



What to Do
When the Militia
Comes to Town

Ken Toole



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The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over, combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

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Foreword

Ten days before the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, the American Jewish Committee released a report entitled *Militias: A Growing Danger*. The paper warned about the fast growth of armed militias around the country, and their venomous antigovernment ideology. A memo accompanying the text cautioned that people associated with militia groups might attack government officials on April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the fiery end of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, an event that holds icon status in the militias' violent and antigovernment ideology.

In the aftermath of the bombing—and the indictment of two militia-linked men—Americans no longer need reports to tell them that there are people who call themselves “patriots” but would attack government officials. What they do need, however, is practical advice about what to do if they live in a community where a militia group is active.

At least forty states have militia groups. Between 10,000 and 40,000 Americans belong to these private armies. Imagine what it must be like having one in your community. Militia members are politically active, threatening public officials, talking about the need to “war” with their enemies. How comfortable would you be signing a letter to the editor, showing up at a community meeting, running for office?

The main impact of the militia movement has been its thuggish intimidation of grass-roots democracy in small communities across America. In some counties the fear created by the militia is akin to that produced in the South by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s. Public officials and private citizens actually have to weigh whether speaking their minds will result in an armed response from the local private armies. That is, of course, the state of political discourse the

militias desire—a matter of great concern to the American Jewish Committee and other groups working for the preservation of democracy.

Because this threat continues to grow in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, the American Jewish Committee commissioned Ken Toole to write this hands-on guide to countering militias on the local level. Ken Toole is director of program for the Montana Human Rights Network, a group dedicated to combating hate and to promoting civil rights. Montana had the first active militia group—the Militia of Montana, which formed in February 1994. The Montana Human Rights Network, under Ken's leadership, helped the state organize against this latest hate group. What Ken and his colleagues put into practice in Montana is reformed into general principles here, and will enable people of goodwill in any part of America to combat armed groups and their hateful political agendas.

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Policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels are struggling to identify statutory tools to address the illegal activities of radical groups that promote violence as a means to change public policy. These efforts are important, but they do not resolve the underlying problem.

Ultimately, the solution does not rest in the law or with law-enforcement agencies. The solution rests with people. Until membership in a militia or similar extremist group is looked upon as something that is, at its root, antidemocratic, unpatriotic, and unpopular, communities will be vulnerable to the activities of these groups. The goal should be to inform the public and to call into question the premises that underlie extremist movements—in the process, initiating meaningful community discussion of pluralism, tolerance, and the values necessary to the conduct of public business in a free society.

This publication is intended to be a tool for individuals working at the local level to confront organizations that promote bigotry and intolerance. While the analytical focus at the beginning is on the militia movement, the community-organizing strategies later presented are useful in building a long-term community effort to counter any organizations that use antidemocratic tactics, including fear and intimidation.

A Word About Right-Wing Extremism

Increasingly, extremist organizations have been seeking avenues to mainstream themselves, to make themselves more acceptable. In doing so they often conceal the full range of their beliefs. Countering groups that employ this tactic can be very difficult. So it is wise to spend some time thinking about what defines extremism, including the radical right.

Certain recurrent themes identify an organization as extremist. These include:

1. Seeking to limit or proscribe the rights of specific groups to participate in society
2. Separating groups along racial, ethnic, or religious lines and then assigning relative values to different groups
3. Seeking to impose narrow positions on public institutions
4. Believing in absolutes
5. Believing in conspiracies
6. Disdaining and abusing democratic processes
7. Seeking to silence opposition

Far-right groups vary in how they present themselves and some of the beliefs they hold. Some consistent beliefs prevalent in far-right groups include:

1. Very strong antigovernment beliefs
2. Fundamentalist or literal interpretation of Scripture
3. Constitution as a static document
4. Strong nativistic tendencies
5. Stratification of society along racial, ethnic and religious lines
6. Compulsive fixation on individual rights

Militia groups present many of these themes, both in their beliefs and in their behavior.

What Is the Militia Movement?

In recent years, the term "militia" has been adopted by a number of groups busily trying to build a movement. They use patriotic language and refer to the lofty ideals of the founders of the country to reach a broad audience in hopes of recruiting new supporters. Thanks to widespread media attention and a prevailing political climate of dissatisfaction and frustration, militia organizers have been having a great deal of success.

As these groups have built their movement, a certain amount of diversity has been introduced. That is to say, different militia groups and different individu-

als within those groups may have somewhat divergent opinions on a number of issues. Nevertheless, several observations apply to the militia movement in general.

Militia organizations are inherently radical. Militia leaders attempt to characterize themselves as civic-minded individuals who seek only to protect themselves from the “enemy.” The reality is that militia leaders almost universally identify the enemy as the government, or some aspect thereof, and advocate taking up weapons to address the activities of the government. These groups see violence as an acceptable means of addressing what are essentially political issues.

