

Mistrust of government ripples across the nation

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An undercurrent of mistrust of government is bubbling to the surface in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing.

From grass-roots conservatives to armed militia members, the belief that the federal government and its endless host of bureaucrats are eroding the Constitution appears to be widespread.

While almost everyone who holds this view decries the carnage in Oklahoma City and believes the bombing was the work of deranged criminals, many are using the spotlight on the tragedy to illuminate their mounting frustration with the federal government.

"We simply will not subsist under the boot heel of tyranny," said Gary Marbut, president of the Montana Shooting Sports Association, who has launched an initiative to change the state constitution and make secession from the union an option.

In states across the nation, there is a loose confederation of people like Marbut who call themselves patriots and are tied together by the core belief that government is too intrusive.

Their concerns cover a wide spectrum, from the rational to the not-so-believable.

On the more rational side, they think the federal government has grown too powerful, that federal police agencies have turned on law-abiding citizens and that the Internal Revenue Service is an intrusive agency that routinely steals assets without due process of law.

Some are in the mining, ranching and timber industry, and believe government's administration of huge tracts of public lands is putting them out of business.

Others go further, asserting that there is no legal authority -- either in the Constitution or in federal law -- for the IRS to demand that annual tax returns be filed. They contend there is a United Nations plot to replace American money with a universal currency, part of a larger U.N. plot to take over the world.

They believe secret or "black" helicopters are spying on Americans, that the federal crime bill calls for prison camps for dissenters and that Russian troops are training in America.

And most say the federal assault on the Branch Davidian compound - - which was exactly two years before the Oklahoma bombing -- was a turning point for what they call the "patriot movement."

"We always thought it couldn't happen here," said Clayton Douglas, editor of the Free American Newspaper and a promoter of militias in New Mexico. "Then we turned on the television and saw our own government's version of Tiananmen Square."

Douglas' name appears on an Anti-Defamation League (ADL) list of armed and dangerous members of possible hate groups. He admits to being armed.

The ADL is one of the watchdog groups that tracks racism and hate activity throughout the United States. The Justice Department in recent days has been reluctant to provide detailed information about potential threat groups.

Of the ADL, Douglas said: "As far as I'm concerned, they are a foreign organization spying on American citizens."

Douglas compared current unrest to protests over the Vietnam War and added: "We expect that the same thing will happen now as happened then. Protest will bring about change."

Misplaced frustrations

Allegations that the patriot movement and the militias are simply the newest focus points for white racists and hate mongers persist.

The ADL estimates militias are active in 13 states, while militia leaders say more than 40.

Some of these groups have trained in wilderness survival and combat readiness. They see a confrontation with the government as inevitable, are secretive about their membership and say they operate in "four-man cells," with information given out only on a "need-to-know basis."

Others, including a fledgling group in San Diego run by Libertarian John Wallner, say they are simply informational groups that meet to discuss concerns about big government. Wallner had intended to disband the group because of the bad publicity he said militias were drawing. But he said his members objected.

More than a dozen militia leaders around the country have been profiled by the ADL, which says most of the people it investigated have past or present racist ties.

One, Randy Trochmann, a founding member of the Militia of Montana, fires back that the ADL specializes in innuendo and "guilt by association." Being in the patriot movement, he said, "is a lot like being in a religion. There are a lot of brands, and everyone associates with everyone else. You've got tax issues, public lands, gun control, people who don't want to get drivers licenses."

Peter Vance, a liberal San Diego defense lawyer, says he understands such frustration with government but believes it is misplaced.

"I know a lot of these tax protesters because, given where they're coming from, it's only a matter of time until they're my customers," Vance said.

"They all have the same MO (modus operandi). They are white, high school graduates who are the working poor and they can't figure out why their world is falling apart. Two generations ago, they would have had good jobs."

The numbers of tax evaders may provide a clue to the size of the patriot movement since its members often refuse to file tax returns. The IRS estimates there could be as many as 10 million Americans who fail to file income tax returns.

While militia members and tax evaders represent the most radical elements of those dissatisfied with the system, a

recent CNN and USA Today poll found that nearly four out of 10 Americans believe the federal government threatens their freedom.

Only one out of 10 has faith in the government, another poll found.

Nowhere are the disaffected more evident than in the rural West, where huge tracts are administered by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management -- and where some residents and local governments are in open revolt.

In Nye County, Nevada, the state's U.S. attorney is suing the Board of Commissioners over its unanimous vote to appropriate all public lands within county boundaries.

"I'm not a radical," says Cameron McRae, chairman of the Nye County board. "What we are saying is enough is enough. Federal bureaucrats here are running amok."

