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LAW AND ORDER

## How Militias Became the Private Police for White Supremacists

In the Trump era, armed antigovernment groups have found common cause with Nazis, KKK and other white nationalists.

By **CASEY MICHEL** | August 17, 2017

**T**he bloody weekend in Charlottesville that began with several hundred chanting white supremacists on a torch-lit march will long be remembered for the searing image of a growling muscle car plowing through a defenseless crowd of counterprotesters.

But there was another moment from the weekend that revealed a potentially more consequential truth about the long-term impact of the “Unite the Right” rally.

Not long after James Fields—a white nationalist who had posted an image of Donald Trump as

king on his Facebook account—allegedly killed Heather Heyer with his Dodge Challenger, protesters linked arms along one of Charlottesville’s sidewalks. Three feet away, a line of men stood in camo pants and tactical vests, all carrying long rifles. The men were not police, whose job was to prevent violent confrontations but who largely stood to the side during the melee. They were militiamen, who had gathered in Charlottesville to act, as one expert on anti-government extremism said, as a “third force”—as a peacekeeping buffer, in theory, between far-right agitators and their opponents.

Despite the militias’ public statements of neutrality, evidence has mounted over the past six months that the militias have gravitated decisively toward one side in the street battles that have played out recently in cities across the country. Indeed, during these first months of Trump’s presidency, these loose-knit organizations making up America’s militia movement are losing their anti-government ideological purity as they grow increasingly close with a segment of the right wing from which many in the recent past had generally kept their distance. Their presence as a private security force for an increasingly public coalition of white nationalist factions—Ku Klux Klan followers, neo-Nazis and "alt-right" supporters—has transformed a movement that has already demonstrated a willingness to threaten violence.

While there is evidence that some of the militia members stepped into the breach to try to keep the peace on Saturday, many critics contend their presence exacerbated tensions and prevented the restoration of order. When asked why police didn’t do more to stop the bloodshed, Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe pointed to the riflemen strolling the streets. “It’s easy to criticize, but I can tell you this: 80 percent of the people here had semiautomatic weapons,” the governor said. “You saw the militia walking down the street. You would have thought they were an army ... [The militia members] had better equipment than our state police had.”

How these two powerful strands of the extreme right wing linked themselves in the first months of the Trump administration explains the durability of his support—and also the potential for further violent conflict across the country.

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**For America’s militias**, headlined most prominently by the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, life was, in a certain sense, easier during the Obama years. For these men—and they’re nearly entirely men, and largely white—the villains remained as clear, as two-dimensional, as ever. “Their whole focus has been on conspiracy-oriented animus toward the federal government—the belief that the federal government was in league with a shadowy conspiracy known as the ‘New World Order,’ which had already taken over the rest of the world, that was going to strip Americans of their rights and their freedoms,” Mark Pitcavage, a researcher on anti-government extremism with

the Anti-Defamation League, told POLITICO Magazine.

And the numbers showed. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, anti-government militia membership, paralleling hate groups more broadly, ballooned during the Obama years, swelling from 42 monitored groups in 2008 to over 300 by 2011. While the numbers dropped by a few dozen during Obama's second term, the militias achieved one of their biggest successes in 2014 when they forced federal employees at gunpoint to evacuate the Bundy Ranch. Militias reprised that defiant stance two years later, helping hold federal officials at bay for over 40 days after holing up in a birding sanctuary in southeastern Oregon.

But then, last November, an important structural support for the militias' New World Order conspiracy theories (remember the Jade Helm military exercise in 2015?) disappeared. Trump was elected. And suddenly, the man in the White House—the building that had for so long symbolized the totalitarian forces threatening to oppress Americans—was a man who shared the militias distaste for the deep state and who had campaigned to demolish Washington from the inside. “You have all this confusion” after the election, said J.J. MacNab, who covers anti-government extremism with *Forbes*. “And confusion is actually bad, because these are movements that move forward based on who they hate. And if you can't decide who you hate, if you're actually going out there because you like something rather than hate something, that tears the movement apart.” Added Pitcavage, “The election of Donald Trump throws [the militias' traditional dynamic] into disarray.”

As the militias cast about for another common foe to rally around, a handful of options presented themselves. Pivoting off of Trump's campaign, certain militia-members eyed nonwhite immigrants, trawling the U.S.-Mexico border for illegal migrants. Others began building links with some of the foremost anti-Muslim groups across the country. Others yet held out hope for a resurgence of Black Lives Matter; said Pitcavage, militia members are “extremely susceptible to becoming racially inflamed, and they tend to have an outsized and extraordinarily hostile reaction to what they would perceive as aggressiveness on the part of African-Americans.” Case in point: Look at the “security” the all-white Oath Keepers—who said they were trying to protect an employee from conspiracy site InfoWars—provided in Ferguson. Yet BLM has remained remarkably quiet over the past few months.

But as the Trump administration kicked off, a new force thrust itself into the political discourse, and began attracting more and more attention from America's militias. Antifa, a shortening of *antifascist*, had existed for decades in Europe and to a lesser extent the U.S., but it burst forth as Trump entered the White House, pledging to oppose what the movement saw as Trump's cozy relationship with right-wing groups. In cities like Portland and Berkeley, the antifa quickly established that they were willing to use violence if necessary to deny far-right voices a public

platform, First Amendment rights be damned. And with that, America's militias had found their new common enemy.