Militia organizations trade in misinformation. Conspiracy theories are critical to militia leaders as they seek to cement their base of support. Conspiracy theories isolate militia supporters from the larger community. Any fact that doesn’t fit the conspiracy theory becomes part of a conspiracy to hide the truth. People who present those facts become co-conspirators and are soon identified as enemies. The conspiracies offered by militia leaders are rarely supported by the facts, though the leaders are adept at providing mountains of “evidence” to “prove” their theories.

Militias have roots in the racist movement. Citizen militias as a vehicle to confront federal authority is an idea advocated by the racist movement for years. Racist groups like the Posse Comitatus during the 1970s and the Committee of the States during the 1980s advocated organizing militias. Many leaders of the current militia movement have long-standing connections to the racist movement.

Militias do not enjoy community support. The full range of ideas promoted by militia groups have very little support in the community. Militia groups often adeptly identify an issue of general community concern (e.g., gun control) and garner some support by speaking to that issue. But as people learn more about the full range of beliefs of most militia organizations, they do not maintain their involvement with the group.

Militias achieve power through intimidation. Militia organizations derive much of their power from the violence that is implicit in their message. These are, after all, groups of armed men who often believe things that are not rational to most people. Any thinking person is bound to be somewhat cau-

tious around such men.

Militia organizations are covert operations. Because of the paranoid worldview of the movement, its members place a premium on secrecy. Militia units are often structured as secret underground cells that keep a very low profile once an initial recruiting drive is completed in a community.

Militias are antidemocratic. When all the rhetoric is stripped away, one thing becomes apparent. Militia organizations are fundamentally antidemocratic because they advocate violence to address political issues. They can have a profound effect on communities in which they are active because of the atmosphere of intimidation they create.

Militias are often linked to other radical groups. It is important to view militia organizing efforts with an eye toward the activities of similar, seemingly unrelated, groups in the community. Experience has shown that militia activists are likely supporters of other far-right causes and groups (racist, constitutionalist, Freeman, patriot, anti-gay and anti-choice organizations, etc.) in the community and vice versa. Leaders in these far-right movements are very adept at using different organizational ties to confuse the public and to build a larger base of support.

Community responses to these organizations should recognize this fact. The community effort should focus on the ideas being set forth and the individuals advancing them as much as organizational names and structures. The organizations will often change very quickly, but the ideology and the leadership are consistent.

Why Respond?

It is very easy to dismiss militias and like-minded groups as harmless kooks. In fact, many people do just that. But there are important reasons to respond to the activities of these groups in our communities. A militia organizing in a community poses threats in several areas.

Law enforcement

To the extent that individuals involved in a militia or similar group engage in illegal activity, police agencies must respond. For example, militia members

may subscribe to a political theory that asserts that they do not need driver licenses or have to register their vehicles. Not surprisingly, such a belief system leads to confrontations with law enforcement.

As stated earlier, it is important to recognize that militias are often covert groups that view themselves as besieged by the government. Much of the activity and rhetoric of militia organizations center on weaponry and military tactics. They are, in virtually every way, private armies. Militia groups warrant careful scrutiny from law enforcement in such areas as paramilitary training (where prohibited) and weapons violations.

Target communities

The presence of militia groups in a community will have different effects on different groups. It is important to be aware that some people may feel very threatened by the activities of militias and associated groups.

To the extent that there are demonstrable ties between local militia activity and more "traditional" racist activists, minorities may feel isolated and threatened. Certainly the gay and lesbian community is aware of the hostility toward them of radical activists, including militia groups. Even if ties to hard-core racists and anti-Semites do not exist in a demonstrable way, members of the Jewish community rightfully see the conspiratorial worldview of militia groups as nothing more than elaborate coding for anti-Semitism.

As the militia movement has grown and cross-pollinated with other, more mainstream political movements like the religious right and the so-called Wise Use movement (the Wise Use movement is dedicated to opening public lands to resource development), new targets have emerged. Environmentalists, local-government officials, and abortion providers have increasingly found themselves to be targets. It is a disturbing trend indeed to see groups like Missionaries to the Pre-born, a national anti-abortion group, and the National Federal Lands Conference, a Wise Use group, calling for formation of militias.

If the community as a whole fails to speak out for people's right to live in an atmosphere free from intimidation, individuals who are targets of radical groups, militias and others, withdraw from participation and democracy suffers.

Democratic process

Perhaps the most insidious effect of the presence of militias and other extremist groups in a community is the way they dominate, then stifle community debate. When radical individuals begin showing up at public meetings to promote their views, point fingers, and call names, ordinary citizens may retreat into silence or leave the meeting. Those who speak out may get threatening phone calls and mail at home.

Failure to respond to militia organizing in a community leaves the field of public opinion to the militia organizers. They will be able to maximize their recruitment efforts using lies and half truths. They will portray themselves as the true representatives of the community and try to build a base of support among people who are willing to believe that.

As a result, law-enforcement officials will be hesitant to respond to the illegal activities of militia supporters because they will not want to risk being criticized. Individuals who are targeted by their rhetoric will be isolated and may withdraw from participating in the community. Those who oppose what militia leaders have to say may become silent. The character of community leadership in opposition to the militia is crucial.

