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## Defining American Dreams: An Ideological Analysis of the Michigan Militia

Pamela LaBelle

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DEFINING AMERICAN DREAMS: AN IDEOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS OF THE MICHIGAN MILITIA

by

Pamela LaBelle

A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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1997

DEFINING AMERICAN DREAMS: AN IDEOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS OF THE MICHIGAN MILITIA

Pamela LaBelle, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1997

The primary goal of this thesis is to explicate the system of beliefs underlying the militia movement in order to better understand how their particular ideology helps them make sense of the complexities and contradictions in the world in which we live. By delineating and analyzing their ideology, I demonstrate how it is rooted in the Constitution and the Bible, as well as how that rootedness can alternately support and work against their system of beliefs. I then examine the ideology of the mainstream American Dream to understand how militia ideology works in tandem with some of the principal tenets of that Dream.

The study of this radical group offers an important opportunity for examining the ways people in our society attempt to deal with the contradictions they experience. It is a study of the ways in which people act and counteract with contradictions as a process of sense-making. Through this examination of the everyday world of militia members, this thesis brings forth a window through which we might begin to understand the sentiments that have motivated militia members to hold on so tightly to their guns, their Christianity, and their democratic ideal.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. METHODS.....	5
The Interviewing Process.....	6
Research Ethics.....	7
Interactionist/Feminist Method.....	9
Interviewing Demographics.....	11
A Methodological Note About History.....	12
III. THEORY.....	14
Defining Ideology.....	15
IV. ANALYSIS.....	19
Delineating the Components of Militia Ideology.....	20
Constitutionalism.....	20
Regulatory Control.....	22
Court/Judicial System.....	24
Family Values/Schools.....	26
Government Corruption.....	28
The New World Order.....	30
Gun Power.....	31
Religion.....	32
What is the American Dream?.....	34
Conceptualizing the American Dream Ideology.....	34
Regulating Success in America.....	35

## Table of Contents--continued

### CHAPTER

Success for Everyone?/Us v. Them.....	39
Playing by the Rules.....	42
Success Equals Virtue.....	43
V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.....	47
Violence - An American Tradition.....	47
APPENDICES	
A. Protocol Clearance Letters From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	55

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

After news of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in April, 1995, the Militia movement soared into the spotlight. In the days and weeks thereafter, front page news articles highlighted militia leadership and ideology. Before the bombing of the Federal Building, Militias were small and peripheral, located mostly in the Western states. Suddenly, under the media's authoritative guidance, the public began to grasp a new dimension of American society in this loosely organized group of angry, white guys with guns.

Much of the general public reacted in fear, but more significant still has been the broader group of disgruntled, predominantly white males who reacted by joining this newly publicized offshoot of the patriot movement, causing memberships to soar. The wide appeal of these irate men tromping through the woods in army fatigues, combined in an odd fashion with the high-tech organizing capabilities of the information superhighway, giving rise to a country wide social movement. Brigades have now formed in many counties and in most states. In only a few short months this group, seen as extreme and insignificant, if seen at all, garnered country wide support.

For the past year and a half, I have been studying the Michigan Militia. As I began this study, I wondered how accurate the

media's version of the militia could be. I also wondered about the public's generalized fear in dealing with the militia. The general public, the so-called liberal news media, and even the more conservative right wing, publicly recoiled at the sound of this new extremist activism, but no real effort has been made to understand what militia members believe or how they come to those beliefs. As a public, our knee-jerk response has been to condemn them as a bunch of lunatics with personal problems.

In this thesis, I delineate and analyze the ideology of the Michigan Militia. My aim is to explicate their ideology, showing how it is rooted in the Constitution and the Bible, but also how that can alternately support and work against their system of beliefs. I then examine the ideology of the mainstream American Dream to understand how militia ideology works in tandem with some of the principle tenets of the American Dream. For purposes of this analysis, I follow Jennifer Hochschild in defining the American Dream as an ideology of success which is widely held by mainstream Americans. The definition consists of four basic components, generally defined as (1) everyone may always pursue their dream of success, (2) one may reasonably anticipate success, (3) how one achieves that success is through actions and traits under their own control, and (4) the pursuit of true success is a virtuous one. Through the process of side by side analysis of these two ideologies, I show how widely held beliefs can confound and contradict everyday events, especially in an economic sense of the experience of everyday Americans. The



ideological turmoil created out of these contradictions may well influence those who have joined militias as they seek new explanations, and thus a more adequate belief system, than the American Dream ideology has provided them. To some extent, they find that adequacy in the ideology that extends from the militia movement.

Throughout this work, I seek to answer foundational questions such as who are the militia members and how do they make sense of the world in which we all live? In Chapter II, Methods, I give a description of who militia members are based upon my interviewing encounters with them. I also indicate how problematic my own underlying assumptions that they were bad people became in the research process. In Chapter III, Theory, I look at ways in which ideologies and counter-ideologies are formed in order to answer other foundation questions, such as, does their world view indicate that they see America as a world full of moral decay and conspiratorial governments, or is it an open embrace of democratic idealism? Are militia members embracing God and Country as our forefathers envisioned, or are they actively creating their own self-fulfilling, deadly prophecy by pushing for an anti-government/government standoff? Since the primary goal of this thesis to explicate the system of beliefs underlying the militia movement in order to better understand how their particular ideology helps them make sense of the complexities and contradictions in the world in which we live, in Chapter IV, Analysis, I delineate the main components of the militia ideology and, from there, look at the main components of the American Dream

ideology in order to draw connections and contradictions between the two. In the final chapter, Chapter V, Conclusion, I illustrate my belief that simply categorizing groups like the militia as right-wing or left-wing extremists serves little or no purpose. If we can instead, move past political pigeonholing in order to comprehend the everyday world of militia members as people as opposed to categories, we may begin to truly understand the sentiments that have motivated them to hold on so tightly to their guns, their Christianity, and their democratic ideal.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

In preparing for the study of the militia, I read histories of various right-wing organizations as well as much of the media critique by centrist publications and by leftist commentators. I also read as much primary material--militia pamphlets, brochures and alternative press magazines as the membership could provide me. These material gave me a good foundation from which to begin the most important, and the most interesting aspect of this research, the long interactional interview with militia members.

Armed with my own picture of the militia as angry, paranoid gun fanatics who see computer chips in road signs and black helicopters bearing down from above, I anticipated difficulty in gaining access to membership for interviews. I also wanted these interviews to be as in-depth and natural as possible, therefore tape recording them seemed almost a requirement. That, I thought, would be doubly difficult as it might add to their paranoia and reinforce their experiences of media manipulation.

It was with this kind of trepidation that I approached my first potential interviewee, a former militia brigade commander who was the guest speaker at a Kiwanis luncheon I had attended. As we had been introduced briefly at the luncheon, I felt he might be amenable to talking with me. I phoned him and reintroduced myself as a socio-

logy student interested in researching the militia and asked for an interview. He asked if "this is gonna end up twisted around in some newspaper" and I explained that I hardly thought so, and that the best I could hope for was publication in some obscure academic journal. I also assured him, and all others I interviewed, that any quotes I used would be accurately placed and verbatim, and that under no circumstances would his identity be revealed.

### The Interviewing Process

Militia members, as a whole, exceeded my best expectations in cooperating with the interviewing process. I had anticipated resistance on the part of the membership because of my view of them, based on the media's view of them, as paranoid. Real experience, however, provided a new picture: a group of people who looked at the interviewing process as an opportunity to put into action one of the goals stated in a Michigan Militia recruiting pamphlet (undated).

To Educate its members in areas of history, law, and principle from knowledge imparted from this country's historical record and from the Bible, which has been the greatest single guiding influence for all great nations desiring to be free.

