# WARRIOR NIGHTMARES: AMERICAN REACTIONARY POPULISM AT THE MILLENNIUM

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THE DAWNING OF a new millennium, beset with global crisis and local upheavals, seems in many ways to harken back to the inter-war years when classical fascism first appeared as a powerful force across Europe. A resurgence of right-wing populist groups and ideologies in many countries over the past decade has rekindled political and scholarly interest in the fascist tradition.[1] Could the spread of right-wing tendencies, with their appeals to people who are marginalized or feel threatened by change, signal the replay of yet another cycle of ultra-authoritarian politics? The recent proliferation of explosive civil wars around the world, many of them rooted in bloody ethnic, regional, and religious strife, brings to this question an added salience.[2]

In the United States, a new reactionary populism, fuelled by intensifying social polarization, job insecurity, urban decay, fear of change, and simply alienation from politics-as-usual, has taken shape in forms of rebellion – militias, cults, fundamentalist groups, skinheads, some urban gangs – which in their xenophobic, nativist, authoritarian, and militaristic dimensions are (sometimes intentionally) reminiscent of fascism. Yet there are a number of critical differences. The movements led by Mussolini, Hitler and Franco always focused their attention on the realm of state power (Mussolini once stated: 'Everything for the state, nothing against the state, no one outside the state.'), and this stands in stark contrast to the insular, turf-oriented and localist anti-politics of modern reactionary populist groups in the United States. What is most characteristic of these groups is in fact the lack of any coherent, future-directed ideology that could give political shape to their anti-statist beliefs and irrational fantasies.

Their outlook embellishes an ethos of retreat, not an aggressive plan to transform the order of things, to create new social and authority relations, to build an entirely new state. In this sense, their ideology is quite remote from the more developed ideologies of classical European fascism on the road to political power. This is not to say they don't occupy an important place on the American stage at the millennium. But it is crucial to register these distinctions if we are to understand what they represent.

## From Cults to Militias

The widespread appearance of right-wing populism in the U.S. stems from the activism not only of free marketers, anti-tax partisans and libertarians but also of a bizarre variety of cults, sects, militias, and enclave groups which have taken off since the 1970s, often galvanized by the familiar 'angry white male' caught up in a backlash against social movements and disruptive change. Many see themselves as engaged in an all-out war against an evil and oppressive federal government that taxes and regulates American citizens against their will. Others see the national state apparatus as an agency or repository of international conspiracies, frequently involving the United Nations or other global organizations. Inevitably, violent confrontations between these groups and the state have occurred – the FBI assault at Ruby Ridge, the Waco stand-off and conflagration at the Branch Davidian compound, the Oklahoma City bombing, the holdout of the Montana Freemen, and the Amtrak train derailment in Arizona among others. In most of these episodes the very legitimacy of the U.S. government was being called into question. In hundreds of other lesser confrontations, generally in the west and midwest, federal agents and employees have been victims of threats, intimidation, and verbal attack. A Gallop Poll taken in May 1995 revealed that no less than 39 percent of Americans believe the federal government is 'an enemy of human rights'. In the first ten days following the Oklahoma City events, dozens of federal agencies received a total of 140 bomb threats. Twice (in 1994 and 1995) violent and angry citizens took employees hostage, in San Francisco and Puerto Rico, to protest shoddy treatment at the hands of the government. Public officials at all levels have often been the target of name-calling, threats, and harassment. Such expressions of public outrage can hardly be dismissed as the irrational response of marginals and crazies, though clearly this element does enter the picture; far more common is the visceral lashing-out of ordinary people who feel powerless and think, often quite rightly, that most government officials and politicians are totally indifferent to their needs and demands, or corrupt and untrustworthy, or simply incompetent.

The impact of cults and sects – dramatized by the collective suicide of 38 Heaven's Gate cult members in San Diego early in 1997 – is far deeper than the relatively small number of their adherents would suggest. While the exact number of members and supporters is not known, estimates run to no more than a few hundred thousand. Recent U.S. history is pervaded with the brief and often turbulent legacies of cult-like groups on both the left and right:

Weather Underground in the early 1970s, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Peoples' Temple and Jonestown, the Moonies of Reverend Sun Yung Moon, the Hare Krishna sects, the Rejneesh Colony in Oregon, and various communes associated with the Guru Maharaj Ji, to name some of the most visible. What these cults and sects have in common is an intensely millenarian vision of the future, a strong attachment to charismatic leaders, and a manifest contempt for politics.