Organizing a Community Group

Timing

Many local organizations formed in response to the presence of radical groups in their community have come into being around specific events: a militia group had a meeting or a racist group said they were moving to town or a Jewish family was being harassed. In such instances a local group forms quickly and involvement by a broad spectrum of the community is easily obtained. The problem for groups that form in this environment is that there is almost always a calm after the precipitating event when the group is forced to struggle with identity issues.

On the other hand, some groups have formed out of general concern about the issues rather than in response to a specific incident. These groups will often have a more difficult time in initial recruitment because the need for their existence is not readily apparent to many people. These groups have the luxury of discussing their identity at the outset.

Allies

There are many groups that are naturally inclined to be of great assistance in a community organizing effort to counter extremist-group activity. In beginning a community effort, it is often helpful to approach *individuals* within various constituency groups rather than the groups themselves. When an organization is new and not yet well defined, established community groups are rightfully hesitant to commit themselves to it.

Organizers should recognize that putting together a local group to counter the radical right is often controversial. There are often charges and counter-charges and high profile public debate about the activities of extremist groups. After all, part of the task is to expose these groups and they don't like that. This controversy can be difficult for people involved in the organizing effort. More important, this controversy can be difficult for other community organizations and institutions to deal with.

There are two subsets of groups that will be helpful in a community effort to counter extremist groups. Tier A groups are likely to be helpful in establishing a sustained long-term organization dedicated to responding to bigotry and intolerance. In a most general sense, these tend to be groups that associate social justice with structural and political issues in society. Tier B groups will cooperate for specific purposes for fairly limited times. These groups often have a more limited view of social justice, focusing instead on individual advocacy or service to the community.

Tier A Groups

Minority organizations (racial, ethnic, gay/lesbian, etc.). These groups are often the first to recognize the presence of far-right groups in the community. Further, members of these organizations understand the threat posed by radical-right groups and the need to be active in countering their rhetoric.

The Jewish community. For the same reasons as minority groups, Jewish organizations fully understand the need for action in the face of intolerance. In addition, members of the Jewish community are very well informed about far-right activity because of national groups like the American Jewish Committee. The Jewish press also devotes substantial coverage to these issues.

Churches. Churches can play a critical role in developing community responses. Often, radical-right organizations claim scriptural justification for the positions they take. Churches are the most effective voice to counter this rhetoric. It is important to understand that in many churches the level of involvement will be dictated by the nature of the congregation. In approaching churches, be flexible and understand the constraints of local church leadership. Take some time to figure out which congregations in a community are most involved in social-justice issues and begin there.

Labor unions. Labor unions are critical to community responses. Right-wing activists often target union members for recruitment, particularly when economic times are tough. Because labor organizations understand this phenomenon, they have education programs in place and mechanisms for delivering their message. More important, most union activists understand right-wing activity and are very experienced at organizing. They are an important asset.

Gay and lesbian advocacy groups. These can be very helpful because people in this community are among the first targets of extremists.

The education community. Teachers, the PTA, the school administration, and, in larger towns, the university community are usually concerned about manifestations of bigotry and intolerance. Thanks in large part to organizations like the National Education Association and the National School Administrators Association, there has already been a great deal of discussion about bigotry and intolerance in the world of education.

Also be aware that there are curriculum or subject-specific associations of teachers within the education community. There is likely to be a state association of social-studies teachers with local members who will be informed about and interested in extremist groups.

Peace groups. In many communities there are groups formed around peace and justice issues. Members of these groups understand the connection between violence and politics that is fundamental to the militia mindset.

Environmentalists. Increasingly, environmental groups and activists have become targets for harassment in communities. As that has occurred environmental activists have become more interested in participating in community groups that counter bigotry.

Good-government groups. Groups such as the League of Women Voters that support democratic principles and processes are good candidates for an antiextremist group, particularly to the extent that the group deals with issues affecting participation in government.

Women's organizations. Women's organizations are often very concerned about right-wing groups because they are often hostile to women's rights.

Tier B Groups

Service clubs. Groups like Kiwanis and Rotary that dedicate themselves to community-improvement projects can be very helpful in providing volunteers and organizing events. In addition, these groups often include community leaders who have a great deal of credibility in the "mainstream."

Business groups. Local groups concerned with economic development or business improvement can also be particularly helpful in establishing the credibility of a new organization in the community.

The law-enforcement community. Early contact should be made with the law-enforcement community. Such contacts are critical if confrontations develop or if individuals begin to receive threats. More and more often, law-enforcement officials are themselves becoming targets of extremist groups, giving them a clear interest in working with a community group.

Local-government officials. These folks are our elected representatives and they often articulate the "position" of the community. They should be invited early to participate in the effort. They too are often the targets of extremist groups.

The media. The media should be approached as members of the community and asked to participate. Often local media will decline on the grounds of preserving their objectivity. But sometimes events in the community may cause them to reconsider their position and become involved.