Clearly, militia members saw these interviews as a way to get their message out, and to educate me in the process. It is one of their main goals to aid in re-educating the American people at large. One of their fundamental beliefs is that most Americans have been misguided and misled and that it is their responsibility to show people the way. Their promotional brochure indicates that it is apparent to them who is doing the misguiding, which, in turn, becomes who is

the enemy: those in political positions of power in our government, those who work for governmental agencies such as the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In addition, those who have too liberal a world view, i.e., humanists, generally, any who might support views other than their own are potentially underminers. As a Michigan Militia brochure (undated) stated, ". . . members stand against tyranny, globalism, moral relativism, humanism, and the New World Order threatening to undermine . . . these United States." This quote is fairly indicative of the level of sophistication some members have reached through their process of re-education. It also seems to explain their tendency to come to interviews armed, not with guns and ammo, but with pamphlets, historical records, legal documents, and a lot of enthusiasm about their newly acquired educational role in this highly political process.

#### Research Ethics

It became obvious to me in the initial interviews that I had to adapt somewhat of a trail blazing mentality when working in the field. I found that this kind of in-depth interviewing with such a controversial and unpredictable social group required me to make up rules as things went along. All the interviewing techniques, schedules and social research etiquette learned in the classroom became moot in this highly interactive process. This lack of usable structure was, to say the least, scary in that it was my first field work experience, but also education because of it. I learned early on

the frustration and confusion of ethical conflicts. Because the people I interviewed were so unexpectedly cooperative, friendly, and even likeable, I soon was haunted by the notion that I was misrepresenting myself to them. When asked, I was not forthcoming about my own ideological foundations as a feminist and humanist which I knew conflicted with their own. This unanticipated moral disturbance occurred because I found militia members to be generous in the spirit of their cause, spending hours with me explaining in earnest their heartfelt views of life, and the experiences that brought them to those views. I felt very much a fraud when, after hours of my poking and prodding them for information, they would finally come around to asking me how, after hearing their explanations, I felt about them and their beliefs. In great cowardice, I would skirt the question claiming the need to remain objective as a researcher, a standard in research I neither believe in, nor want to promote. Sociologist Kathleen Blee (1991) noted similar experiences in her study of women in the Klan.

I was prepared to hate and fear my informants. My own commitment to progressive politics prepared me to find these people strange, even repellent. I expected no rapport, nor shared assumptions, no commonality of thought or experience. What I found was more disturbing. Many of the people I interviewed were interesting, intelligent, and well informed . . . in fact I shared the assumptions and opinions of my informants on a number of topics (excluding, of course, race, religion, and most political topics). (p. 6)

I also spoke with a seasoned anthropologist who has spent half of her life in fieldwork and she thankfully pointed out that fraudulence runs both ways and that they were using me as well as my using

them. This kind of "mutual deceit" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1993, p. 4), which I now know to be inherent in situations of engaged interviewing, has no solution or resolution. Denzin, in quoting Ditton (1977), notes that participant observation

is inevitably unethical by virtue of being interactionally deceitful. At the situational and interactional level then, it may be unavoidable that there is a degree of impression management, manipulation, concealment, economy with the truth, and even deception. (p. 5)

In short, there is a double betrayal that occurs, them of you, and you of them, with which I have struggled and am not likely to ever become comfortable. This sentiment, too, is not unlike that of many other field researchers who indicate that this realization is "generally distressing and confusing" (Punch, 1979, p. 94).

#### Interactionist/Feminist Method

Because of the creative situations encountered in my interviewing, I had a difficult time pinpointing a concrete, socially scientific definition for the type of research I was conducting. Once I began to read the work of feminist researcher Shulamit Reinharz, however, I found her book Feminist Methods in Social Research (1992), described many of the same dilemmas I was encountering. Much to my relief, she identified what I thought of my tendency to punt in a given situation, as well as my unstructured style as wholly in concert with a feminist perspective in research. She defines research as "production of a publicly scrutinizable analysis of a phenomenon with the intent of clarification" (p. 9). She also says

that feminist interview research "explores people's views of reality and allows the research to generate theory," and that "feminist research is amoebalike; it goes everywhere and in every direction" (p. 243). My work here has certainly been amoebalike, but that is only part of its identification as feminist. From the beginning, I have been guided by a genuine motivation to give voice to a group of people who have previously been heard only through the judgmental voice of the media, which is, to some extent, not being heard at all. I also felt a great desire to see militia members as people struggling in everyday life, i.e., in their humanity. Both the feminist perspective and the interaction perspective, as set forth by Norman Denzin's (1989) Interpretive Interactionism, hold up these elements as principles defining their method. Denzin defines the Interactionist method and those who use it as "interpreters of problematic, lived experiences involving symbolic interaction between two or more persons" (p. 13).

Further, the purpose of the analysis is to create an understanding of how the private troubles that occur within the immediate world of militia members' experience are intimately connected with what the wider public see as irrational public actions. I explore a different angle, with a different intent, than the journalists who displayed militia members as a wholly fearsome group. I explore their humanity with, as Reinharz (1992) states, the "intent of clarification" (p. 5). While they may be radical seeming in the news reports, I saw a different, closer to home picture when I looked at



them as ordinary people coping with the contradictions of every day life. It is, then, for these primary reasons that I have coined the method I utilize in this study as Feminist Interpretive Interactionism.

### Interviewing Demographics

Although the majority of the interviewing has been conducted with members of county brigades located in Southern Michigan, I also traveled to another rural area in Northeast Michigan to interview. This lends the data some geographic depth within this extensive statewide movement. Michigan, it should be noted, claims one of the strongest and largest militia movements in the country.

Because of the in-depth nature of the interviews, and the precarious relationship of trust I felt it necessary to maintain, I purposefully limited my sample size to a small number. Over the course of 18 months, I spent many hours in the homes and workplaces of militia members, interviewing a total of nine people. I interviewed all members at least one time and three members two or more.

The nine interviewees ranged in age from 26 to approximately 68. There were six males and three females. Of the nine interviewees, there were three sets of married couples. The majority of the interviewees were self-employed, for example, owning a small business, a small farm, or running a home business. Of the ones who were not self-employed, they held positions of blue collar work such as working in a factory, delivery or truck driving.

One of the couples was very involved and active in the militia and I maintained a relatively consistent relationship with them over the course of the eighteen months of this study. I visited their home several times, met their family, and attended meetings with them. Interviews lasted for several hours each and were most often conducted in the homes or businesses of the interviewees, in the presence of their spouses, and sometimes their children or their friends who also participate in the militia. My interviewing style in these instances was always unstructured, conversational, non-authoritarian and friendly, as were their responses to me.

#### A Methodological Note About History

While working on this study, in a sense, I discovered history, again, for the first time. I found out that the nature of history is ever-present, and therefore vital, to any sociological work, but also that it's vitality can often be hidden behind literal interpretations of the truth of history. I had not anticipated, but am happy to have found, how necessary it is to allow for the participants of a study to generate their own historical record. Historical figures and events are subject to differing processes of interpretation, therefore I am loath to focus much attention on the available academic histories of right-wing groups and how the contemporary militia might or might not fit into or extend out of, specific categories of earlier right-wing groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or the Freemasons. Further, as I explain below, this sort of cate-

gorization distorts the process of creation and the content of their ideology. I believe that placing them in this kind of historical context misses the point; a good chunk of the content of militia ideology is culled from their forefathers, the American Revolutionaries, and, more importantly, much of the justification that they feel in pursuing their contemporary path of resistance stems from their own recognition of the importance of the connection we hold to our history, and of their own understanding of the historical role of citizen militias.

I also believe that, in this case, traditional methods of classifying make for an uncomfortable fit in that they create a dehumanizing effect that dilutes whatever passion the people in this group might feel toward their cause. As a researcher employing feminist methodology, I feel it is far more consistent to let the militia members tell their own story about how they are connected to history and what significance that history holds for them as a social group.

