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Antigovernment Groups: A Growing Threat to US Security

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Executive Summary

Domestic terrorism is a growing threat in the United States, particularly from the 998 right-wing antigovernment (AG) groups in existence in 2015. In the years since the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City, right-wing antigovernment acts have occurred more often and killed more people in the United States than Muslim extremists. Such AG group members are often influenced by racist, anti-Semitic, or anti-Islamic views, believe conspiracy theories about the government, and often commit acts such as refusing to pay taxes or initiating frivolous lawsuits in order to intentionally waste the government's resources. There is, however, a violent element to these groups that participates in events ranging from the armed take-over of federal land in Oregon to the bombing of the Oklahoma City building which killed 168 people. Such acts may be conducted by a few individuals, as is the case of the Oklahoma City bombing, or an entire group as was done for the Oregon takeover. Such groups have a wide range of capabilities, with typical weapons including legal and illegal firearms, with a focus on purchasing fully automatic weapons; hand grenades, with some homemade; deadly toxins, like ricin (in multiple cases) and sodium cyanide (in one case); transportation, such as all-terrain vehicles (ATVs); arson, with the intent of destroying federal property; and explosives, often in large numbers and including pipe bombs, truck bombs, IEDs, and other homemade explosives. The growing acceptance of these violent methods by Republican congressmen and governors, however, only increases visibility of such groups and encourages their behavior. Coupled with the removal of the Department of Homeland Security's division responsible for monitoring such groups, the result could prove disastrous for the safety of United States citizens.

Introduction

Terrorism is a very real threat facing many countries, including the United States (US), due to goals that include the intimidation of people, the coercion of government policy, or the incitement of chaos [1]. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) divides terrorism into two categories: international and domestic [1]. International terrorist acts “transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear intended to intimidate, or the locale in which perpetrators operate”, such as the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 [1].

Domestic terrorism, in contrast, has no international component or foreign direction, with adherents instead operating entirely within the United States. While it is true that domestic terrorism has both radical right- and left-wing adherents, liberal extremists (such as the Animal Liberation Front) are much more likely to emphasize nonviolence [1]. As a result, right-wing extremists pose a larger threat to the US population than left-wing extremists because of the increased risk of loss of life.

Perhaps surprisingly, domestic terrorism has the potential to be much more devastating than international terrorism. The FBI tallied 335 total terrorism incidents in the United States between 1980 and 2000, with 247 of these attacks attributed to domestic terrorists, far outweighing the frequency of international terrorist attacks on US soil [1]. More recently, since 2000, domestic right-wing extremists have killed 25 law enforcement officers because of their fear of government confiscation of firearms and their belief of an impending US government and/or economic collapse. Moreover, from 2001 to 2011, right-wing attacks have killed a total 254 people with an average of 337 attacks per year; in contrast, during the same time period, Islamic extremists killed 50 people in 20 attacks [2].

Law enforcement officers have taken notice of the growing domestic threat. A recent *New York Times* article surveyed 382 law enforcement agencies and found that 74% of them ranked antigovernment extremism as one of the top three terrorist threats in their jurisdiction. Furthermore, 7% of these agencies stated that this threat was severe; in comparison, only 3% ranked the threat of Muslim extremism as severe [2]. Thus, while international terrorist attacks are more deadly on average, they occur far less frequently and, in general,

kill fewer people overall than such right-wing antigovernment (AG) groups.

Overview of US Antigovernment Groups

Sometimes referred to as “patriot groups”, domestic antigovernment groups are those that are “opposed to the ‘New World Order’, engage in groundless conspiracy theorizing, or advocate or adhere to extreme antigovernment doctrines” [3]. (Note: This “New World Order” was mentioned by President George H. Bush in 1990 to describe the world after the fall of the Soviet Union, but AG groups saw this as a plot to create one government for the entire world due to their tendency to embrace conspiracy theories [4].) Such groups are often influenced by racist, anti-Semitic, or anti-Islamic views, and typically engage in activity that is more of an annoyance to government agencies, such as the refusal to pay taxes or register their vehicle, or filing frivolous lawsuits to waste time and undermine the efficacy of the courts [1, 5, 6]. Such tax protesters are estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands [5].