As individuals set about forming a community organization and begin approaching these groups and individuals, it is important not to be restrictive. Very valuable group members may come from groups in Tier B while individuals in Tier A groups may be decidedly uninterested. The key is to be flexible and encourage as much involvement as possible.

The First Meeting

Generally, discussion of forming a community group or coordinating community efforts begins with two or three people. These individuals need to reach out to others to form a somewhat larger core. This can be done by approaching individuals involved in the groups listed above. Some effort should be made at this point to make sure that different sectors of the community are involved.

Organizers should be aware that similar groups may be forming around the same concerns at the same time. This is particularly true if there has been some recent event that has attracted public attention. There also may be groups in the community that have been working on a specific issue organizers wish to address. If this is the case, special efforts should be made to consolidate or at least coordinate activity.

The Organizers

It often appears that community groups come together spontaneously; they don't. There is always someone making the phone calls, inviting people to come to meetings, setting the meeting agenda, facilitating the meetings, and so on. That may be one person or it may be a small group. This role is critical to getting a group going. (If you are reading this pamphlet, it is likely to be you!)

The core organizers should quickly look to inviting a somewhat larger group (10 to 20 people) together to discuss forming a group and the kinds of activities the group might sponsor. Some thought should go into who is invited to this meeting. There are several things organizers should be looking for:

- Individuals who have some concern about what is going on in the community
- Individuals with some connection to a larger constituency group as previously discussed
- Individuals who have had some involvement organizing community events

The core organizers should call or visit people individually to invite them to the initial meeting. Some time should be spent on these initial contacts. This

is the organizers' chance to set the stage for the initial meeting of the larger group and to ensure that the first meeting goes well and that participants feel it is a productive effort. It also enables the organizers to identify problems that might arise in the initial meeting and to develop strategies to handle them.

Physical Issues

The meeting should be held in a convenient location with which people are familiar. It is a good idea to avoid having the initial meeting in someone's house. Local schools, libraries, community halls, senior centers are public settings that can be used as meeting places. The organizers should also have something to eat and drink at the meeting.

The meeting time is also important to facilitate involvement. Meetings right after work are often difficult for people with children. Wednesday nights are often church nights, and some people will have a hard time meeting then. Weekends pose obvious problems. Early-morning meetings often don't allow enough time to get business done. The same is true of lunch meetings. People's employment often prohibits daytime meetings.

(Seem hopeless? Think about this. In each month—except February—there are several weekdays that occur five times. In busy people's schedules, these days are the most likely not to have conflicts because regular meetings of other groups are often set on a particular day of the month. For example, the local peace group may schedule its meeting for the second Tuesday of the month, the local chamber of commerce for the third Thursday and so on. These groups almost never schedule on these "fifth days.")

Organizers should have some kind of writing materials available for each person who is coming. Butcher paper and markers, a chalk board, or some method of being able to write things down where people can see them is also a good idea. The seating should be set up so that people can see the other participants and the person running the meeting. Classroom seating is bad; circles are good; people around a table is best.

Follow-up calls are essential. If a person was invited on Monday to a meeting on Thursday night, he or she should be called and reminded on Wednesday night or Thursday during the day. In all activities and meetings, participation is directly related to the amount of follow-up.

Organizers should make sure that everyone in attendance signs a sign-in sheet with his or her address and phone number. This should be done at all meetings.

Someone should agree to facilitate the meeting. The facilitator is responsible for assuring that the meeting sticks to the agenda and for making sure that people are not talking over each other or interrupting others. If the facilitator is not one of the individuals who has been organizing the meeting and contacting people, the organizers need to spend some time talking to the facilitator and letting that person know what is hoped to come out of the meeting.

The Content

The first meeting of the group should be fairly directive but should allow time for discussion. Organizers should be hoping to achieve a tentative agreement that there is a need for a group in the community to counter the activities of the radical right and to reaffirm the principle that everyone, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation, is a valued member of the community. In addition, the first meeting should move the group toward sponsoring some kind of community event.

The meeting should have the following components:

Introductions. The facilitator should introduce himself or herself and spend some time explaining how the meeting came about. Once that is done, people should be asked to introduce themselves and provide a little information about why they came.

The pitch. Organizers should set out an analysis of what they see as the problem, how it affects the community, and what they think should be done about it. Others will join in this discussion. Organizers should have a strong sense of the group's views going into the meeting from the contacts they made inviting people. A fair amount of time should be allowed for discussion. Organizers should be looking toward building a consensus within the group that an organization could be beneficial to address problems. At a minimum, the participants should agree that a community event would be a positive step.

Planning. To the extent that some agreement comes out of the discussion, the next step should be to plan an event. This event is important for two reasons:

it will establish the group in the public eye, and it will begin to build a base of support. It is also important to do something active in the community quickly to give the group a sense that it has accomplished something.

There will likely be people who want to get immediately into organizational issues like by-laws and articles of incorporation. There are two ways to handle this issue. One is to form a small committee to do the organizational tasks. The other is to defer the discussion. The important thing is to avoid letting the whole group get involved in lengthy organizational discussions at the first meeting. This discussion bores a lot of people and is not terribly productive in terms of community action. The focus should be directed more toward an initial community event.