In Utah, Joseph Stumph is trying to enlist at least 38 states to adopt a measure he calls the "Ultimatum Resolution," which would dissolve the federal union unless certain conditions were met. No state has signed on yet, though he said 14 states have adopted a "10th Amendment Resolution" that re-asserts the concept of states' rights outlined in the Constitution.

In Catron County, N.M., a spate of lawsuits question who owns federal lands and whether federal agents have the authority to make local arrests. The U.S. Attorney's Office is also defending a forest ranger and an agent of the Bureau of Land Management who were placed under citizens' arrest recently by a rancher and charged in a county court with trespassing.

"A lot of people here are upset," said Robert Gorence, first assistant U.S. attorney in New Mexico. "Do they hate the government? Well, I guess they don't like the Forest Service much."

Fear and paranoia

The West's so-called "Sagebrush Rebellion" has resulted in a few skirmishes between locals and federal officials, but no bloodshed. That's no thanks to the feds, according to one writer at a small New Mexico newspaper.

"They talk about militias," said Gene Ballinger of the Hatch Courier in Catron County. "But they are the people with the guns and badges going around harassing the public."

"The problem is the Forest Service and the (Bureau of Land Management) are arming everybody and their brother and running around with guns, not trained properly, and they're creating fear and paranoia. Thank God our ranchers have not reacted."

In Nevada, however, there has been apparent reaction. U.S. Forest Service facilities were the targets of two bombs and a bomb threat in the weeks before the Oklahoma City federal building was demolished, killing scores of people, including at least 15 children.

The bombs in Nevada went off at night, blowing out the windows of the Carson City Forest Service office and destroying an outhouse in the Humboldt National Forest. No one was hurt. There are no suspects.

While more than two dozen people interviewed for this story said they did not condone violence of any kind, some privately made a distinction between destruction of property and destruction of life. They all said they were horrified by the human toll in Oklahoma City and that they believe those responsible should get the death penalty.

Most denied that anyone in the patriot movement could have done something so horrible, insisting instead that it must

have been somehow promoted by a clandestine government operative.

"Depend on yourself"

Among those who have advanced this theory are Bo Gritz, perhaps the godfather of the modern militias.

A well-decorated Green Beret colonel from the Vietnam War, Gritz has trained armies all over the world. Today, he trains armies in America, but not for the government.

In an advertisement for his SPIKE, or Specially Prepared Individuals for Key Events, paramilitary training classes, which he says have attracted about 3,000 people, he promises: "You will be prepared as Delta Force." Included are classes in counterterrorist driving skills, defense methods, live fire exercises, close-quarters combat and demolition.

"I'm teaching people to be self-sufficient," he said in a recent interview. "We're telling people, 'If you're in an earthquake or a mudslide or a riot, don't call 911. Depend on yourself.'"

Gritz is listed in the ADL literature as a man with possible racist ties who is building an armed community on 200 acres in Idaho's forests. He says nothing could be further from the truth.

He said anyone of any race or religion could live in his community on one condition:

"You agree to stand in defense of your neighbors in your constitutional rights. Would your neighbor defend you if (federal police) were breaking down your door in the middle of the night?"

Pre-emptive strike

While Gritz said he has called the Oklahoma bombing heinous and America's greatest crime, he also said the bomb was a "a masterpiece" of engineering that Timothy McVeigh, the chief suspect in the blast, would be incapable of making.

Jordan Maxwell, a Burbank man who calls himself a "new world historian," agreed.

"I would not be a bit surprised if the government behind our government, the power structure behind America, . . . some agency within the CIA or NSA (National Security Agency) set that bomb off themselves," he said.

It would be, he said "a pre-emptive strike against the so-called right-wing militia or anyone else who's disturbed with the government. Then immediately (you) have a hue and cry for either gun control or (the) need to do something about these militias and so-called patriots who have guns."

According to San Diego Deputy U.S. Attorney Larry Burns, "Any idiot who buys into that is simply outlandish."

But he and his boss, San Diego U.S. Attorney Alan Bersin, agreed that the Oklahoma bombing could contribute to a move in Congress to give federal law enforcement agencies like the FBI expanded powers to ferret out conspiracies against the government.

Bersin supports greater FBI authority but added that he also applauds the "individualist, 'don't tread on me,' spirit" common in many rural areas where militias and radical conservatives have the largest followings.

"Americans have always been skeptical about government," he said.

While Maxwell, Gritz and others who call themselves patriots believe there will now be a backlash against all conservatives, San Diego civil libertarian Michael Crowley said all of America will probably pay with an erosion of civil rights.

At the same time, Crowley, a former journalist and a liberal, said he recognizes the paranoia that seems widespread these days in America. As a defense lawyer who often crosses swords with federal agents in court, he said, "I feel it myself."

"Lately," Crowley added, "I've been understanding why these right wingers think they need to have their assault rifles -- and it scares me."

Credit: Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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