Often overlooked is the fact that popular belief in prophesies and mystical ideals, as well as a fascination with conspiracy theories, has a long tradition in American culture. Such millenarianism appeals to the widespread populist conviction that life entails a perpetual struggle against hated outside enemies, and that there can be no escape from the miseries of everyday life through either conventional religion or normal politics. Given this outlook, a presumably corrupt public sphere can never be the arena for genuine human self-activity or emancipation (however defined). Insecure about the future and cut off from the past, people responding to an atmosphere of change and crisis may be available to highly-seductive messages about promises of an entirely new life, especially where those messages are conveyed by strong, articulate leaders who offer the true path to empowerment.[3]

The search for an idyllic separate kingdom, made up of a community of believers standing firm against an oppressive world, motivated David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in their quest for religious transcendence. Their ideas had roots in the Millerite Christian movement founded by William Miller in the 1830s and inspired by Old Testament prophecies about the coming apocalypse. The Millerites were able to build a congregation of close to 100,000 followers dedicated to a renunciation of material possessions; members spent much of their time praying on hilltops, waiting for the second coming of Christ. This cult gave birth to the Seventh Day Adventists, who later produced a split-off group called the Davidians, out of which the Branch Davidians were formed under the stewardship of Ben Roden. Following Roden's death in 1978 his widow Lois formed the Mount Carmel Commune and entered into a relationship with Vernon Howell, who soon changed his name to David Koresh and then proclaimed himself the new Messiah, using his charisma to take over the organization in the early 1980s.[4] Taken to quoting long biblical verses, Koresh placed himself above any earthly criticism, talking incessantly about the future liberation and how it was destined to come about. He envisioned a strictly religious process confined to the Davidian faithful. Eventually the group came to embrace a series of wild prophecies, most of them linked to the idea of inevitable and perpetual conflict with a corrupt and hated outside world. Within this general scenario the Davidians established a specific target of fear and hatred: the U.S. government.

The Davidian siege outlook was based on a manichean and paranoid view of social reality that lent itself to a form of militarism which soon gripped the membership (totalling only a few hundred by 1990). By the early 1990s the

Davidians had amassed a huge stockpile of weapons at their compound in Waco, Texas, including a large assortment of grenades and automatic rifles. Following a series of FBI investigations into cult activities came a number of confrontations, both violent and non-violent, eventually leading to a 51-day stand-off in 1993 that ended when federal authorities moved in force against the compound. The resulting inferno cost the lives of 84 members (including Koresh), who apparently preferred total annihilation to surrender. To the very end, the rebels remained implacably hostile to the federal government, rejecting any compromise with its agents and refusing to extend legitimacy to it during negotiations. Yet beyond this fierce anti-government stance, the Davidians never articulated a coherent view of either their goals or a strategy for building a movement.

The Davidian cult thus bore striking resemblance to comparable religious and quasi-religious groups analysed by Eric Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels*.[5] One case study explored by Hobsbawm was the millenarian cult founded in Italy by David Lazzaretti in 1875, which appealed to hundreds of poor, marginalized, and uneducated people lured by images of quasi-religious salvation. Like Koresh, Lazzaretti set himself up as an earthly messiah whose mission was to perform miracles in order to end human suffering. Many peasants, especially in Southern Italy, were convinced by the power of a message that could challenge the hegemony of both the Catholic Church and the much-despised political system. But while Lazzaretti inspired an ethos of resistance by encouraging peasants to refuse their tax obligations, he offered neither a specific program nor a method for carrying out even minimal social reforms; the 'ideology' consisted of little more than unwavering belief in imminent miracles, a search for divine intervention. In 1878 Lazzaretti and most of his followers were killed fighting the *carabinieri,* choosing – as the Davidians did later – violent death over capitulation.[6]

The search for apocalyptic solutions likewise motivated the Heaven's Gate Commune near San Diego, 38 members of which decided to commit collective suicide in May 1997 in the belief that leaving Earth for spaceship travel behind the Hale-Bopp comet would take them to the 'next level'. Their millenarian ideology amounted to the most extreme and total escape from politics – indeed from society itself. What is most interesting about the Heaven's Gate phenomenon is how its members, followers of Marshall Applegate, incorporated a variety of mainstream beliefs and commitments while carrying them to apocalyptic extremes: science fiction, obsession with computers and high-tech, new-age mysticism, and conspiracy theories linked to UFOs and alien beings. In this respect Heaven's Gate can be seen as a quintessential end-of-the-century millenarian cult which, hardly by accident, was located in one of the most affluent San Diego suburbs (Rancho Santa Fe) and attracted members (overwhelmingly white and middle-class) who had worked in the high-tech sector. Their sense of alienation and powerlessness, their paranoid feelings of being under siege, could be overcome only through the ultimate apocalyptic act: departure from a mundane and corrupt earthly existence.