Closure. Summarize areas of agreement: We want to establish a sustained presence in the community. Define what you are going to do next: We are going to sponsor a community event. Review assignments: So and so is going to contact potential speakers; So-and-so is going to get the room for the event. Discuss the agenda for the next meeting: Three items will be on it that people should think about: a name for the group; designating a spokesperson; a progress report on the event. Set the next meeting date.

Pitfalls

All of this seems simple on paper. It is far from simple in practice. Anytime you get a group of people together and talk about becoming active on an issue there will be bumps along the way. Being successful in bringing a community group together is one part science, two parts art, and three parts faith in human nature. There are some issues that will come to the fore and challenge the group. Very likely a number of these will come up at the group's initial meeting.

“We should enter into a ‘meaningful dialogue’ with our opponents.”

There are those who believe that the solution to all problems lies in talking things out. And of course this is true—to some degree. Unfortunately, dialogue is ineffective when confronting racial supremacists, militias, and other similar groups. In fact, entering a discussion with them gives them credibility. The best approach to this issue is to focus the discussion on the idea that violence and intimidation are simply not debatable.

“We should have a positive message.” Of course that is true, and many people are very uncomfortable saying negative things about anything or anybody. Unfortunately, part of the work that needs to be done in any community effort is naming and exposing the opponent. There should be a positive aspect to the work of supporting pluralism and democracy. Individuals who are uncomfortable directly countering bigotry should be channeled into working on positive events.

“We should be proactive.” Of course the group wants to develop a program that is positive and proactive, but time and time again community groups facing opponents who are fundamentally opposed to their mission will find that a portion of their effort will be devoted to reacting to their opponents. Failing to recognize that at the outset and planning for it makes the group very vulnerable. Perhaps more importantly, doing only proactive, positive things simply will not address the problem.

“We don’t want to give them attention.” Many people believe that militias and other radical organizations are simply after attention and if we respond to them we are playing into their hands. The reality is that these groups seek attention so long as it is not critical. They do not seek nor do they benefit from attention that is critical of what they have to say.

“They have free-speech rights too.” Many people are rightfully concerned about the free-speech rights of marginal groups in our society. Too often people forget that free speech does not apply only to marginal opinions. It should be emphasized that the community group is exercising its free-speech rights in expressing opposition to what these groups have to say.

“There are racists behind every tree.” There are a number of people who will see a radical-right presence in everything going on in a community. It is important to keep the problem in a realistic context or the group can lose credibility. Recognize right off the bat that the process of change and education is incremental and if a group gets too far ahead of the curve, even if the group is right, the result is a loss of credibility.

The First Event

If all has gone well, the group will now move to sponsoring a community event. The purpose of the event is to begin the process of community educa-

tion. The theme of the event should be very clear. Most often groups bring in an expert speaker who takes on the problem directly. This avoids ambiguity and confusion about what the community group is about and what the issue is that they wish to address. The event should be free unless the speaker is very famous and will clearly attract a lot of people.

The speaker. Remember, most people think the farther a speaker comes, the more expert he or she is. Consider getting in touch with national groups to see if they can provide a speaker. There may be state organizations like the Montana Human Rights Network that can provide speakers. If that fails, try getting in touch with colleges or universities to see if there is a faculty member who can address the topic.

Promotion. The more promotional activity, the more successful the event will be. If possible you want to promote your event through direct contact with individuals. One of the best ways to do that is direct mail. Remember those constituency groups we already discussed. Most of them have mailing lists and may be willing to mail information to them. They also have phone trees they may be willing to activate to turn people out.

Media promotion is also important. Public-service announcements should be given to all radio stations, and TV spots should be broadcast about two weeks before the event. A press release should go out three or four days prior to the event. If the local paper has bought into the community effort, it may provide free advertising. Don't spend much money on advertising in the paper.

Posters should be put up around town in grocery stores, laundromats, school bulletin boards, virtually anywhere that will take them. Banks and other businesses have electronic reader boards and may take an announcement. Church bulletins and group newsletters will often print an announcement.

Schools should be approached about attending the community event. Depending on the speaker, teachers will often offer extra credit to students who attend these presentations. This is true at the college and high school levels. Not only does this help reach a very important group, students, it also helps assure good turnout.

On the day of the event your speaker should be on radio talk programs, doing television interviews, and meeting with print reporters. All of this activity will

help promote the event.

The event itself. This is the group's first chance to build a mailing list. Organizers need to do everything they can to get people to sign up. Sheets should be provided at the doors. More important, sign-up sheets should be circulated in the audience during the introductions and someone should be assigned to make sure they keep moving.

(Watch for anyone copying names off the lists. Stop them. This is best accomplished by a volunteer asking them to keep the list moving.)

Law-enforcement officials should be invited to the event. If the event is a reaction to the presence of militia or other extremist elements in the community, it is very likely that they will attend. Be sure to invite law-enforcement personnel early on so the event can be incorporated into their planning.

