

PROBE FOCUSING ON NETWORK OF EXTREME RIGHT IN HEARTLAND

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An arrest in Oklahoma and a raid on a rural Michigan farmhouse firmly focuses the investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing case on the extreme right edges of American political life.

The people living on that edge hold the overarching belief that the federal government is at war with its people and only an armed citizenry can keep it in check.

A loose network of these anti-government groups is scattered across the country, from Montana to Michigan to the Deep South. They bear names like Constitutionalists, militia and freemen. While many of their leaders have links to white supremacy organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, Aryan Nations, many members reject the racial dogma of such groups. Instead, they focus their animosity on the federal government and advance elaborate conspiracy theories involving the United Nations, international banking and an invasion of America by foreign troops.

While U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and FBI Director Louis Freeh were careful not to speculate about motives for the bombing Wednesday, that date has great symbolic value to many of these extremist groups.

It was the day Richard Wayne Snell, 64, one of their most notorious members, was executed for murder - just 12 hours after the Oklahoma City blast. It was also the second anniversary of the Waco, Texas, massacre, a rallying cry for many of the groups. And it was the date federal agents first tried to arrest Randy Wayne Weaver, beginning a standoff that eventually ended with the killing of his wife and son.

But it has even further importance, according to John Trochmann, co-founder of the Militia of Montana. It was, he said, the date the Warsaw ghetto was burned in 1943 and the day British troops clashed with the Minutemen at Lexington and Concord, Mass. two centuries ago.

"That's when they tried to take our guns away the first time," Trochmann said. "It's their dirty track record, not ours. It's the American and British government's dirty track record, not ours."

In the wake of the arrest of Timothy McVeigh, 26, and Terry Nichols for the Oklahoma City bombing, attention has focused on one of Michigan's most visible

extremist groups, the Michigan Militia. Militia leaders in that state and other parts of the country were quick to condemn the bombing and deny any connection to the nation's deadliest terrorist attack.

"Why would we promote the remembrance of Waco and all those babies burned?" asked Trochmann. "Why would we expose that and then go burn babies ourselves? It would hurt us terribly. We do not advocate violence. We do not advocate bloodshed. We advocate education."

McVeigh, in fact, was charged with launching the bombing in retaliation against the U.S. government for the Waco disaster.

At the same time, they tried to blame the federal government for the Oklahoma City bombing and predicted it would be used as an excuse to attack them.

"We suspected that after this was done, they'd try to villify us and stop our movement," said Trochmann. "It's a grassroots movement, and they want to slow its momentum."

"We didn't burn Waco. We didn't shoot a mother in the face or a little boy in the back. The federals did that."

"It gives them justification to come down on people that are exposing them, to shut people like us down. I think (the bombing) was done purposely to justify what they're about to do."

White supremacists and organizers of Waco remembrance rallies held Wednesday in Texas and Washington, D.C., echoed Trochmann's claim of federal persecution.

"In my mind, it's got the makings of a witch hunt and a trashing of the Bill of Rights," said Richard Barrett of Jackson, Miss., head of the National Alliance, a neo-Nazi white supremacist organization.

Said Carol Valentine, a Waco rally organizer from suburban Washington, D.C.: "Have you ever heard of the Reichstag fire - Hitler's boys setting the blaze, then blaming the Jews for it? The FBI has a long, proven history of using dirty tricks, agent provocateurs, front groups and the like. The nation saw on daytime TV the FBI gassing and burning people in Waco, Texas."

While militia groups and white supremacy organizations like Aryan Nations and the Confederate Hammer Skins may differ on issues like race and interpretations of the Constitution, they share a hatred of national authority and an apocalyptic world view that envisions a war with the federal government.

"The federal government is being seen as the ultimate enemy more and more," said Laurie Wood, staff member of KlanWatch, a division of the Southern Poverty

Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., that monitors hate groups. "The militia's a pretty new movement, but they've picked up on this hatred pretty quick."

Extremist groups also share a penchant for heavy weaponry, violent rhetoric and armed confrontation with law enforcement officials. In recent months, Confederate Hammer Skins armed with assault weapons and shotguns chased sheriff's deputies away from a "White Man's Weekend" in Dawsonville, Ga. Militia members in Montana have been arrested for threatening court and local government officials.

White supremacist groups refer to the federal branch as the Zionist Occupation Government, or ZOG, and say it is controlled by a cabal of internationalists and Jewish bankers. And followers of these groups avidly read a book called "The Turner Diaries," a novel about an armed revolt by white citizens that features the bombing of power stations, the destruction of FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., by a car bomb, the poisoning of reservoirs and the robbery of banks to fund other violent acts.

The militia movement, active from Montana to Georgia, advocates an armed citizenry, ready to resist the federal government. Their followers believe the national government is under control of the United Nations and that foreign troops are training and cacheing weapons on American soil, preparing for an invasion.

"They're an extreme expression of that anti-federal sentiment that's been expressed by a broad band of the public," said Thomas Halpern, a chief investigator for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

"But they go beyond what the ordinary citizen does when he thumbs his nose at the tax man. They say it's time to head for the hills, stock up on weapons and ammunition and wait for the inevitable war with the federal government."

The main catalyst for the militia movement appears to be Waco, the 1992 Weaver shooting, the Brady Bill and the assault weapons ban, not race. The two federal gun control measures are cited as proof that the federal government wants to trample on the rights of citizens.

But civil rights groups like KlanWatch say the militia leadership is shot through with former Klansmen, white supremacists or sympathizers, including Trochmann; Wayne Gonyaw, a retired Tennessee sheriff who is a member of the Aryan Nations and head of the Tennessee State Militia; Tom Stetson, an Idaho militia leader; and Bob Holloway, a former mercenary and close associate of Aryan Nations leader Louis Beam who heads up a militia group known as the Texas Light Infantry.

They also express alarm at the increasing tendency of militia leaders without such baggage to link up with white supremacists. In a KlanWatch report on militias,

they quote Michigan Militia leader Ray Southwell as saying he "would meet with Satan himself if it would help the militia movement."

But Wood, of KlanWatch, said she is surprised at the reported connection between the bombing suspects and the Michigan Militia. This group, while active in paramilitary exercises, isn't led by veterans of the Klan or neo- Nazi movement.

Michigan Militia members deny any connection with the bombing. Trochmann and others say their organizations are defensive in nature.

"We've fought hard and fast to keep the peace," he said. "If they want to find out how ready the people of Montana are, they'll just have to come up here and try to take away our guns and our rights. Until then, we behave."

But experts worry that as ties between the militia and white supremacy organizations increase, militia groups will be more likely to go on the offensive, much like the Order, a violent spinoff of Aryan Nations that robbed armored cars in Washington, Oregon and California in the early '80s and assassinated Denver talk show host Alan Berg.

The Order, whose leader, Robert Mathews, was killed in a bloody shootout with federal agents on Whidbey Island, Wash., in 1984, was following the blueprint of "The Turner Diaries," gathering seed money for an armed revolt plotted by white supremacist organizations like Aryan Nations.

Snell and Church of Jesus Christ Christian, Aryan Nations founder Richard Butler of Hayden Lake, Idaho, were two of 13 white supremacists who were acquitted of conspiracy and sedition charges after a 1988 trial in Fort Smith, Ark.

The federal government is the target.

"They hold them responsible for Waco, the Weaver shooting, the Snell execution," said Danny Welch, KlanWatch director. "They've used Weaver, they've used Waco, they've used Snell to make the federal government to be the bad guys. Above race, above ethnicity, the rhetoric has been, 'There's going to be a day of reckoning with the federal government.'"