One of the purposes of this research is to demonstrate the inappropriateness of defining militias as either a left or right. Instead I will draw on historical accounts of other groups and social movements to explain how militia ideology offers a complex, contradictory mixture of right-wing and left-wing stances.

### CHAPTER III

#### THEORY

In talking with militia members, I was often struck by how many of their beliefs seemed to echo what I felt were the beliefs of mainstream Americans, often minus the veil of politically correct rhetoric which is carefully in place in mainstream discourse. Yet mainstream America has clearly categorized militias as radical and fringe. This was one of the many contradictions I encountered in my research. In an attempt to understand the contradiction in their experience, I wanted to determine how militia beliefs could be defined as radical by the mainstream and still reflect mainstream beliefs. To do this, I set out to compare and analyze the literature about the ideology of the American Dream with the data I gathered about the ideology of militia members. In that way I thought it would become clearer how the two are similar, as well as how they diverge. As I worked on defining the differences and similarities of the two ideologies, I kept having problems separating the two. They seemed to collapse into one another and it felt like I was really simply looking at different peoples' interpretation of a set of beliefs. At the analytical level, I could discern a core of beliefs, held in common, that somehow connected the two ideologies. It was this comparative process that moved me to the question that I really needed to ask. Is militia ideology the mainstream American Dream

rearticulated in response to the social complexities of this era? Or is it indeed a radical new ideology? Gathering together the definitions of the American Dream from academic literature, as well as the data I collected in my interviews with members of the militia, I found that the two ideologies do converge in places and that militia ideology works for its members because it is, to some extent, a re-articulation of the American Dream. I also found that while we often treat ideologies as something concrete, a set of beliefs, it pays to be mindful that they are amoebalike and ever-changing; their form is determined by many factors, one of which is the public and private experiences of the everyday life of the believers.

### Defining Ideology

Since in this section, I will be discussing not only the ideology of the militia, but also the ideology of the American Dream, it is necessary to clarify in what way I use the concept and, maybe more importantly, how I do not use the concept. I use ideology in this thesis as an analytical tool, not as an implication of a false system of beliefs. Ideology here is assumed to be a more or less coherent set of beliefs held in common by a group. It is considered to be more or less hegemonic in so much as the main ideals have historically and continually set forth patterns of thinking in our culture through which, to some degree, we all inform various aspects of our lives. When considering their beliefs, I do not see the militia members as living in some fantasy land in which they labor under a

belief system rent with massive false consciousness. Like the American Dream ideology, I see militia ideology as a mind set that aids the participants in sense-making in a chaotic world. And, like the American Dream, militia ideology is packed full of irresolvable contradictions that sometimes place them at odds with themselves and the institutions they support.

Both neo-marxist and feminist concepts of ideology recognize that a hegemonic ideology provides our authorization of social reality and that working class people, (as most militia are), women, and racial minorities have been marginalized and ultimately left out of that authorization process. This process brings about a system of stratified meanings versus common meanings in which the subordinates (Lengermann & Niebrugge (1996)

immersed in the same ideological interpretation of their experiences, stand at a point of dialectical tension, balancing this ideology against the actuality of their lives. A great diversity of meanings develops out of this tension. (p. 343)

In the instance of the militias, this tension gives way to the re-articulation of what the media have assumed is their skewed interpretation of the Constitution and of what American life, i.e., the American Dream should be. However the media represents it, sociologist Dorothy Smith (1975) reminds us of another problem: Dominate ideologies such as the American Dream don't always fit well in the lives of the marginalized groups who are saddled with it.

Modes of thinking and imagining our experience are produced for us by others who do not share our experience or position in the world. They are produced by those who hold the super-ordinate positions in the society and whose consciousness ex-

tends into the world as a reflection of the structures of power within which they act upon and know it. (p. 370)

In phenomenological terms, this laying on of a belief system can and does create many irresolvable contradictions. Since national ideologies such as the American Dream await us as we arrive in the world, various rearticulations of it are part of an historical and continuous process of sense making in the real world. The differing life experiences of militia members create differing interpretations of what the American Dream ideology is and what it should be. It is upon this process, and the contradictions that constitute it, that groups excluded from the dominate authorization process attempt to create counter ideologies.

This desire to create something counter to what is, or to what Antonio Gramsci called cultural hegemony, can have paradoxical outcomes. As groups such as the militia pull some meanings from their own lived experiences, and some from the pool of preexisting shared knowledge of the culture, they begin the process of interpretation which ultimately forms their personal version of an alternative vision: A counter ideology.

T. Jackson Lears (1985), a neo-marxist historian, explains how subordinated groups work within the dominate culture to create their own "contradictory consciousness" in an attempt to create a new ideology. This attempt, because it draws from that pool of what is in its creation, often leads to the group's participation in maintaining the dominate culture. In quoting Gramsci, Lears notes that the working class had its own conception of the world, even

if only embryonic: A conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and it flashes. Yet, it had also adopted a conception which is not its own but borrowed from another group. (p. 569)

The subordinated group, in effect, contributes to the legitimation of their own domination because of their internalization of hegemonic, or laid on, values.

The consequence was that man-in-the-mass had two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): One which is implicit to his activity and transformation of the real world: And one . . . which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (p. 569)

Militia ideology is an example of this phenomenon. As I will demonstrate, it borrows uncritically absorbed principles from the past, i.e., those set forth in the Bible, the Constitution, and by the founding fathers. While at the same time, their ideology provides members an avenue of critique. They use it to actively adjudicate the processes that frustrate their pursuit of the American Dream.



## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

In order to illustrate how militia ideology borrows from the Constitution and the Bible, as well as how it absorbs many components of the mainstream American Dream, it is essential to establish a foundational set of beliefs that militia members themselves identify as their ideology. Based upon my interview data and an analysis done by Garry Wills in his article, The New Revolutionaries, I identify and explicate the main components of militia ideology which, as Wills (1995) notes, has its own validity within the current skepticism of government agencies in mainstream America.

The new extremism is less a style' of paranoia than a coherent, even rigorous, statement of what follows from recognition of the government as one's enemy. Using sophisticated communications techniques . . . they have made an internally consistent case for the illegitimacy of federal acts.  
(p. 50)

And, to a certain extent, these same ideas were voiced by one of the membership I interviewed:

I guess, the militia on a whole, statewide, is basically a watchdog of the government and to uphold peoples' rights under the Constitution. Most of the people who enter into the militia or any patriot group are concerned citizens, concerned that our Constitution is going to be eroded away, taken away, and we're out there just to make sure the government doesn't overstep their bounds. Used to be a government controlled by the people for the people . . .

## Delineating the Components of Militia Ideology

### Constitutionalism

Militia members are passionate in their belief that government has tainted the intent and content of the Constitution. It was, as this small shopowner points out, the motivating force in joining a militia:

I went to what was supposed to be a pro gun rally, people that were sick and tired of federal abuses of the Constitution, taking away gun rights by instituting gun control and banning this and banning that and doing nothing as far as crime is concerned. . . it was a promotional type thing to let people know of certain rights that are being stripped daily, abuses of the Constitution that is supposed to be our guarantee of our freedoms and our liberties here in the United States.