In contrast to the Davidians and the Heaven's Gate devotees, for whom apocalyptic belief was everything, the skinheads – bands of right-wing or neo-Nazi youth with an estimated 3,000 members across 31 states in the early 1990s – are more closely linked to elements of urban gang culture. Like the millenarian cults, however, the skinheads have attracted members largely from the poor, marginalized, and uneducated sectors, including above all young males who have yet to establish strong roots in work and family. While generally not overtly ideological, the skinheads often adopted the rhetoric of a racist, sexist, xenophobia subculture bent on reproducing the division between initiates and outsiders, between the (usually homogeneous) youth groups and various stereotyped 'others'. In many cases they took on the symbolic paraphernalia of historical fascism, adorning themselves with swastikas, German Eagle medals, and tattoos, listening to German marching music, and so forth. In most instances, however, skinhead groups expressed little interest in political ideology or in changing the world. As with most gangs, there was a strong attachment to turf and a swaggering, macho cult of violence that could easily be directed against scapegoats: rival gangs, feared or despised ethnic groups, other 'enemies'.[7] At a time when few good jobs and careers seemed available to poor youth, when the family had deteriorated as a source of cohesion and identity, and when politics was viewed as a boring, meaningless exercise, skinheads came to epitomize the alienation and nihilistic outlook of urban youth in general. Much like cults and sects, youth-based gangs of this sort can furnish solidarity where it is otherwise absent. But it is an emphatically *anti-political* solidarity that views any kind of routine institutional life (especially involving government) with total contempt: there is no vision of grass-roots politics. Even with all their Nazi symbols and culture of rebellion, therefore, skinheads have come to embrace an ethos of cynicism and nihilism that self-consciously refuses the duties and challenges of citizenship, that debunks the idea of winning (or influencing) political power, that looks with deep scepticism upon anything resembling official discourse.

Such retreat from the public sphere is, in a territorial sense, even more pronounced among the growing ranks of 'survivalists' than among cults, sects, and skinheads. Survivalists generally seek refuge in the wilderness, forming tightly-knit, isolated groups intent on preserving self-sufficient and (in most cases) traditional lifestyles. Unlike the millenarian cults, they have no single-minded religious or utopian mission; unlike the skinheads, their escape from society takes them into more insular rural enclaves; and unlike both, they adhere to relatively coherent beliefs. At the same time, survivalists typically appeal to the same constituency of marginalized, poorly-educated, lower-class white males. More significantly, they view politics with much the same degree of hostility: once again, while many participants may reject *in toto* the existing social order, the leaders seem to have little interest in framing alternative visions or strategies, even along fascistic lines.

The term 'survivalist' was first coined by Kurt Saxon in the early 1960s – a reference to purportedly superior beings who, bonded together in the remote

wilderness, were prepared to endure some cataclysmic event such as nuclear war. Initially they were mainly consumed with the idea of self-protection from hostile intrusions: urban elites, cops, the United Nations, minorities, Communist aggression. Over time, as the survivalist ranks grew to tens of thousands, organizational and ideological coherence followed. Their elan was boosted by the influence of certain racist, neo-Nazi texts such as William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*. Eventually the survivalist rebirth gave rise to such dispersed groups as the Aryan Nations, The Order, the Posse Comitatus, and numerous militias, which together claimed as many as 60,000 members scattered around the country.[8] Inspired by the Civil War Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibited federal troops from intervening in local disputes, the Posse formations refused to obey any government higher than the county level; all other jurisdictions were scorned as corrupt and implicated in a conspiratorial world governing body. The Posse groups of the 1990s include tax resisters, home schoolers, religious fundamentalists, gun enthusiasts and others who see their life as a perpetual struggle against an implacably corrupt and hostile world. Some leaders and activists predict an imminent race war that could threaten the survival of the white population. Within this ideological subculture many groups have taken on the veneer of a military structure, replete with uniforms, chains of command, large arms caches, shooting ranges, and the entire lingo of an army outfit.