However, sometimes these non-violent protests turn violent, with unmeditated and uncoordinated attacks often unleashed against police officers engaged in routine traffic stops [5]. In 1997, for example, an individual in New Hampshire holding AG views shot and killed two police officers and two civilians, while injuring three other police officers before committing suicide. Across the country in Idaho that same year, two brothers were pulled over by police for not using their turn signal. They subsequently killed one police officer and wounded another, causing a violent shoot-out that resulted in their deaths. These individuals typically call themselves “sovereign citizens” because they believe they do not answer to the government, and they often act alone or in very small groups when carrying out their violent actions [5].

One organized sovereign citizen group does exist, however, called the “Republic for the united States of America (RuSA)” by its supporters. This group, based in Alabama, has a congress with voting representatives in 49 states, ready to begin operating upon the successful overthrow of the US government. Although it may seem far-fetched that RuSA could achieve their goals, the group is increasingly turning toward violence as a means to an end. A

particularly inciting event was the death of William Foust, a RuSA “chief justice”, who was shot by police during a raid. Many in the group are now calling for revenge against law enforcement, with the head of RuSA, Tim Turner, announcing in 2011 the formation of an armed branch of RuSA called the “American Rangers”. Information on whether this happened is limited, but law enforcement officials in southern Alabama report that they have seen armed militants in the region [7].

Potentially more dangerous, however, are large-scale attacks against the United States’ government. In a well-known example from 1995, Timothy McVeigh, aided by Terry Nichols, used a truck bomb to blow up the Oklahoma City federal building, killing 168 people in the most deadly domestic terrorism attack to date. These two men were motivated by their AG views, which, like many in the early AG movement, were fueled by the 1992 Ruby Ridge, Idaho stand-off between Randy Weaver, a white supremacist, and US agencies; the 1993 botched FBI stand-off in Waco, Texas that resulted in the deaths of four federal agents and nearly 80 members of the Branch Davidian cult; and the 1993 Brady Bill that imposed a mandatory waiting period to purchase handguns. Other large-scale examples of the many that could be cited include the 1997 arson attack on the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) office in Colorado Springs, Colorado, that cost 2.5 million dollars in repairs and injured a firefighter; the 1998 arrest of three men for plotting to attack then-President Clinton and other federal agents with biological weapons; and the 2010 intentional crashing of a plane into an IRS building in Austin, Texas that killed one IRS worker along with the pilot [4].

In addition to motivating large-scale attacks, the early 1990s saw the birth of militias, a subset of AG groups that believe in hostile action against the government, often train their members in paramilitary tactics, purchase large amounts of guns (many of which are illegal), and attempt to buy or build improvised explosive devices (IEDs) [8, 9]. The first modern example of an AG militia is the Militia of Montana, which was formed in 1994 by John Trochmann, a white supremacist who had supported Randy Weaver. Later that year, they hosted a meeting attended by 800 people which led to the formation of the Michigan Militia, a group that would soon be the nation’s largest with nearly 6000 members, as well as others around the country. In 1996, seven members of the Mountain Militia were arrested for plotting to blow up the FBI’s national fingerprint records center in West Virginia, which

employs 1000 people and could have been a devastating attack. In 1997, militia members of the Third Continental Congress group were arrested for plotting to “invade and slaughter” troops based at Fort Hood, Texas. Many other examples exist, with militias continuing to plot and attempt attacks, with nine militia members arrested in 2011 for plotting to kill a police officer and then bomb the resultant funeral procession, with the goal of inciting a greater conflict with authorities [4].

Current Status of US Antigovernment Groups

The current number of US AG groups is not insignificant, with 998 such groups in existence as of 2015 (Figure 1). Of these groups, 276 are classified as militias with the goal of equipping members with the tools and weapons to fight the government. Perhaps more worrying is that the number of such groups is rising, and fast; in 2014, there were 874 AG groups, of which 202 were militias [3].