After the Oklahoma City bombing there was a media blitz about militias. The media portrayed militia movements as strongly anti-government gun nuts who feel they live outside of the law. This is not an accurate picture. Quite the contrary. Militia members are ardently involved with the law. They place the Constitution, in its original form, on equal footing with the Bible. It is in their minds quite literally the law of the land and it, along with its creators, are seen as prophetic in their vision, so much so that it seems militia members believe that if we could just "get back to the Constitution" we could resolve all government corruption and most of societies' ills, which as a laundry list, range from predatory government agencies to immorality run amuck in the form of homosexuality. A male militia member told me:

Once you restore the Constitution, the IRS is history, the EPA

is history, the Department of Education is history. All the special agencies are history because they are not constitutional, plus they have no legal authority-constitutional authority to make these rules and regulations they are shoving down our throats. Only the legislative branch of government can make law, not the President with all these stupid executive orders. Only Congress can make laws, not the President, not the Supreme Court . . .nobody else.

Wills (1995) connects the modern militias reverence of the Constitution with the Mormons belief that the Constitution is divinely inspired. "Brigham Young said when the Constitution of the United States hangs, as it were, upon a single thread, they will have to call for the Mormon' elders to save it from utter destruction" (p. 52).

Like the Mormons, militias, see themselves as rescuers of the Constitution. Stern (1996, p. 152) in his book about American militias, notes that their "use of patriotic images" helps give militias the ability to twist their own treasonous behavior into that of defenders of the Constitution and its first ten amendments. This twist allows members to classify anyone who breaks the Constitution (sometimes simply adhering to amendments made after the tenth, or the sixteenth is reason enough to be dubbed as such) as a traitor. One male militia member classified the vagaries of the Clinton administration as such:

They voted for the Crime Bill and the Brady Bill. That violates the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Second Amendment. Our rights shall not be infringed. . . that means any law they pass about gun control is totally unconstitutional. They violate our rights. They're traitors.

The license that militias members take in their interpretations of the Constitution and of events in American history does not neces-

sarily lead to a Constitution that contemporary American society would, or could, support. It is important to note, though, that these interpretations are valid in the sense that they are based upon their own experiences. They are formed out of the contradictory consciousness which is inevitably a part of hegemonic culture. So, while the media is busy rendering the whole lot of militia members extremists and lunatic fringe, perhaps to make themselves and their viewers more comfortable, extremism is it is not the whole picture, or even a very accurate picture. More realistic, I think, is to understand that their ideology lends them a language and an arena in which they can rebel against very real contradictions in everyday life.

### Regulatory Control

Following a somewhat logical reasoning process, militias see that the later Amendments to the Constitution are attempts to regulate America in a way that they abhor. Somewhat reminiscent of the left wing ideology of the late 60s, militias are in agreement with the Gingrich republicans that governments increasing regulation mania is one of the many indicators that America is becoming socialist and that people are increasingly controlled in their everyday lives by the big hand of bureaucratic government regulation. While almost all of us would agree that there is far too much bureaucracy and regulation, militias relate it directly to events in their own lives and see it as an increasingly menacing tyranny we are all being con-

ditioned to accept:

Well, we knew something was going on because with my daycare, a few years back, things were starting to come out. We had to go in for classes. You had to do 20 hours of classes, you had to be licensed. Fifteen years ago they threatened to throw my sister in jail because she wasn't licensed. They found out she was babysitting. Well, then I decided to do daycare and I just went ahead and automatically did the licensing because I thought that was the rule so I went ahead and did it. Well, then the 20 hour deal came up. We had to have CPR, and first aid, and 12 hours of class time. Well, then I thought, gee, we don't have to go through all this stuff, hopefully; once you do it you're done. Now, couple years ago, they made it mandatory every two years when you renew your license, you gotta go through this. Then, when I renewed my license I had to pay \$20 to do daycare. I'm like, what a minute. This is garbage. Why do I have to go through this? My four kids are how old? And besides that, with me, I always listen to my sister in law and her friends. You learn from other people how to do things, you learn from your mistakes. I don't need the stupid government telling me how to do something.

Her husband concurred by saying that the government is all about money and power and then stated sarcastically, "Welcome to the United Socialist States of America."

Certainly there is some validity and some appeal in what they say. When this woman talks about learning how to do things from other people, especially where children are concerned, it seems, at least initially, a far more humane outlook than the often nightmarish instances when government too quickly intervenes in family life. This kind of rhetoric serves to remind us of what has been lost in our technocratic, post-industrialist world--the personal and the person. However appealing this rhetoric may seem, I found that the further out these scenarios were carried, the less appealing they became. What started as a conversation about regulatory control and infringing on human rights would inevitably move into a discussion

of the welfare system, or more accurately, welfare mothers. The welfare system is, almost without exception, a gendered institution; it is discussed only in terms of women and one in which humanistic rhetoric is absent:

This whole idea of the welfare thing, we created a whole generation, second and third generation people on welfare because they're used to that system. Shut it off tomorrow, you'll find out you won't have as much problem as you think you're going to have. Why is it fair that one family, a wife with three kids struggles as a waitress and doesn't take a dime, and another one says oh, woe is me, and then has five more kids. . . you have this warm and fuzzy all the time. I'm sick of that, life is not supposed to be easy.

Somehow, during the course of the conversation, the notion of human rights turned backward in time. I saw this kind of boomerang effect in all my interviews.

#### Court/Judicial System

Many militia members seem to have become amateur lawyers. In fact, they utilize legal jargon when referring to their own justice pro tem; members who specialize in legal representation, protecting other members, or other civilians, in and from the court system. It is difficult to get a handle on how they view the courts, but, as with most of their beliefs, militia members have identified a specific event and time in which the court system was perverted from its original and correct state. Although there is always variation that will take the story further back in history, most say the trouble began with Roosevelt and the Emergency War Powers Act in 1933. Militia members say that before that the country worked as it was sup-

posed to, under constitutional law whereby any violation of the Constitution, as defined by the Constitution, was null and void. One of the male brigade commanders explained:

I don't know if you knew that we're not under constitutional law but in 1933 when Roosevelt decided to enact the EWPA because of the failed banking system, he put into place the country under emergency powers which goes back to executive order where the president has the power to enact laws against the Constitution until the emergency is over with. Well, the emergency has been over for a long time but they never rescinded the law, therefore, we're still under executive laws . . . the judicial system is totally different under executive law. You don't have the constitution to back you up and a lot of people come out of court saying geez, I felt guilty until proven innocent instead of innocent until proven guilty.

So, this interpretation of historical events allows militia members a certain leeway in laws, executive orders, and amendments that might have been added after that magical point in time. If they truly believe, (and most of them seem to), that America is erroneously functioning under executive law, they can defy the laws and twist their "patriotic image" (Stern, 1996, p. 152) around to show that, in fact, their defiance of the judicial system is actually more lawful because they are following Constitutional Law which is the law we were intended to function under. This kind of historical twisting, to convert the present by reinstating the past, is common in militia ideology.

Recent media coverage has militia members fighting in court for Common Law consideration, and, according to my interviewees, these court battles have proved fruitful. And, while some of the legal intricacies that they explained to me proved upon my later verification to be erroneous, when I heard on the evening news that

one of Jack Kevorkian's many court battles was being fought based upon the premise of Common Law, something which, according to militia members, has not been unearthed in our court systems in years, I began to wonder in what odd and backdoor ways the militia movement might impact our culture.

Their further efforts of activism in the courts have them, in the pure tradition of democratic process, being true thorns in the sides of State government officials. The members that I spent the most time with during the interview process were impressive in their devotion and unending energy in learning laws and statutes, copying existing legal briefs, and in petitioning their representatives, over and over and over again. In these instances, they truly do carry out due process. They descend upon Lansing with the full force of their civilian rights, petitioning state representatives with demand and show cause orders, all perfectly legitimate under the federal and state constitutions. And, they say they are making inroads at the state level, too. When I asked what their petitioning was for, one member stated:

It means we're pissed off about something the government is doing, and have the right to notify them and can form a general assembly and come up with conclusions and send them in and ask them to act on them. That document there represents 4,000 pages of actual document we pulled out of the archives, both state and federal, to prove our point. In fact, we've judges tell us behind the scenes: You guys are right on.

