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Rage on the Right

The Year in Hate and Extremism

By Mark Potok

The radical right caught fire last year, as broad-based populist anger at political, demographic and economic changes in America ignited an explosion of new extremist groups and activism across the nation.

Hate groups stayed at record levels — almost 1,000 — despite the total collapse of the second largest neo-Nazi group in America. Furious anti-immigrant vigilante groups soared by nearly 80%, adding some 136 new groups during 2009. And, most remarkably of all, so-called "Patriot" groups — militias and other organizations that see the federal government as part of a plot to impose "one-world government" on liberty-loving Americans — came roaring back after years out of the limelight.

The anger seething across the American political landscape — over racial changes in the population, soaring public debt and the terrible economy, the bailouts of bankers and other elites, and an array of initiatives by the relatively liberal Obama Administration that are seen as "socialist" or even "fascist" — goes beyond the radical right. The "tea parties" and similar groups that have sprung up in recent months cannot fairly be considered extremist groups, but they are shot through with rich veins of radical ideas, conspiracy theories and racism.

"We are in the midst of one of the most significant right-wing populist rebellions in United States history," Chip Berlet, a veteran analyst of the American radical right, wrote earlier this year. "We see around us a series of overlapping social and political movements populated by people [who are] angry, resentful, and full of anxiety. They are raging against the machinery of the federal bureaucracy and liberal government programs and policies including health care, reform of immigration and labor laws, abortion, and gay marriage."

Sixty-one percent of Americans believe the country is in decline, according to a recent NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll. Just a quarter think the government can be trusted. And the anti-tax tea party movement is viewed in much more positive terms than either the Democratic or Republican parties, the poll found.

The signs of growing radicalization are everywhere. Armed men have come to Obama speeches bearing signs suggesting that the "tree of liberty" needs to be "watered" with "the blood of tyrants." The Conservative Political Action Conference held this February was co-sponsored by groups like the John Birch Society, which believes President Eisenhower was a Communist agent, and Oath Keepers, a Patriot outfit formed last year that suggests, in thinly veiled language, that the government has secret plans to declare martial law and intern patriotic Americans in concentration camps. Politicians pandering to the antigovernment right in 37 states have introduced "Tenth Amendment Resolutions," based on the constitutional provision keeping all powers not explicitly given to the federal government with the states. And, at the "A Well Regulated Militia" website, a recent discussion of how to build "clandestine safe houses" to stay clear of the federal government included a conversation about how mass murderers like Timothy McVeigh and Olympics bomber Eric Rudolph were supposedly betrayed at such houses.

Doing the Numbers

The number of hate groups in America has been going up for years, rising 54% between 2000 and 2008 and driven largely by an angry backlash against non-white immigration and, starting in the last year of that period, the economic meltdown and the climb to power of an African American president.

According to the latest annual count by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), these groups rose again slightly in 2009 — from 926 in 2008 to 932 last year — despite the demise of a key neo-Nazi group. The

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American National Socialist Workers Party, which had 35 chapters in 28 states, imploded shortly after the October 2008 arrest of founder Bill White for making threats against his enemies.

At the same time, the number of what the SPLC designates as "nativist extremist" groups — organizations that go beyond mere advocacy of restrictive immigration policy to actually confront or harass suspected immigrants — jumped from 173 groups in 2008 to 309 last year. Virtually all of these vigilante groups have appeared since the spring of 2005.

But the most dramatic story by far has been with the antigovernment Patriots.

The militias and the larger Patriot movement first came to Americans' attention in the mid-1990s, when they appeared as an angry reaction to what was seen as a tyrannical government bent on crushing all dissent. Sparked most dramatically by the death of 76 Branch Davidians during a 1993 law enforcement siege in Waco, Texas, those who joined the militias also railed against the Democratic Clinton Administration and initiatives like gun control and environmental regulation. Although the Patriot movement included people formerly associated with racially based hate groups, it was above all animated by a view of the federal government as the primary enemy, along with a fondness for antigovernment conspiracy theories. By early this decade, the groups had largely disappeared from public view.

But last year, as noted in the SPLC's August report, "The Second Wave: Return of the Militias," a dramatic resurgence in the Patriot movement and its paramilitary wing, the militias, began. Now, the latest SPLC count finds that an astonishing 363 new Patriot groups appeared in 2009, with the totals going from 149 groups (including 42 militias) to 512 (127 of them militias) — a 244% jump.

That is cause for grave concern. Individuals associated with the Patriot movement during its 1990s heyday produced an enormous amount of violence, most dramatically the Oklahoma City bombing that left 168 people dead.

Already there are signs of similar violence emanating from the radical right. Since the installation of Barack Obama, right-wing extremists have murdered six law enforcement officers. Racist skinheads and others have been arrested in alleged plots to assassinate the nation's first black president. One man from Brockton, Mass. — who told police he had learned on white supremacist websites that a genocide was under way against whites — is charged with murdering two black people and planning to kill as many Jews as possible on the day after Obama's inauguration. Most recently, a rash of individuals with antigovernment, survivalist or racist views have been arrested in a series of bomb cases.

As the movement has exploded, so has the reach of its ideas, aided and abetted by commentators and politicians in the ostensible mainstream. While in the 1990s, the movement got good reviews from a few lawmakers and talk-radio hosts, some of its central ideas today are being plugged by people with far larger audiences like FOX News' Glenn Beck and U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn). Beck, for instance, re-popularized a key Patriot conspiracy theory — the charge that FEMA is secretly running concentration camps — before finally "debunking" it.

Last year also experienced levels of cross-pollination between different sectors of the radical right not seen in years. Nativist activists increasingly adopted the ideas of the Patriots; racist rants against Obama and others coursed through the Patriot movement; and conspiracy theories involving the government appeared in all kinds of right-wing venues. A good example is the upcoming Second Amendment March in Washington, D.C. The website promoting the march is topped by a picture of a colonial militiaman, and key supporters include Larry Pratt, a long-time militia enthusiast with connections to white supremacists, and Richard Mack, a conspiracy-mongering former sheriff associated with the Patriot group Oath Keepers.

What may be most noteworthy about the march, however, is its date — April 19. That is the date of the first shots fired at Lexington in the Revolutionary War. And it is also the anniversary of the fiery end of the government siege in Waco and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.