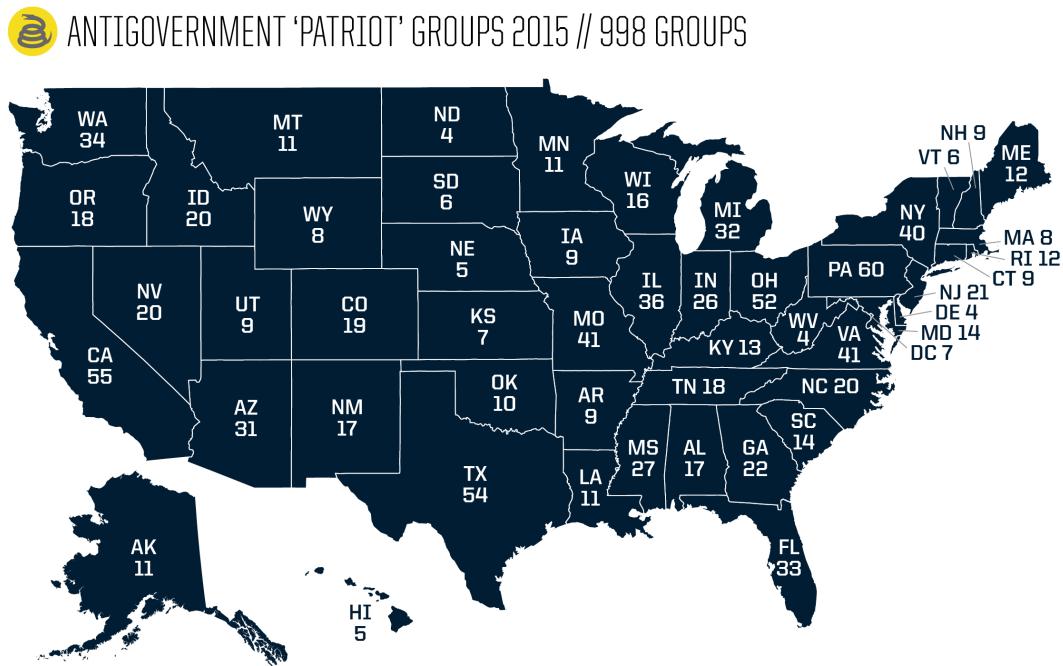


Figure 1: Number of AG groups in each US state in 2015 [3].

In Tennessee alone, there are 18 such groups, with 4 being militias (Table 1) [3]. Tennessee is, however, near the middle for the number of AG groups, with Pennsylvania (60 AG

groups), California (55 AG groups), and Texas (54 AG groups) having the three largest numbers of such groups. The states with the least number of AG groups (equal to 4) are Delaware, North Dakota, and West Virginia, which means that all states have at least 4 operating AG groups [3]. Using state population numbers from the 2010 United States Census, these numbers can be adjusted to reflect the number of AG groups per capita [10]. It was found that the three states with the highest density of AG groups were (beginning with the largest) Alaska, Idaho, and Wyoming, with the lowest density of AG groups occurring in Massachusetts, followed by California and then Florida.

Interestingly, the number of AG groups reached its peak in 2012, with 1360 such groups in existence, and then rapidly fell for two years to 874 AG groups in 2014 [3]. Although it appears that the number of groups is on the rise again, numbers still remain well below this peak value. The Southern Poverty Law Center cautions, however, that the reduced number of organized groups does not reflect a decrease in AG extremists, who are retreating to the internet to prevent discovery by law enforcement. Such changes in group numbers indicate that attacks are shifting from group-organized plots to individual action; indeed, 90% of all domestic attacks (which also includes jihadists, etc.) from 2009 to 2015 were committed by one or two individuals acting on their own. Furthermore, the rate of attacks by AG groups has remained constant since the 1990s, even though it is commonly believed that AG violence has decreased since the 1990s [11].