Make sure the group has cameras at the event to take pictures to be used in subsequent publications. Consider video taping the event. The group may want to circulate the tape later as part of its community-education effort. In any event, get pictures of the audience as well as of the people on the podium. (Remember the guy who was copying names off the sign-up list? Be sure to get a picture of him.)

The event should begin with a presentation by the group's spokesperson. The presentation by the spokesperson should include: welcome, explaining what the group is, how to get in touch, what the group wants to do, and an appeal for contributions. Baskets for contributions should be passed out at the beginning along with sign-up sheets.

If it looks like a lot of opponents are there, the spokesperson should also cover some ground rules. These should include:

- No interrupting the speaker
- Hold your questions or comments until the end of the presentation
- Individuals in the room are entitled to courtesy and respect regardless of their views
- No personal attacks or insults
- Allow others an opportunity to make a brief comment or ask a questions

Some discussion should go into this issue before the event. If these groups have been visible in the community to any degree, count on their attendance. If they are in attendance, count on them to be vocal. Take heart, they are generally pretty easy to control. Certainly most people who speak to the activities of these groups in community settings are used to handling them in meetings.

At the end of the meeting there should be a list of names and addresses and a small amount of money. The media attention to the event has also begun to set the group in the community eye. The group now has a base to work from. The core of activists has that warm fuzzy feeling that comes from a success and is beginning to develop a sense of itself as a group.

Back to the Organizational Issues

Organizational issues are often the death of fledgling community groups. Half of the people in the group can't seem to agree and the other half are bored to tears. This is one reason to have the first activity of the group be some kind of event. There are some things the group can do to make the process of setting up the organization go more smoothly.

Borrow what works from other groups. There is no reason to reinvent the wheel. Get copies of by-laws and organizational documents from other groups.

Set up a committee that is focused on the organizational issues. This will prevent the whole group from getting stuck on these issues. A word to the wise here: The committee doing the organizational stuff should be empowered to do its job. There is nothing worse for people than to have a larger group nitpick every decision it makes. So when that committee makes its report some people in the group need to be ready and willing to jump in and remind people that the committee had a job to do and that the larger group doesn't need to go over all the same issues again. Making sure that the organizational committee does a thorough job of giving a report to the full group will help tremendously.

But even if there is an effective and fully empowered organizational committee, some issues need to be addressed by the full group. Some of the issues the whole group will need to address include:

- Group name
- Mission statement
- Legal status (to incorporate or not to incorporate)
- Membership based (yes or no)
- Spokes person/leadership
- Board size and method of recruiting board members
- Decision-making process (consensus, Robert's Rules, other?)

Don't force the discussion of these issues quickly. If people are not ready to make the decisions, refer them to a smaller group or defer them to another meeting.

Planning. Some time after the first event it is important that the group come together to develop a plan. The plan can be for any period of time, but a year is usual for most groups. The plan is important because it gives the group definition and an understanding of what comes next. The annual plan also prevents the group from just dying out for lack of a next task.

A good process to use for planning is to take a calendar and identify those dates that might provide an opportunity to organize activity. For example, many local human-rights groups often sponsor a variety of activities around the Martin Luther King holiday. Others focus on Presidents' Day as a time to celebrate democratic principles. It is valuable to be aware of election cycles and other political events that might afford opportunities for community education.

The group should allow plenty of time for annual planning. Half a day should be sufficient for a local group. Consider having a facilitator (someone not a member or participant in the local group) volunteer their services to help this process along.

Fund-raising and budgeting. An important subset of planning is budgeting. Depending on the aspirations of the local group, this may be a critical portion of the planning process. If the group would like to have an office, staff, phone and all of that neat stuff, it is critical that a budget be established. If, on the other hand, the group wants to remain essentially volunteer-based, the budget may be more loosely constructed.

An organization's budget is nothing more than paper unless it is accompanied by a fund-raising plan that specifies how the money is to be raised. If the community group plans to pursue staff, office, phone, etc., it is critical to recruit individuals who have experience in management and fund-raising to the board.

If the group plans to start small and remain volunteer-based for a time, money and a budget are still important. Too often volunteer groups don't like to raise money because it is not pleasant to ask for it. But it must be done. Here are some things to consider:

- *Events.* Fund-raisers tend to be labor-intensive and often have a relatively low return for the effort put in. Nonetheless, fund-raisers are important to community groups not only because they raise money but because they also provide recognition in the community.
- *Direct-mail appeals.* Direct-mail appeals are easily done and can raise significant funds. A group needs access to lists (remember those allies) and needs to write a good fund-raising letter.
- *Personal appeals.* This is the best way to raise money. Get each board member to commit to asking ten people for contributions of \$50. This can mount up fast. It also can fall flat; much depends on the people on the board.
- *Large donors.* There are people and institutions in every community who will contribute significant amounts of money to combat bigotry. Finding them and asking them takes time and effort but is well worth it.
- *Grants.* Getting money through foundations requires expertise and familiarity with the foundation world. Find individuals with this experience and solicit their involvement in the group.