As with other kindred groups, survivalists face the challenge of retaining their organizational dynamism over time. As participants age and mature, there is always a question of how long even the most strongly-dedicated activists can remain in such an isolated, paranoid, and hostile atmosphere rife with conspiratorial tales (at times survivalists have seemed ready to believe in virtually any outlandish scenario – indeed the more far-fetched, often the more credible). Moreover, without any presence as a genuine social movement or hope of achieving specific goals, members are hard put to point to actual or even potential worldly successes. In these circumstances insular groups will frequently turn more and more inward; in the process they may wind up fighting among themselves, splitting off, even disintegrating, as a result of ever-mounting levels of frustration. Destructive patterns of this sort have become one of the modern legacies of primitive rebellion – witness the fate of Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Rajneesh Commune, Peoples' Temple, and more recently the Heaven's Gate cult. As the disillusioned survivalist founder Saxon remarked about these groups in the late 1980s: 'Leave them to their own devices and they'll wipe each other out.'[9] Even in the absence of such an implosion, however, it would seem that these groups are condemned to political irrelevance owing, at least in part, to their militantly isolationist stance.

Among all extreme right-wing groups operating on the fringes of the political system, by far the largest, most dispersed, most well-known, and probably most ominous have been the militias. By 1996, militias had an estimated membership of 250,000 with a sprawling base of support totalling between

three and five million people across at least 30 states. Theirs is a thriving (and growing) nativist, anti-urban subculture which also views government and politicians of all stripes as objects of ridicule. In fact the paramilitary organizations have evolved in such a way during the 1990s as to incorporate the main thrust of these other tendencies, including much of their *modus operandi* and espoused aims, but with a clearer focus on the idea of armed mobilization. It seems clear from the evidence to date that the militias attract typically poor, working-class, rural or semi-rural Christian white males, with little or no college education, who are the most amenable to the whole panoply of racist, xenophobic, militarist, and conspiratorial messages.

What its members like to call the patriot movement gained its biggest notoriety at the time of the Oklahoma City federal building bombing in April 1995, but the militia presence goes back much further – probably as far back as the emergence of survivalists and kindred groups in the early 1960s. The movement is generally formed through networks of small, relatively autonomous, 'leaderless' cells that can move swiftly, flexibly, and secretly if necessary. They are inclined to stockpile weapons, dress in army fatigues, conduct periodic quasi-military 'manoeuvres' and hold 'intelligence-briefing' sessions, typically in remote rural areas. They come together under such banners as the 'Colorado Free Militias', the 'Florida State Militia', 'Christian Identity', the 'Militias of Montana', and the 'Viper Militia'. Significantly, support for the paramilitary movement actually *increased*, in some cases dramatically, in the period immediately after the Oklahoma City carnage – no doubt part of the macabre fascination with the intense media coverage of this and related events.

If the names and images of the U.S. militias convey a world-view thoroughly cut off from social reality, the groups nonetheless have an ideological rationale, however murky. They see the ordinary person (again mostly white and Christian) as politically disenfranchised, struggling for survival and identity under circumstances made more difficult by the actions and designs of a governmental behemoth. Crucial to that struggle is ownership of weapons that the federal government is viewed as illegitimately trying to deny law-abiding citizens. A popular refrain is: 'What will you do when they come for your guns?' Militia partisans are fond of apocalyptic scenarios – for example, the one where U.N. forces, assisted by the CIA, FBI, and perhaps the IRS, have mobilized to occupy the American heartland with the aim of delivering the country over to agents of a sinister (but never clearly-defined) 'New World Order'. Taking as their inspiration the Minutemen of the Revolutionary period, militia groups cherish a myth of rugged individualism and frontier heroism in which guns appear larger than life – symbol of a disappearing sense of historical mission.[10] Members harken back to a simpler, far more homogeneous world of rural harmony, religion, family values, and ethnic solidarity – a world in which outsiders, foreigners, and government agents are regarded as *personae non gratae*. Aside from books like *The Turner Diaries* a major conduit of propaganda for the militias has been the burgeoning ranks of extreme right-wing talk radio hosts

like Chuck Harder in Michigan, who urge listeners to fight, violently if necessary, against the global demonic forces that are bent on disarming and enslaving American citizens.