Such AG websites include Stormfront, a popular web forum for AG extremists that is run by a former Klan leader. Stormfront has nearly 300,000 registered users and even more who are non-registered. The Vanguard News Network is another such forum that is very popular, and websites embracing freedom of speech, such as Reddit, are also used by those adhering to AG views. Those who hide in the shadows of the internet are equally capable of violence as those who belong to official AG groups, with 100 murders committed by Stormfront members from 2010 to 2015 [11].

Another likely explanation for the decrease in AG organized groups is that, when the government absorbs the beliefs of a special interest, the special interest cause (in this case, AG extremists) loses momentum and the number of groups drops [11]. In 2014, Cliven Bundy of Nevada led hundreds of armed AG extremists in a stand-off against the US Bureau

Table 1: A list of the names and location(s) of the 18 AG groups in Tennessee [3]. Militias are shown in italics. Common abbreviations are shown in parentheses. Some AG groups have chapters in multiple states, with the total number of such states (including Tennessee) indicated in the third column.

Name	Location(s)	Other States
Black Robe Regiment	Springfield	—
Christian Exodus	Savannah	4
Eagle Forum	Nashville	—
<i>East Tennessee Mountain Militia</i>	Knoxville	—
Get Out of Our House (GOOOH)	Statewide	40
Lawful Path	Lynnville	—
Oath Keepers	Knoxville	47
<i>Outlaw Militia</i>	Davidson County	—
Salt and Light Institute	Nashville	—
<i>Southeast Constitutional Militia</i>	Statewide	6
The Three Percenters (III%ers)	Smith County	50
<i>Three Percenters Club</i>	Nashville	21
The United States Patriots Union	Hermitage	—
We the People	Etowah, Fayetteville, Maryville, Nashville	32

of Land Management (BLM), who had confiscated his cattle to compensate for the grazing fees and fines for which he refused to pay and which totaled over \$1 million [12]. Many in the media and politics, however, loudly sided with Cliven Bundy, including Sean Hannity of Fox News and the governor of Nevada, which has the effect of reducing some of the anger felt by AG adherents who feel their views are not being heard [11, 12]. The federal government backed down, which was seen as a big win for AG groups and unfortunately encouraged subsequent stand-offs with the BLM in Idaho, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Montana, and, most recently, in Oregon with the the 2016 takeover of a federal wildlife refuge in Oregon by Cliven Bundy's son, Ammon Bundy, that led to arrests of 25 people and initial damages of nearly \$6 million [13–15].

Capabilities

AG individuals and groups are capable of a range of threats, varying from mere annoyances, like refusal to pay taxes or purposeful hindrance of court proceedings, to lone wolf attacks on police officers and federal agents, to deadly organized attacks. Such attacks can occur in any region of the US. A list of deadly plots is as follows, with some restated here from other sections in this paper, to illustrate the wide range of threats AG groups and individuals pose:

- Tennessee: Individual arrested for attempting to defraud the government with fake checks, which is typical of AG acts [4]
- New York: Almost 100 New York City city employees arrested for refusal to pay taxes [4]
- Georgia: Plot to take hostages in a court house, which led to the attacker's death and injury of a police officer [16]
- Oklahoma: Successful Oklahoma City bombing of a federal building, killing 168 people [4]
- Minnesota: Two individuals successfully made ricin, a poison, that they intended to use against federal agents [4]

- Texas: Individual arrested for plotting to blow up federal building in Austin [4]
- Arizona: Amtrak train intentionally derailed, killing one and injuring 70 other people [4]
- Oklahoma: Arrests of individuals made for plotting to blow up gay bars, abortion clinics, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and more [4]
- Nevada: Drum filled with explosives found near Reno IRS building failed to explode, one arrest made [4]
- West Virginia: Seven militia members arrested for plot to blow up FBI building [4]
- Colorado: Arson of Colorado Springs IRS building that injured a firefighter and cost 2.5 million dollars in damages [4]
- Texas: Individual successfully crashes plane into IRS building, killing himself and one IRS employee [4]
- Texas: Two arrested in plot to murder troops at the Fort Hood military base [4]
- Texas: Three men arrested for threatening President Bill Clinton and federal officials with biological weapons [4]
- California: Arrests made for plot to blow up propane tanks, a television tower, and an electrical substation, as well as kill a federal judge [4]
- Texas: Individual arrested after raid finds approximately 500,000 rounds of ammunition, pipe bombs, remote-controlled briefcase bombs, and deadly sodium cyanide in his home [4]
- Michigan: Nine individuals indicted for plot to murder police officer and then bomb the funeral [4]