There are numerous resources available on fund-raising in all communities. People with fund-raising experience should be recruited to the group. But organizers should keep two basic principles in mind: (1) All community events cost money, and where possible that money should be recovered. (2) Nothing ventured, nothing gained. It is necessary to take some reasonable risks in fund-raising.

Selecting a spokesperson. One of the first difficult challenges any group will encounter is selecting the individuals who will represent the group to the public. The problem is rarely choosing one out of many willing people. Far more often it is finding someone who is willing to take on the task. There are several things that can be done to make this easier.

- Make the initial approach to people outside the group setting. Organizers should identify people who have the skills and/or the standing in the community to be a credible representative and talk to them before the group takes up the topic. Have someone ready to nominate the person(s) in the meeting.
- Make the commitment for a limited period of time. People are more willing to take on tasks that they can see an end to.
- Share it among several people. People will commit more easily if they see others making a similar commitment.

The group should also be mindful that their spokesperson may be singled out for special attention from extremist groups. This may take the form of midnight phone calls and anonymous letters, or it may take the form of public attacks on the person's patriotism or religious beliefs. The group should be prepared to bring others into the limelight and to support those who have opened themselves to the criticism that flows from this kind of work.

The mission statement. Groups will struggle mightily with a concise mission statement. These statements are important because they sum up the essence of the group in a short, memorable statement. If all else fails, try this: *To promote democracy and pluralism and to counter bigotry, hatred, and intolerance.*

Promotional piece. The group will probably want to have some kind of brochure that articulates what it is about. Promotional materials should be available at all events sponsored by the group. This piece should include the mission statement, goals, accomplishments (once there are some), and an address and phone number. This piece is often the first contact people have with the organization. It is very important that it be professionally prepared.

Sustaining a Community Group

As stated earlier, often community groups form around an immediate crisis or in response to the activities of extremist groups. When this is the case, there is

often a point in time when the immediate threat has passed and the group struggles to sustain itself. This is the primary reason for the planning activities discussed previously. There are issues the group will face as it matures. These often include the following:

Dealing with the Opposition

Militia and other extremist groups can be very aggressive. They may target a new community group for infiltration, or they may send activists to disrupt community events sponsored by it. In the worst-case scenario, members may begin to receive threats. The following are some strategies to handle some of these issues.

Disruption or infiltration at board meetings. The best solution to this is prevention. The group should discuss the need for security and commit early on to inviting only individuals people know to be committed to the principles of the group. Some may object to this “exclusive” approach; they should be reminded that board meetings are to get the work of the organization done and that can’t be accomplished with individuals who do not support the goals of the organization.

If opponents do show up at a board meeting, they should simply be asked to leave. Board meetings are not public and opponents have no right to be in attendance. Don’t play games here. Their goal is not to participate with the group in furthering its goals. It is disruption. If they refuse to leave, inform them that you will call the authorities and do it.

Opponents at community meetings. These meetings are different because they are public. It is not wise to ask opponents to leave public meetings unless they are engaging in some disruptive activity, such as not allowing the speaker to make a presentation. If they behave themselves, they should be welcome to stay.

The best way to deal with their presence is to make sure that rules of conduct are reviewed at the beginning of the meeting and posted in the front of the room. Then make sure the rules are strictly followed. If an individual refuses to follow the rules, ask him or her to leave and be prepared to call the police.

Remember! Freedom of speech does not give anyone the right to disrupt your meeting!

Threats to activists. One of the most insidious things that happen in community-organizing efforts is threats directed toward people who speak their minds. This is serious business indeed and constitutes plain and simple terrorism. Make no mistake about it.

Any time any individual involved in the group receives a threat several things have to happen. First, the police must be given a full and complete report on the incident. Often these cases are very difficult to investigate, but the police should have a record. Equally important is letting the community at large know that the threat has occurred and that the police have been informed. This is important for two reasons. First, the community is often in denial about the activities of these groups and this kind of revelation forces recognition that things are happening in the community. Second, the perpetrators are often quite disturbed to see in the press that the police have been notified.

Anyone in a group who is receiving or has received threats has to be supported by the group. People should check in with the person to see how things are going. Individuals may want to swing by the person's house at night just to check things out. (Let them know that you will be doing this. Then don't stop, just drive by.)

The person who is the target of the threat can also do some things. If the threat was left on a phone-answering machine, he or she should save the tape for the police and should also let neighbors know that they should call the police if they see or hear anything suspicious. Consider getting caller ID from the phone company. (On many phone systems you can get the phone number of the last caller by pressing *69. You can get the address and name of the phone number in the Polk Guide at the local library.)

Keep in mind that it is very rare that the people making threats actually take any action. Their purpose is to frighten people into silence. When that doesn't happen very often the threats stop.

Research

A critical element in doing community work to counter militia and other extremist groups is research. These groups are a complex social phenomenon. Their leadership is becoming increasingly sophisticated in masking their full agenda. Militia of Montana leader John Trochmann's consistent denial of

association with racist groups is one example. Another, possibly better known nationally, is David Duke and the way he has made himself over for presentation to the political process. Exposing these kinds of individuals to the community requires thorough and credible research.