#### Family Values/Schools

Many militia members, have followed the move of right wing



Christians, and taken to home schooling their children. Discontent with the state of public education is certainly not a radical idea held solely by the Christian Right or militias. Many Americans are discontent and distraught at the state of our schools and the potential societal dangers of drugs and violence that public schools are seemingly a magnet for.

The first time I encountered the militia viewpoint regarding school, was in an article I read in one of their most widely-read alternative press magazines, The New American which is published by the John Birch Society. As I read through the article and listened to the author's philosophy I felt myself become panicky and confused because , for the most part, I agreed with him. Did this make me militia material? Many times over the past few years, I have longingly thought of removing my children from the public educational system so that I could have more influence on how they might come to view the world. And when I listened to one militia member proudly proclaim of the home schooling movement "it's a silent revolution," I must admit I felt some admiration for the ability of these people to at least believe strongly enough in some set of values to take a stand. That is, after all, the American way. But my agreement, and a good chunk of my admiration, ended when I found that militia members' motivation for home schooling comes from their belief that the Department of Education is a pipeline directed by the American government which feeds multiculturalist propaganda, loose moral codes, and inaccurate teachings of American history to children.

It's sad times when you see what's going on in today's society, a lot of it's coming through education because we have allowed the government to infiltrate, if you will, into our educational system where they control the minds of our young children. They're educating them to the point where they are not hearing the same history that we heard when we were children and morality is just amuck.

They see the public school system as one more way that government controls the masses.

Actually the school system dumbs you down so you're an indentured servant to the government. You can become more reliant on the government instead of yourself and you're finding out more and more that the government doesn't like self-reliant individuals.

There is a conspiratorial belief that this brainwashing is an effort to ease the move toward a New World Order/one world government. And, as one farmer and his wife explained it, all the multiculturalist efforts are really a way to cozy up to other countries so that we feel good about a one world government when it happens. A farmer told me that

the policy is not to step on anybody's toes, to get along, to make everything OK . . . you don't hurt me, I don't hurt you. Let's forget about the past, the past is past. So what that I stabbed your brother in the back ten years ago, hey, we're friends now . . . .

His wife added that "It's part of the global thing."

### Government Corruption

American history is extremely important to members of the militia. They identify strongly with the American Revolutionaries and see their role in combating government corruption of equal importance as that of their historical brethren. As Kenneth Stern (1996) notes

in his book A Force Upon the Plain,

they have answered a call to arms to defend their families, their homes, and their Constitution . . . . The use of patriotic images to malign American government allows militia members to reject the notion that their actions and beliefs might be treasonous. I think we've gotten more knowledgeable on the treason and the fraud being committed by our government. It's outright treason. They know we're not under the constitution, they know our monetary system's a total joke. They know our court system's a total joke. They're keeping it in effect. Like, I called my congressman, Fred Upton, and said: There's 550 of you people roughly in Washington, 435 representatives, 100 senators, the VP, the Pres, and the Supreme Court justices. You created every problem this nation has. You make the laws, you spend the money. You've created every problem. It's not us spending the money, it's not us making the laws, it's you clowns. You are ultimately responsible. I said: I hope you remember Nuremberg, the Nazis were held accountable for their atrocities, you people are going to be held accountable for your crimes against us, I hope you realize that. (pp. 153-154).

The militia anti-government stance certainly reflects a feeling held by many mainstream Americans. The 1993 General Social Survey (GSS) shows that, when Americans were asked if they had confidence in Congress, only 7% said they had a great deal of confidence, while 51% said they had only some, and 42% said they had hardly any confidence in Congress. Anti-governmentalism, is a growing sentiment in America and it is used by the militia to shore up their own position. In its simplest form, their ideology seems to work as if any stance that opposes government in its current state is good, therefore, their own defiance of laws, regulations, court proceedings, etc., are legitimated because they are opposing the corruption of the standing government. They seem to believe that these oppositional forces will then, ostensibly lead to its downfall. At its downfall, the pieces of our real government, verbatim from the Constitution,

can be put back in place. Since there is such disaffection with our government in America, the militia's ardent appeal to fight back has drawn many supporters. Their anti-government stance aligns them with close to half of America in their sentiment and may, in part, explain the overall popularity of the movement. Garry Wills (1995) believes this disaffection is one piece, albeit a dramatic one, of a true crisis of legitimacy in American government.

Right or wrong, the armed patriots at least have arguments they can believe in wholeheartedly. They take the mood of post-cold war drift . . . of disillusionment and economic shakiness . . . and change it into a plan for doing something about one's gripes. . . . The authority of the government can no longer be assumed. It has to be justified from the ground up. (p. 54)

### The New World Order

The militia uprising has brought to the surface a strong image of alienation in our country. Evidence of how far that alienation has progressed is seen in their beliefs of a New World Order as set forth by Pat Robertson and other of the Christian Right. When speaking of the New World Order, militia members show how far removed they believe government is from the people.

We will be totally enslaved by the Federal Reserve Bank and the Rockefellers of the world who own us. Most people don't realize it yet but it will be a total socialist communist country by then. It will be the one world government because the government will say, here's your food ration for the week . . . here's your housing allotment and everything else goes to them. You'll just be paid to exist and you'll be their little slave to manufacture products for them or do whatever service they want you to do for them. That's the way it's going to turn out if it keeps going the way it's going now, if we don't stop it.

As indicated, the impending doom of the New World Order has been promoted widely by many right-wing Christians, and by organizations like the John Birch Society. The targets of much of the conspiracy rhetoric are the suspicious seeming, far removed entities established by our government: The Tri-Lateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Bildeberger Association. These far reaching, far flung, enigmatic entities, according to militia members and other, more prominent right-wingers, are, behind the scenes, the organizing principle for a one world, ultimately communist regime. And the United Nations is seen as front for the whole operation. James McManus (1994), the President of the John Birch Society, in his book, The Insiders: Architects of the New World Order, makes similar claims that

the Council on Foreign Relations was conceived by a Marxist . . . for the purpose of creating a one-world government by destroying the freedom and independence of all nations, especially including our own. Its chairman of the board is David Rockefeller. And its members have immense control over our government and much of American life. . . . The real goal of our government leaders is to make the United States into a carbon copy of a communist state, and then to merge all nations into a one world system run by a powerful few. (p. 94)

### Gun Power

The New World Order mind set that has militia members believing there are concentration camps strategically placed across the U.S., provides them with ample justification in their fierce protection of Second Amendment rights. They back this up with memories and words from the American history they learned in school. Patrick

Henry, as quoted in the Militia Brochure (undated), said,

guard with jealous attention the public liberty. Suspect everyone who approaches that jewel. Unfortunately, nothing will preserve it but downright force. Whenever you give up that force, you are ruined. . . . The great object is that every man be armed. . . . Every one who is able may have a gun.

It is the New World Order scenario, along with memories of aggrandized American history, and fatalistic, good vs. evil interpretations of present day events like Ruby Ridge and Waco, that led one female militia member to conclude, "We're in it. We're under the U.N. right now. Let's hope that we don't have to use our Second Amendment rights, but I guess we are preparing ourselves that that's the only choice we have."

All of this sentiment does ring, as Garry Wills (1995) said, of some strange, post-cold war hangover. Americans have existed so long under the cloud of war that it is, for some, the only known way to direct energy, fighting back through the us vs. them adrenalin rush of protecting the Mother country. This hangover can be seen in the militia literature as they quote Hitler, "1935 will go down in history! For the first time, a civilized nation has full gun registration!" The point here, of course, is that gun registration in Germany was the first major step in gaining control of Germany's populace.