Typical weapons include legal and illegal firearms, with a focus on purchasing fully automatic weapons or modifying semi-automatic weapons, but also including sniper rifles; hand grenades, with some homemade; deadly toxins, like ricin (in multiple cases) and sodium

cyanide (in one case); transportation, such as all-terrain vehicles (ATVs); arson, with the intent of destroying federal property; and explosives, often in large numbers and including pipe bombs, truck bombs, IEDs, and other homemade explosives [4, 12].

While it is common knowledge that guns and ammunition are legally sold at sporting goods stores and gun shows, it is perhaps less-known that explosives are also legally available for purchase without an explosives license in 49 out of 50 states, and in large quantities. In one case, a journalist was able to buy 40 pounds of explosives, enough to blow up a house. H2Targets and Tannerite are two companies that manufacture the ammonium-based explosive, which is very similar to the type of bomb used in the Oklahoma City bombing and is often found in IEDs in Afghanistan that are used against US troops [17].

Additionally, individuals often have paramilitary training, either from former or current service in the armed forces, or have attended militia courses, such as one held in North Carolina in 1999 for the Militia of East Tennessee [4]. Such knowledge of military response methods and capabilities gives AG groups an advantage. Some individuals also have fully-fortified bunkers, believing that the collapse of the government is imminent [18].

Perhaps more worrisome, AG groups have help from individuals in power who agree with their views. As stated earlier, members of the media and state governors announced their support of the Bundy family, but law enforcement officers also subscribe to the extreme ideology[12]. The Oath Keepers is one such AG group comprised mainly of active-duty law enforcement and military personnel who have sworn to not uphold 10 types of orders by the federal government in order to defend the US constitution, and has been praised by the likes of Pat Buchanan, Lou Dobbs, and Glenn Beck, well-known right-wing media “talking heads” [12, 18, 19]. In fact, during the Nevada BLM-Bundy stand-off, Cliven Bundy had support from the local sheriff and law enforcement. Such help should not be underestimated because it lends credibility and tactical support to AG groups [12, 19].

Additional (and perhaps unintentional) help came from members of Congress, who shut down the Department of Homeland Security’s extremism office, whose mission was to investigate and address the AG domestic threat. The office was closed because of their focus on the recruitment of returning veterans and Tea Party members by AG groups. This focus rankled many many right-leaning politicians who felt that the office was incorrectly label-

ing, to quote John Boehner, ‘American citizens who disagree with the direction Washington Democrats are taking our nation’ with the word ‘terrorists’ [13]. As a result, there is now a limited ability for the government to handle the AG threat, which only helps their cause because they will be less likely to be intercepted.

Looking to the Future

Based on the facts contained in this paper, it appears that the AG extremist movement is gaining political legitimacy for acts that are treasonous in nature. Simultaneously, government oversight of this threat is being reduced, making it highly likely that AG plots will become increasingly successful. With increased tolerance for right-wing extremism, it will be most likely easier for AG groups to amass followers, money, and weapons. Cliven Bundy has already inspired numerous armed stand-offs with government agents, who appear to be afraid of acting decisively in order to protect lives but rather just embolden these groups who are perceived as victorious against the government. While the number of AG groups declined from 2012 to 2014, the amount of such groups is again on the rise, and extremists are flocking to the internet in greater numbers to further solidify their views and gain expertise for their plots.

In summary, the threat posed by AG groups is not minor. Although domestic terrorists typically kill fewer people per attack when compared to international terrorists, domestic terrorists attack far more often and generally cause more deaths overall. Unless the US government begins taking this threat more seriously and prominent right-wing members stop endorsing such extremist behavior, AG activity is highly likely to only increase in frequency and magnitude.

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