A highly-celebrated case of patriot action was the protracted stand-off between the Freemen and federal agents in Jordan, Montana during the spring of 1996. Engaged in long-standing combat with the FBI and IRS, the Freemen – a group of less than 100 resisters led by Leroy Schusasinger – hoped to create their own republic (called Justus Township) replete with its own legal territory, constitution, currency, and armed units. Their overriding goal was local governance, but strictly within the framework of a white, patriarchal, rural, Christian order. For several years Freemen activists carried out a series of anti-government actions, often inundating local courts with bogus documents and claims, refusing to pay taxes, and making payments to creditors of up to 30 million dollars in counterfeit checks. They issued death threats to federal officials who, in the Freemen ideology, had no right to regulate, control, or tax individuals who, in any case, should not be required to pledge allegiance to the outlaw U.S. state. Federal arrest warrants were issued against several Freemen members in March 1996, leading to the prolonged encounter and culminating in the arrest of two leaders.

Another paramilitary group, the Phoenix-based Viper Militia, seemed to be preparing for an extended violent confrontation with the federal government – largely, as it turns out, without the knowledge of any local residents. In July 1996 agents from the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms office, following a nine-month investigation, arrested twelve people involved in the Vipers and found an arsenal of machine guns, rifles, fifty-six boxes of ammunition, and hundreds of pounds of chemicals that could be used to manufacture bombs. Agents also found a videotape in which militia members gave detailed instructions for blowing up government buildings. Operating underground, the Vipers were a dispersed, loosely-organized network that was able to move about without attracting much public attention. Their nucleus was comprised of mostly ordinary working-class people, including housewives and a fairly large percentage of women. Relaxed gun-control laws in Arizona enabled the militias to go about normal daily activities, with members often dressed in fatigues with weapons visible . Their literature and videotapes showed that the Vipers apparently believed that 'urban warfare' and 'race wars' were imminent, and that it was the duty of citizens to mobilize for this, while militia partisans and spokespersons liked to represent themselves as simple folk just out for fun and games in the woods or the desert.

## An Anti-Political Cult of Violence

Like survivalists, skinheads, and some cults, the militias embrace a diffuse subculture – more an alternative way of life than an explicit ideology or political formation. As an expanding national presence, the militias carry forward – in quasi-militarized form – the familiar American idea of disenfranchised people

fighting for identity, recognition, and local democratic control against a distant, impersonal, and bureaucratic government. The vast majority see themselves as bearers of a renewed citizenship that must be won by vigorous battle in the midst of a harsh and ever-threatening world. Their obsession with conspiracies, their fascination with mysterious schemes and plots, and their glorification of gun culture can easily draw them into the zone of domestic terrorism. The much-celebrated cult of violence, however, does not seem to detract from a populist image the militias have so patiently cultivated. Of course this is a reactionary form of populism, but its anti-government zeal does inspire a semblance of grassroots activism that shares some of the symbols and even aims of progressive populism. Indeed the militias' hostility to state power is deep, visceral, and generalized; it goes well beyond the targeting of specific office holders or legislators, or the familiar conservative assault on bureaucracy. Such grassroots sympathies are compromised, however, by their undeniably shadowy element: a sometimes virulent white racism, staunch social conservatism, an intensely parochial defence of turf, super-patriotism. More tellingly, their populist critique rarely extends to the power of multinational corporations; the struggle for local control is strangely directed against only the national state rather than big business, and against the civilian branches of the state, not the military. And like the other movements discussed above, the militias never mobilize popular support on the basis of some positive vision of the future – even a vaguely anarchistic one – but focus instead on people's fear of change, their insecurity about material and social dislocation, and a scapegoating of minorities, immigrants, and outsiders. The result is a kind of 'Rambo' syndrome – a macho defiance of elites, by any means necessary, along lines of the traditional American outlaw hero and the frontier ethos of rugged individualism.