### Religion

Militia members feel that this country became great primarily because it was founded upon principals brought forth in the Consti-

tution and the Bible. For the majority of militia members the very fact that the founders of this country were Christians is enough reason to give primacy to Christianity over other religions in this country. My interviews indicate that there is a strong belief amongst members that the Bible is truly the word of God. They often use it in a very literal sense when they feel their political positions need some underlying legitimacy. When discussing abortion, one woman told me matter-of-factly: "Abortion is just wrong. It's harder when you're talking about rape, but I'd still have to say it's wrong. It goes against God."

In another interesting discussion about racial issues, I asked this same young woman how she would feel if her son were to become engaged to a black woman. She struggled with this issue for quite some time, but in the last stance, deferred her mixed feelings to the documentary authority of the Bible: "Well, I'd have to say that if you look at the Bible, I think it says something about not mixing races or something like that. I'm not sure but I guess I would have to think about that."

Questions about gay lifestyles and equal rights for gays got much the same type of response. These answers reflect the way in which militia members utilize the documentary authority of the Bible to clear up complex cultural issues, such as race and sexual preference, by deferring to what they consider a higher authority. This tendency helps them delineate what is right and what is wrong in the world. It is, in essence, a process of making sense of the world.

Militia ideology, then, pulls much from the historical record, mixed with basic religious tenets, both of which the majority of Americans utilize in some capacity. Militia members, however, not only use it to make sense of the world, but also to critique the world.

### What is the American Dream?

The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one--if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you. (Hochschild, 1993, p. 18)

### Conceptualizing the American Dream Ideology

Hochschild (1993) identifies four tenets that underlie the American Dream ideology. She points out that the meaning of the American Dream under which Americans labor, has the power of both inspiring great acts and creating deep despair. She defines the American dream, much as Clinton does above: Everyone, all Americans, regardless of their ascribed status, can pursue success through behaviors under their own control, and have a reasonable expectation of attaining that success. There is, I believe, an irresolute and contradictory nature in the meanings and symbols brought forth by this powerful ideology. For those groups who feel the strain, or "dialectical tension" (Lengermann & Neibrugge, 1996, p. 343), of these contradictions in everyday life, there is a need to react. I believe it is this contradictory force that propels groups like the militia to form. As a form of action and reaction to the contradic-



tions between ideology and actuality, in the hope of resolution, militia members lash out in the public arena. One organic farmer told me:

. . . you know we were being the underdogs all the time and not being able to step out of that rut. You want to know: Why is this happening? And so we come to the conclusion that maybe its not just us, maybe there's something out there keeping us back and so I wanted to find out more about what our government's up to. We got into reading literature and finding the facts about how our government is basically holding American citizens back by instilling, I don't know, would you say the correct term is fear, into the people?

They envision a government that is the evil puppet master, pulling all of the strings to create a world in which the attainment of that Dream is no longer available to them. This process, as this militia member illustrates, is seen as an alteration of world proportions and it is known as the New World Order:

You look at most of the world, its either socialist or communist. The U.S. is still a republic where we all can vote. . . . And its just at a point right now where the government is really pushing to get weapons, the guns, out of civilians hands. Why, you ask? Its because by the year 2000 the U.S. Was supposed to have entered that New World Order, the one world government where our Constitution will be basically put aside, under UN control.

### Regulating Success in America

The first component identified by Hochschild (1995) is that everyone can have a dream and likewise can pursue it or that everyone, all Americans, can pursue success. This raises questions about the nature and meaning of success. What, exactly, is success? Obvious answers have to do with attainment of high income and prestigious jobs. There are other recognized forms of success, such as

high achievement in the arts or theater, or any other arena where performance connects with prestigious cultural forms. Success can also mean outperforming the success of one's parents or friends. As Hochschild points out, these definitions of success, well recognized and encouraged in all aspects of American society, are built upon the underlying assumption that "my success implies failure" (p. 17).

How does any of this relate to the militia? How have they fared on the success ladder? Not very well if you look at their economic status and the jobs that they hold. Certainly when one envisions a militia member it is not to envision a concert pianist or the CEO of a large company. One interviewee defined their membership in this way.

As far as the militia is concerned, the type of individuals that belong or join it are your middle class, lower middle class people. . . . They're blue collar workers, or they're self-employed in one aspect or another but they see what's happening.

How then does a social group whose members were raised to believe in this success ethic, but who can claim only marginal success, respond? Within the context of their own ideology, militia members rebel against the disingenuous promises of success put forth by a national ideology that they too, have internalized. A self-employed, independent farmer said,

we will never be able to get ahead with the way our government is being ran today. I mean, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Right now the government's working on two classes: Rich and poor, while the middle class is gradually being weeded out through taxation and whatever other levies they can put on us.

Hochschild (1995) further points out that, with the success

ideology, if one defines it absolutely, accepting a wide array of indicators of success, then America is the land of plenty. If one is to define it narrowly, with definitions of success severely limited, something to be competed for, America looks harrowingly small with only a few who are in a position to grab success.

Militia members have the same basic vision of life within the American Dream as do other Americans. One female said that the American Dream meant to her: "Being happy, having your house and your family and career and being able to take care of yourself, I guess." Her husband, also a militia member, similarly described the American Dream as: "Having the freedom to be able to pay your bills and be able to live halfway comfortably without the government interfering in your life."

This is not remarkably different from how most Americans might describe their vision of the American Dream. Militia members are different, however, in two senses. First, they seem acutely aware of the narrowness of current definitions of success. It is, in part, this lack of alternative definitions of recognized success that has them feeling restricted in their opportunities to obtain their own dream. They feel blocked from it. They feel the tension of having to contend with definitions of success that come out of an authorization process that occurred outside of their own power structure (Smith, 1985). Current definitions of success do not fit with their lives or their livelihoods.

Second, their recognition of blockage is a feeling that sets

them apart from what, according to Hochschild, is the sentiment of a majority of Americans. Hochschild's research shows that most Americans believe that they: "Have a good chance of improving our standard of living" (Hochschild, 1995, p. 21). Militia members voice much more skepticism about their prospects. Their ideology addresses this blockage and enables them to articulate their own life situation. Since militia membership is made up of predominately low or middle class blue collar workers, farmers and independent shop owners, the strain of global economic reform may have hit them sooner than other factions of American society. Some have lost their jobs to corporate downsizing, others indicate that government regulations have hounded them out of businesses. As one member, an independent business consultant, who used to work for a major U.S. corporation, told me:

The GATT Agreement took away the businessman's sovereignty. Also the patent office. Before, when I was getting one (a patent), I knew I had one, two, three years possibly with a patent pending. That gave me an edge in business with a product. With that patent pending, knowing that no one else knew what the hell I was doing, that kept the large companies at bay. I could go out and market my product and get a little bit of hedge with the idea that I was pretty sure that this thing was going to go through. . . . Now, the patent office, before you get a patent, they will make that public. That's why now 70% of the patents being applied for in this country, just in the last two years, is foreign corporations. Only 30% are Americans. Its our patent office, for gods sakes. . .now under the GATT agreement if I wanted to fight some pinhead from Korea or China or anyplace. . .that was stealing my patent rights in the US, I have to go through my state and the state petitions the government for a US attorney. Who the hell can afford that?

Thus, structural shifts have brought home the very real contradictions between their ideals of the American Dream and their exper-

iences within a capitalist system.

### Success for Everyone?/Us v.Them

This second component of the American Dream, that anyone who pursues the Dream may reasonably anticipate success, that success is possible for everyone, also contradicts the lived experiences of militia members and impacts their ideology. As previously indicated, ideologies are not concrete. Militia ideology is no exception. It is complex and contradictory. In this section, I deal with the militia view of who is us and who is them in the world, and, in doing so, hit those complexities and contradictions head on. As set forth below, militia members consistently classify the government as them: Those who use governmental judicial powers to legitimate what is wrong, immoral, loose, and unrestrictive, (i.e., gay rights, abortion, etc), yet, on the other hand, they also critique the government for regulatory mania and what they see as infringement upon their personal, God-given rights.