"Most people in the militia movement were never even aware of the antifa, but once [antifa] started targeting Trump and Trump events, the militia movement started reacting to the antifa, and very negatively, and in a very characteristically militia way," Pitcavage said. "The anti-government extremists are now enraged at the antifa because [antifa] had gone after Trump and Trump supporters."

Unsurprisingly, militia members layered their penchant for conspiracy on their new antagonists. "Antifa solved all [the militias'] problems for them," Pitcavage added. "And it wasn't just the antifa as the antifa ... I started seeing them start building them into much more than they actually were. There were constant references to [antifa] being terrorists, even constant allegations that they were being trained at terrorist training camps in the Middles East, in Syria." Some militia members claimed antifa, in a page from the international far-right playbook, were even cashing checks from George Soros.

But members of America's militia movement weren't the only ones staring down the antifa, or trading punches with them at protests. White nationalists, like the KKK and Nazi groups who converged on Charlottesville, targeted the antifa too. For militia-members uncomfortable with overt white supremacists, however, the "alt-lite"—people like Mike Cernovich and Jack Posobiec who Trump will occasionally retweet—proved more comfortable fellow travelers.

To be sure, not all militia-members are sympathetic to white nationalist ideology. In June, at a protest in Houston, a man affiliated with the Oath Keepers choked out a white nationalist on camera. Likewise, certain members of the Three Percenters (the name comes from the percentage of the American population they believe fought the British) remain as opposed to the government—even one headed by Trump—as ever, as a recent, failed bomb plot in Oklahoma City illustrated. But more and more, militias were cropping up at events propping up the embattled president, with the roster of speakers as conspiratorial as they were nationalist. Many of these events were organized around themes of "free speech"—as if those pushing political correctness were somehow a larger threat to free speech than a president targeting the country's free press. Members of the militias would often claim they were simply there to preserve order, Pitcavage summed up, saying they were only "maintaining order and security." The militias at these events "feel they can have their cake and eat it too," he said.

Which is why, on Saturday, dozens of militia-members from across the country had few qualms about rolling into Charlottesville, and forming ranks. Christian Yingling, head of the Pennsylvania Light Foot Militia, may have told the *Washington Post* that both sides—both the white nationalists

and those opposing—were “jackasses.” But only one of those sides has grabbed the attention, and sympathies, of the broader militia movement. Only one of those contingents enjoys the affinity of the men hauling semiautomatic rifles, sufficient to be mistaken for National Guard members—sufficient, if the Virginia governor is to be believed, to dissuade police from intervening in a riot.

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**With the country’s** most prominent politicians—aside from a defiant Donald Trump—condemning unequivocally the retrograde racism on display over the weekend, a question lingers as to whether militia-members may distance themselves from any actors, any organizations, affiliated with the white nationalists still buoying the president. In the fallout from Charlottesville, a statement from a Three Percenters group issued a “stand down order” for members. While the Three Percenters remain a diffuse, bottom-up organization, the statement was notable for its clarion opposition to the violence, and white nationalism, rattling Charlottesville: “While we support and defend everyone’s right to free speech, we will not align ourselves with any type of racist group.”

Instead of remaining alongside other far-right contingents, America’s militias may make an oblique turn into, of all things, a kind of semi-official government contractor. Already, we’ve seen Portland’s local GOP party push Oath Keepers as private security for events—a result of the threats, Multnomah County Republican Party chief James Buchal has said, emanating from the anarchist, antifa elements targeting the city. A legislative aide to a Republican state representative in Oregon recently served jail time for loaning a gun to a member of the Three Percenters—a group to which the aide, Angela Roman, also belonged. Perhaps most concerning, at least one militia member helped police outright arrest protesters in Portland in early June. The militiaman later said he was working at the behest of the Department of Homeland Security.

But even if local Republican chapters welcome militias into the fold, white nationalists may no longer feel the need for the protection the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters once claimed to provide. After all, James Fields, the alleged domestic terrorist, marched in Charlottesville with a relatively new organization called Vanguard America. With chants of “blood and soil,” Vanguard America doesn’t mask its neo-Nazi inclinations. As an article in *The Guardian* related, Vanguard America demands the creation of an all-white ethno-state. And as the ADL added, the group “maintains that America ‘is to be a nation exclusively for the White American peoples who out of the barren hills, empty plains, and vast mountains forged the most powerful nation to ever have existed.’”

It remains to be seen what will come from Charlottesville, or whether the militias will distance themselves from the anti-antifa groups with whom they’ve found common cause. But, only seven months into the Trump administration, America’s militias appear closer than ever to the halls and

structures of power they'd long abjured: an unofficial, paramilitary force growing increasingly close to the president's party. And while they may be wary of white nationalist associations in the wake of Saturday's domestic terrorist attack, it may not take much to bring the militias back, shoulder to shoulder, with the nationalists and conspiracists backing the president—especially if America's antifa tries to extract a physical price from the white nationalists in the wake of Heyer's death. "It's gotten serious—it's no longer a barroom brawl," said MacNab of *Forbes*. Charlottesville "is a game-changer. ... My biggest fear right now is that someone will avenge [Heyer's] death. And if that happens, it won't be pretty."