The importance for the militias of a weapons subculture, of preparation for armed combat, of the image of everyday people locked in mortal struggle against a wicked federal bureaucracy, all involves carrying to extremes the worship of guns and violence, the attachment to rugged individualism, that is deeply embedded in post-war American culture. There are an estimated 220 million guns in civilian hands in the U.S., including several million automatic weapons, belonging to people who for the most part are able to roam freely across the rural and urban terrain. It is the hard-fought and well-financed lobbying campaigns of the National Rifle Association that have done so much to legitimate the gun culture. Add to this mix a mass media and popular culture saturated with images of violence, along with an increasingly Hobbesian civil society that feeds into a variety of angry and paranoid responses, and the resonance of messages predicting warfare involving ordinary citizens (as in Larry Pratt's widely-read *Armed People Victorious*) becomes more comprehensible.

As Bill Gibson observes in *Warrior Dreams*, guns and violence have become a powerful male obsession in the U.S. since the Vietnam war.[11] The weapons fetish has spread rapidly, across class and ethnic lines; more than three million assault rifles have been purchased in just the past two decades. Manifestations

of male violence have been on the upswing since the 1960s, from street crime to domestic violence to serial murders. Films devoting macabre attention to mass killings – or just regular mayhem – like *Silence of the Lambs, Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Natural Born Killers*, have become the object of cult fascination. The immense popularity of televised coverage of the Persian Gulf War, much of it graphically depicting bloody carnage, is well known.[12] Reflecting upon this trend, Gibson points to the emergence of a 'new warrior hero' in American society that mirrors a shifting masculine ethos – one less focused on soldiers and cops, but rather advocating an everyday sort of warrior life that encourages ordinary people to take up arms, join quasi-military groups, and 'prepare for heroic battle against the enemies of society'.[13] So the modern male warrior, whether in the guise of the Freemen, patriot organizations, marauding bandits, gangs, or skinheads – or even a hermetic figure like the Unabomber – becomes the archetype of the renegade hero who in earlier days tamed the frontier, robbed trains and banks, or simply took the law into his own hands to fight Commies and other alien intruders.

The recurrent search for American male warrior identity goes back to the Minutemen, frontier settlers, and foreign adventures like Teddy Roosevelt's 'Roughriders', which attracted men looking to conquer the world, or at least hoping to defend their own territory, with a powerful sense of adventurism. It runs through the myths and rituals of the mafia and organized crime as well as urban street gangs. During the 1990s it has appealed far more to white men than to any other social category – to men who feel threatened by a heartless and encroaching urban world and who are attracted to ideas of racial superiority, sexism, male bonding, and the familiar ultra nationalism of fascist ideology. Writes Gibson: 'American men – lacking confidence in the government and the economy, troubled by changing relations between the sexes, uncertain of their identity or their future – began to dream, to fantasize about the powers and features of another kind of man who could retake and reorder the world.'[14]

The new paramilitary culture was shaped in part by a national mood of defeat and pessimism stemming from the aftermath of the Vietnam war. As Gibson points out, the Indochina debacle was a great blow to the collective American psyche, representing the end to a long U.S. tradition of military victories; it eclipsed the national doctrine of manifest destiny that had such deep roots in the imperial designs of American ruling elites going back to the early nineteenth century. U.S. military hegemony was challenged and smashed, at least in one geographical locale and for one historical moment. The result was a massive social-psychological disruption leading to a 'crisis of self-image' in the general culture but which seemed most disorienting for the military subculture. During a period of intense and rapid change, including the strong impact of feminism and erosion of long-established gender roles, a large number of men felt driven to recapture the patriarchal ethos of a simpler era. In this context many sought out images of violent power, which they found validated in the popular culture. But for such fantasies to make sense, to have credibility, they

would have to be directed against purported enemies: Communists, foreign terrorists, drug dealers, illegal aliens, nebulous conspirators, even the U.S. government itself, which in fact was often seen as behind these other forces. In this fashion the national crisis intersected with a variety of identity crises (and perhaps economic hardships) that for good reasons seemed impervious to normal political initiative.

The most explicitly fascistic current in U.S. political culture is to be found among the angry right-wing extremists who form the backbone of rural groups like Aryan Nations, Christian Identity, The Order, and The Order-2, many of them based in Far West regions such as Idaho, Utah, Montana, and eastern Washington State. Richard Butler of the white supremacist organization Aryan Nations has set up an enclave of twenty acres behind barbed-wire fences in northern Idaho where members can meet, practice target-shooting, and generally vent their rage at a country that has sold out white people. Butler's goal: a 'ten percent solution' that would save one-tenth of the United States for a 'white homeland' while letting the rest of the country rot in its own corruption and decay. Funded in part by Silicon Valley high-tech money, Butler and his followers rejected the Klan and John Birch Society for being too 'liberal'; as of 1998 they had established close contacts with chapters in at least twelve states and with a variety of neo-Nazi groups worldwide. Referring to the bible as a 'book of separation', displaying photos of Hitler, and fascinated with both punk rock and German marching music, the Aryans envision a protracted 'war of freedom' – a 'war', however, that lacks any coherent political-strategic definition.