In one sense then, when the militia members refer to the us vs. them, they are categorizing themselves as a part of the public masses, whereby implying that we are all in this together(including gays, liberals, and other American citizens, i.e., the middle, lower-middle class) against the them which is government. Yet, in another sense they see themselves as separate from certain un-American factions of society, the them which consists of the gays, humanists, etc.

Hochschild (1995) reminds us that the plethora of cultural messages encouraging Americans to "go for it" imply that we are in the land of plenty and that "success" is out there waiting for us (p. 21). Simply by virtue of being born and/or raised in America, we all believe (some more, some less) in the American Dream. But what happens to those who are cut off from it, or perceive that they are cut off from it? The answer for the militia seems to be to determine what or who has caused this situation and then to fight against that enemy with all their might. For the militia, that enemy clearly is our own government. As indicated above, over the course of my many hours of interviews, I realized that most militia members feel cut off from the American Dream in some acute way and this feeling may be somewhat different from that of other Americans. This feeling fuels much of the energy behind their ideology. They lash out, looking for answers and reasons for why and how they have failed. In a word, they go external. And, as explained above, they find restrictive laws and regulations to be primary among their reasons. At the same time, however, they focus on what they see as unfair enabling laws and regulations, such as Affirmative Action, as part of the problem. If success is a limited arena, then in order to increase their own chances at obtaining it, there must be a way to limit the people who can be acceptably defined as successful.

In part, militia members utilize the ideological foundations of the Bible and Christianity to legitimate narrowing the field of those who are allowed full rights, and thereby the strongest chances

at success. Scapegoating, or drawing generalizing parameters under the guise of moral concern, is a common tactic in America and it is often present in the sense-making processes of militia members. In a conversation I had with one militia member about equal rights for gays, he told me that "they don't want equal rights. They're after more than equal rights. They want to be recognized that their lifestyle is normal, it's not normal. It's abnormal."

This kind of judgmental reasoning should be of no surprise if the primary ethic of us vs. them is kept in mind. Certainly their adherence to the Bible as the word of God justifies this type of thinking. Railing against the tension and frustration of their own blocked opportunity, militia members grab onto legitimated shared knowledge about normalcy and rights. They then utilize it in the same way it is used against them, as an exclusionary authorization process that eliminates their brand of success. Elizabeth Long (1985), in The American Dream and the Popular Novel, notes how these kinds of paradoxical relationships are created within a capitalist system.

Widespread affluence, and the very conditions that permitted its attainment, increasingly set the entrepreneurial ideal at odds with the realities of aspiration, achievement and the experience of a successful life. Structural trends toward economic concentration, bureaucratization. . . . All challenged older values of entrepreneurial independence, thrift and self-discipline, and cast doubt on the old equation between material and social advance. (p. 1)

The us vs. them is part of the uncritically absorbed ideology; it is an aspect of the contradictory consciousness within a hegemonic culture. Within the Euro-American tradition, there is a longstanding

military mentality that sees everything as having two sides pitted against each other. This is what drives militia members to create life threatening, right vs. wrong scenarios in everyday life. Every time an event like Ruby Ridge or Waco occurs in this country, in the minds of militia members, it is more evidence that the us (public masses) must always be on guard against the them (corrupt government-New World Order). As one militia member artfully described, if we are to succeed, we must beat the them.

If you allow that to happen to every individual in your community without taking any kind of action, what's going to happen? Its like the bully in high school . . . . If somebody was being picked on and didn't fight back that bully kept harassing him until hell froze over. . . . But if that individual took and fought back, if nothing else, stung him, hurt him a little bit--he wasn't picked on no more was he? I'm sure he mighta had to take a bruise or two to prove your point but the bully left you alone after that. The same way with our government. They are like little kids up there. The populous is the parent. They're pushing, pushing, pushing, to see how far the public will go.

### Playing by the Rules

The third tenet, inherent in the earlier Clinton quote above, is that the realization of your dream is under your control. There is an implication that solely through your own behaviors and actions, i.e., if you work hard and play by the rules, you will be rewarded with the realization of your dream. If this is true, and most Americans believe that it is--including militia members--then it becomes much clearer how they have come to the point in which they grab their guns and their constitutional rights and start pointing the mechanism of under my control in the opposite direction. I got the feel-



ing when talking with militia members, that somehow, if they could just find a way to control the rampant corruption in our culture that would also give them control over the quality of theirs and their children's lives--something they don't currently feel they have. In other words, they would have cleared the blocks to their dream. To some extent, the American Dream provides for this proprietary feeling. Militia members, too, have been educated to believe that, as Bill Clinton says, if you work hard, or as militia members say, if you "pick yourself up by your bootstraps and take responsibility," then you can realize your dream. They have lived their lives with expectations borne from this dream, have followed the rules to obtain that dream, but the dream is nowhere in sight because, they say, big government is blocking their view of it.

#### Success Equals Virtue

The final tenet which states that success is, in some way, paired with virtue' helps explain why Americans are so caught up in the pursuit in the first place. It is the idea that somehow if you are a successful person, you are in some way a better person and if you fail, you were in some way unworthy of that success anyway, i.e., there must be something wrong with you. Like their forefather, Benjamin Franklin, militia members believe that apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous. Rogers, (1986) quotes Benjamin Franklin as he describes the virtue of being virtuous.

If we were as industrious to become good as to make ourselves great, we should become really great by being good, and the number of valuable men would be much increased; but it is a grand mistake to think of being great without goodness; and I pronounce it as certain, that there was never yet a truly great man that was not at the same time truly virtuous. (p. 23)

This means, according to the Franklin tradition, that is only one kind of real success: Good success. This aids militia members in their differentiations between evil and good, which brings us full circle to the us vs. them mentality, a truly American tradition. Militias ultimately equate evil with communism, and good with true American nationalism. Therefore, they feel justified (read: Virtuous) in all their pursuits--just as their forefathers likely did. Because there is no room for failure in the American Dream, this belief aids in the set-up of a competitive/military us vs. them world view. The idea that there is no place for failure (which encourages side taking), is an ideology that cuts across race, class and gender, albeit in different ways.

The extent to which this mentality can be played out was evidenced in the recent testimony of Michael Fortier in the Oklahoma City Bombing trial where he elaborated on McVeigh's belief that he was justified in killing innocent people in the Federal Building because they were part of the evil empire and therefore enemy enough to sacrifice. In his book, This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy, Sociologist James Aho (1994), captures the paradox involved in the prototypical thinking process of the world as black and white, good and evil.

The subject of violence becomes challenging ethically and intellectually when I feel justified in acting violently. But I sense that my violation of you is vindicated when I grasp profoundly my own victimization: When I not only see you as my enemy but viscerally feel it. . . . My violation of you grows from my yearning to rectify the wrong I sense that you have done me. Violence emerges from my quest for good and my experience of you as the opponent of good. (p. 11)

As previously indicated, the frustration created out of a multitude of dashed expectations fuels the anger most militia members express toward America's body politic. They see our government as the monolithic purveyor of the capitalist ills that have impacted their lives and, I think it is important to recognize that this seemingly radical expression of frustration is more realistically the long overdue scream of a collective of Americans giving voice to the recognition that decades of adhering to the American Dream ideals of success and competition and going for it contradict painfully with reality.

