clara Pilchak, November 2, 1998.

¹⁹ Battle Creek Enquirer, March 20, 1998

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ United States Department of Justice, "Operation Megiddo," November 2, 1999, 2

²² *Ibid.*, 8, 11-12, 22, and 32.