But even here the struggle is understood, for the moment at least, as essentially *cultural* – part of an historical battle to regain lost values and social structures (community, family, religion, etc.). Indeed, the anti-statist outlook of the militias and allied groupings is infused with such utter contempt for the public sphere – for any generalized mode of civic participation – that translation of their populist energy into movements for social change will be extremely difficult. This defect is compounded by their ethos of dispersion and secrecy, and by an intense commitment to localism, which is viewed as necessary to 'leaderless resistance'. Here the militia groups are doubly anti-political: they have an aversion to the whole realm of social governance and statecraft, and they reject the public arena *in principle* as a site of collective action. Dedicated and solidary as they may be, therefore, the militias, like the millenarian cults and the skinheads, are not, left to themselves, likely to amount to anything more than hotbeds of primitive rebellion: fragmented, local, insular, and lacking the capacity for political definition and expansion. They have little in the way of political language or methods that could give substance to their beliefs or connect their actions to social processes and historical possibilities. For the near future, at least, theirs is likely to be nothing more than a proto-fascist form of cathartic activity built around their own unique brand of anti-politics. While it is not impossible that such dispersed and inchoate groups will evolve into more established (and menacing) social movements or even political

parties, in the foreseeable future their impact is most likely to be felt in a growing number of acts of terrorism.

Only recently, beginning in the 1990s, has ideologically-motivated violence become a fairly widespread *domestic* phenomenon in the U.S. This is an historically significant development, not only because of what it might portend for American politics but also because it reflects powerful trends at work in the society as a whole. Proto-fascist acts of violence directed at public targets may be less deviant or exceptional than is commonly believed; on the contrary, they are the work of mostly ordinary people taking a few very ordinary ideas (freedom, rugged individualism, patriotism, the right to bear arms) to fanatical excesses. As mentioned above, the cult of violence resonates throughout American society in the form of the gun lobby, images in the mass media, urban gang subcultures, astronomical rates of violent crime, and of course the war economy itself (which, though downsized, still devours more than $260 billion yearly).

In this social milieu the problem of right-wing terrorism cannot be dismissed as the isolated shenanigans of fringe crazies. Indeed local incidents of this kind of violence have been surprisingly common during the 1990s: according to the ATF there were no less than 2,400 bombings in the U.S. during 1993 alone, leading to 70 deaths and 1,375 injuries. Reportedly hundreds of other planned actions were intercepted by the FBI and police agencies. The heightened fascination with bombs and guns, including sophisticated assault weapons, is fuelled by mail-order companies that cater to paramilitary enthusiasts, not to mention Internet transmissions, short-wave radio, fax systems, and the omnipresent talk radio programs (some of them hosted by militia sympathizers). Aided by the Internet and alarmed about the coming of the new millennium, 'hate' groups around the country have multiplied rapidly in just the late 1990s. In 1998 observers from Klanwatch and the Militia Task Force documented an all-time high of 474 hate groups in the U.S. – an increase of 20 percent from 1996. Many activists who are biblical doomsayers, fascinated by violent rock lyrics, are drawn to domestic terrorism; they collect high-powered weapons, build bombs and chemical weapons from easy-to-obtain ingredients, and set up web-sites (163 all told as of early 1999) as intricate networks of communication. Their main target is an evil, tyrannical federal government. No longer confined to the South and Far West, such groups (they hardly constitute movements) now have the kind of nation-wide presence that enables them to avoid social and geographical isolation.