This kind of frustration is also fanned by the fact that militia members seem to have strongly internalized the tenets of the American Dream. They believe wholeheartedly in it and, because of the inherent contradictions that come out of this kind of ideology, militia members are in the difficult position of having to justify why their dream has not been realized. It is the thoroughly ingrained belief that working hard and playing by the rules, or picking oneself up by the bootstraps, as militia members like to put it, are the behaviors necessary to gain access to your dream. One of the commanders in the militia, when comparing what he sees as the dependency of welfare recipient with his own solutions to economic

loss, indicated how deeply this belief is embedded in the American psyche when he said:

Now I've had hardships financially. I've made money and lost it, but I blame myself for that and I took responsibility for it. Did I run and cry to somebody? No, I just picked up my pants and my boots and started over again, kicked myself in the butt.

There is no structural consideration, if you don't follow the rules, you should be held accountable, especially in the case of welfare mothers and homosexuals. But it is at this point where one of the irresolvable contradictions is revealed. If militia members have played by the rules, been God fearing, hard working citizens, why have they been cut off from the dream? What separates them from the welfare mothers and homosexuals they have condemned? It is here where their ideology must go to work, attempting to justify and legitimate their own position in society while simultaneously weakening those that they wish to separate themselves from. According to the assumption that success is tied to virtue, and that it is ones own responsibility to create that success, militia members must now find a laudable reason that theirs has not come true. Again, the only enemy big enough and strong enough to attack on that front is the American government and, to a lesser extent, its attendant scape-goats which vary between feminists, multiculturalists, humanists and homosexuals.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

#### Violence - An American Tradition

Catherine McNicol Stock (1996), in her book: Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain, supports the connection militia members make in identifying themselves with their forefathers. Stock shows us that militias have grown very much out of the violent soil of our own American heritage and that their purported new radical extremism is not new at all, just another violent chapter in American history. One of Stock's major points, in fact, is that however horrifying and unsettling the events surrounding the Oklahoma City bombing, we should not be so incredulous. Violent extremism, after all, is a part of our heritage.

And while most Americans, as well as most school textbooks, whitewash the facts, the reality is that American history, whether when fighting for democratic rights and left ideology, or vigilantism and right ideology, was and is: (a) never clear cut; and, (b) bloody and deadly. History reminds us that in the minds of revolutionaries and ordinary citizens alike, matters of country have always been worth dying for. This sentiment once considered patriotic, is today often labeled as extremist. Militia members do not miss the irony in this, as this man indicates with his observations on how definitions change over time.

How far do you take the term militia? That's about like saying, a hundred years ago, the word patriot. Wow, you're a patriot, pleased to meet ya, can I do anything for ya. . . . You're a patriot because you stood up for your rights, your country, your state, your fellow man. You believe in the Ten Commandments, you did what was right for yours and others. Now you mention the term patriot today. Oh wow, you're one of them? You must be a radical; you're one of those right wing supremacists? You see how things get twisted? Look in Webster's Dictionary, 1st or 2nd edition and then come back and look at the 5th or 6th edition; you take the same words from either and see how the definitions have change. Same way with society.

Stock (1996) reminds us that the knee-jerk response to militia-type violence, especially the collective horror felt by Americans after the Oklahoma City bombing, incorrectly assumes that this type of activity is somehow new and, further, indicative of a different level of extreme, radical activity in this country. Sadly, this is not the case. What is new is the technology that allows us to hear about such activity as it occurs in all parts of the country, when it occurs. What is new is a medium of communication which molds and biases the event as it is reported. What is not new is the long tradition of consistent and similar activity throughout American history. When Stock describes activities surrounding the Peace Treaty in 1862, one cannot help but recognize the familiarity.

Rural violence against African Americans began in much the same way that rural violence against Native Americans did: With European cultural stereotypes about people with dark complexions and the fears that turn arrogance and greed into murderous rage. . . fear and resentment of the federal government, the struggle to maintain economic independence, a desire to control local affairs, an association of heterosexual manhood with sexual conquest, and a tradition of collective action all played a part in rural white men's determination to maintain racial superiority by whatever means necessary. (p. 121)

Although herself a historian, or possibly because of it, Stock (1996) recognizes the shortcomings involved in the rigidity of pigeonholing certain groups in specific categories. Categorization cuts off the possibility that ideologies belong on a continuum, with some believing more strongly, some less. By placing militias squarely in the right-wing extremist fringe category, we have lost an opportunity to consider certain areas of valid concern which they have voiced, such as loss of individual freedom and certain unalienable rights. Reality shows us daily that the dividing lines between right and left, good and evil, right and wrong, are most often nothing more than a leap of faith. Considering all the initial hype in the media as to whether the militia were really a right wing radical group, or a left wing radical group, Stock's words warrant remembering.

Were we to travel back in time to determine once and for all whether rural radicalism has been progressive or regressive, liberal or conservative, a force from the left or the right in American society, we would return as confused as ever. (p. 140)

Violence in our society is often created out of ideological contradictions, and we are a country built upon a foundation of contradictions. The American Dream ideology began with the founding fathers and has continued, full steam ahead, with capitalism and modernization as its most powerful fuel. A country that creates contradictions as large as the coexistence of a society devoted to personal liberty and a society that legalized slavery, begets reactions that are equally as large, like the Bacon Rebellion (Stock, 1996). A country which creates such paradoxical arrangements begets

equally paradoxical arrangements such as the growing militia movement of fatigue-clad, gun-laden white guys who glorify the use of violence in the name of freedom and individual rights. While we may disagree with their politics and their methods, Stock reminds us of the danger in creating false divisions. In an effort to ignore the ugly side of our past and our present, and as a way of distancing ourselves from "them", we are refusing to acknowledge the essential Americanize of groups like the militia. Whether they are coming from the far left or the far right on a given issue is of less consequence than the recognition that they are, as much as we would like to disregard it, upholding the traditions of their nation. Stock (1996), states

. . . at many times in the American past, the best and worst, the most forgiving and most vengeful, the most egalitarian and most authoritarian, the brightest and the darkest visions of American life were alive in the same men's souls, nurtured at the same dinner tables. . . not two sets of beliefs, then, but two expressions of the same beliefs and circumstances bound left and right together in an unwavering, synthetic. . . embrace. This interrelationship. . . should not be ignored. Historians and politicians who perpetuate a false division between the left and right. . . who marginalize the extremes of American politics. . . do so at their peril. (p. 148)

Contradiction is America's birthright, and violence it's ever-present companion.



## Appendix A

### Protocol Clearance Letters From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board



Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-3899  
616 387-8293

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## WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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Date: October 6, 1995

To: Pamela LaBelle

From: Richard Wright, Chair

Re: HSIIRB Project Number 95-01-01

The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board will consider your application for the approval of the research project entitled "Militia ideology: a sociological analysis" at its next meeting on October 18, 1995. The application will be considered under **expedited** review conditions.

Expedited reviews are initially considered by a subcommittee of the Board which makes a recommendation to the full Board regarding the approval of the application. While the subcommittee recommendation may be known prior to the full Board meeting, approval of the application cannot be made until the full Board has considered the recommendations. Immediately following the meeting of the full Board, you will receive information on the status of the application.

Thank you for the timely manner in which you made your submission.

xc: Gerald Markle, SOC

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board



Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-3899  
616 387-8293

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## WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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Date: October 20, 1995

To: Pamela LaBelle

From: Richard Wright, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 95-10-01

*Richard A. Wright*

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Militia ideology: a sociological analysis" has been approved, as modified, under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you must seek specific approval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 20, 1996

xc: Gerald Markle, SOC

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board



Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-3899

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## WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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Date: 27 January 1997

To: Gerald Markle, Principal Investigator  
Pamela LaBelle, Student Investigator

From: Richard Wright, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 95-10-01

This letter will serve as confirmation that an extension to your research project entitled "Militia Ideology: A Sociological Analysis" has been granted by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now continue to implement the research as described in the original application.

You must seek reapproval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the continued pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: 16 January 1998

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