Right-wing terrorism thus goes deeper than the bombing of federal buildings and occasional acts of sabotage: there are the frequent assaults on women's health clinics, along with a tremendous increase in hate crimes directed against minorities and gays. And outside this quasi-fascist subculture there have also been recurrent Luddite efforts to smash the artefacts of modern technology – witness the Unabomber mail bombings to presumed agents of the industrial order during the 1980s and 1990s. Viewed in this context, terrorist episodes

involving the World Trade Center, Oklahoma City, the Amtrak derailing, and the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, to name only the most publicized, could be a prelude to mounting domestic insurgency that could spill beyond the boundaries of reactionary populism. The violent mood is nourished by a popular cynicism and frustration over the meaninglessness of normal politics – measured by the precipitous loss of efficacy that pervades any depoliticized society – and by the rapid spread of paranoid, conspiratorial beliefs often tied to some future apocalypse or fear of conquest by nebulous intruders from afar. Paranoid references to black helicopters, alien creatures, drug cartels, and secret military missions – all supposedly leading to a tyrannical New World Order – are best understood in this context. Such beliefs add up to a demonology which offers a substitute for the Communist 'evil empire'.

Of course the appearance of groups that place violence at the centre of their agenda has the effect of closing off public space for open dialogue and collective action by provoking a heightened degree of police and military vigilance and a curtailing of basic political freedoms – as in the case of Italy, where a once-thriving radical left was decimated by the end of the 1970s in the wake of the Aldo Moro abduction/murder by the Red Brigades. Random and widespread acts of violence generate fear and suspicion well beyond their points of origin, endowing the state security apparatus with more power, both institutionally and psychologically. Terrorist episodes can also spread the flames of racism and scapegoating that may already be deeply ingrained in the culture. Because of its generally capricious and murderous nature, civic violence feeds into a classical Hobbesian nightmare in which conflict spirals out of control, eviscerating political life as fear, cynicism, and hatred take hold of the public sphere. Given the complexity of modern society and the critical role played by the mass media and popular culture within it, severe political degeneration can result from just a few acts of terrorist violence – as the deadly work of the Red Brigades, Baader-Meinhof in Germany, and Supreme Truth in Japan has shown. The state becomes more authoritarian, while the other oppositional groups and movements are thrown on the defensive; democratic participation at the societal-wide level is readily blocked or crushed.

Terrorism is the inevitable result of anti-politics, a politics that refuses to aim at entering into the alliances that are necessary to occupy state power. Fascist movements and parties were once able to seize state power in Europe because large sectors of the power structure – aristocracy, Catholic Church, big business, the military – swung over to the fascist agenda at a decisive moment. Whatever the ideological affinity with earlier incarnations of fascism and neofascism, along with certain undeniable similarities in the historical context, in the U.S. today there are few signs of such a critical alignment. The cults, fundamentalists, and militias, for their part, generally want nothing to do with the elites, indeed nothing to do with politics. And the *squadrista* mentality of the armed groups is anathema to Wall Street, the Pentagon and the bulk of the

political establishment not only because of their distaste for destabilizing domestic insurgency and terrorism, but also because the open xenophobia, racism, and fervent localism, which extends throughout the whole reactionary populist subculture, runs against the historical grain of economic globalization. The localized militarism and deep, often irrational anti-politics of the extreme right clashes with the globalizing priorities of the elites, who remain committed to economic rationalization and political order on a large scale.

The ruling elites are more likely to use the terrorism of the populist right as an occasion to repress opposition in general in the name of the state than enter into an explicit alliance with the anti-statist reactionary populist groups. The danger that reactionary populist groups pose for the left is not that they are about to turn into successful fascist parties. It is rather that they could have the effect of inducing a 'state of emergency' response from the state which will fail to discriminate (indeed may be only too ready not to try to discriminate) between right wing terrorism and legitimate left-wing political activity. In this way, even if the fate of reactionary populism is long-term political oblivion, the violence it spawns can nonetheless help to perpetuate a political climate in which progressive social change is stymied.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, the recent work of Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Oxford University, 1997); Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University, 1994); and Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: Pinter, 1993).
2. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil Wars: from LA. to Bosnia* (New York: New Press, 1993).
3. See David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear* (New York: University of North Carolina, 1995).
4. On the Koresh phenomenon within the Branch Davidians, see Marc Breault and Martin King, *Inside the Cult* (New York: Clarendon, 1993).
5. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York: University Press, 1959), chs. 4–6.
6. Ibid., pp. 68–70.
7. William W. Zellner, *Countercultures* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), ch. 1.
8. Ibid., p. 52.
9. Ibid., p. 67.
10. See Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, 'Militia Nation', *The Progressive* (June 1995).
11. James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).
12. Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder: Westview, 1992).
13. Gibson, *Warrior Dreams,* Introduction.
14. Ibid., p. 11.