One of the first things that local organizers need to do is to gather information about these groups from national and regional organizations. The groups include:

American Jewish Committee (AJC)

165 E. 56th St., New York, NY 10022

Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL)

823 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017

Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR)

P.O. Box 50469, Atlanta, GA 38322

Coalition for Human Dignity (CHD)

P.O. Box 40344, Portland, OR 97240

Northwest Coalition Against Religious Harassment (NWC)

P.O. Box 16776, Seattle, WA 98116

Political Research Associates (PRA)

678 Massachusetts Ave., Suite 702 Cambridge, MA 02139

Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)

P.O. Box 2087, Montgomery, AL 36102

State agencies, Jewish organizations, civil-rights groups, labor organizations, and some environmental groups may also have pertinent information.

In the community the group should spend some time assessing the activities that have occurred locally. Start with the local papers. Go to the library and review the paper for stories about militias or other similar groups. See if a specific reporter seems to be on the story; if so, call him or her and talk about it. Also get the local advertisers (Adit, or Mini Nickel) to see if meetings have been advertised. Look in the legal ads for extremist rhetoric.

Local-government officials will also be fairly aware of the things that have been going on in the county courthouse. Because much of the political philosophy of these groups focuses on county authority they often have quite a bit of contact with county government. Spending a couple of hours with a local clerk

and recorder can be very illuminating.

When these groups do advertise meetings, get a volunteer to go and report back. The volunteer should focus on factual information rather than impressions. Things like: getting a good count of the people in attendance; where did people come from; what was said; buy tapes and literature; get on mailing lists and become a subscriber.

It can't be overemphasized: Credible research is a critical component of the organizing effort. Spend some time on it and make sure it's done right.

Managing the Media

One of the things that militia organizations have done very effectively is managing the media. They have a clear understanding of their message and they engage in behavior that attracts media attention. It is important to understand that militia groups seek a certain type of media exposure. They want, and often receive, uncritical exposure. The coverage they seek focuses on what they have to say—without challenge. They really do not want media coverage that examines their core beliefs, their violent rhetoric, or their connections to other far-right movements. This kind of coverage inhibits their ability to recruit and diminishes their support in the community and they know it.

Community groups start at a significant disadvantage in attracting media attention because they aren't as outrageous as militia activists. It doesn't do any good to bemoan this fact; accept it and incorporate it in developing strategy. There are a number of things that will help gain media exposure for a community group countering militias. There are many things a community group can do to attract critical media attention.

Become experts. Most reporters simply don't have time to do much research on a story. The smaller the community, the more true this is. Reporters will often be struggling to put together a story on a tight deadline. A community group can often step in with information and analysis that brings it all together.

(Getting something wrong even once does tremendous damage to a group's credibility with the media. Also be aware that being too strident or presenting too much information too fast can create the appearance of paranoia. Remem-

ber, many people in the media are very low on the learning curve when it comes to the radical right generally and the militia in particular.)

Be the “other side.” Most reporters try to achieve “balance” in their stories. This often means that the media see things only in terms of two disagreeing sides. This bipolar approach to reporting is a reality of media handling of controversial issues. But when all is said and done, if the media know that a group is there, and that it is opposed to militia activity, they will often call for comment on militia activity.

Develop personal relationships. Knowing the reporters who cover militia stories will help in getting out information. To the extent that a personal rapport can be developed, it will be helpful in getting coverage.

Be critical. Don't be afraid to criticize the media. The media respond to criticism. When they foul up they need to hear about it. But when challenging media about their coverage it is important to be specific and accurate.

Consider: The medium has a lot to do with the message. A sound bite on TV forces more focus than a long interview in a magazine. Spend some time thinking about that.

Generally it is very important to get the primary theme right up front. In writing press releases it should be in the first paragraph. Talking informally with a TV reporter before the cameras roll often allows an opportunity to “direct” the interview somewhat.

Some tips for press releases:

- Put your point up front
- Write so it can be edited from the end
- Use a lot of short quotes.
- Use “snappy” language

Some tips for TV:

- Smile
- Stop talking when you have made your point— wait for the next question

- Stop and answer the same question again if you make a mistake

People often make far too much of media work—it's glitzy, it's exciting—but when all is said and done community-group activity countering militia efforts is news and the media will cover it. When they do, community members do just fine. The group is far better off with a spokesperson who stumbles a bit than they are avoiding the media because they don't have anyone who they think is good enough to handle it.

Framing the Issues

Of course the point of all of the above is to get access to the media. Once access is gained it is important to think about the themes the group wants covered and how they are presented. Militias seek to portray themselves as benign community-support groups. They attempt to position themselves in the public eye as the true patriots representing the perspective of "the People" against "the Government."

In dealing with militias, there are several ways to cut issues that will damage their credibility while gaining support for a community group. These include:

Militias are about violence. Try as they may, militia groups cannot avoid the fact that they run around promoting the use of guns. Everyone knows and understands that. It is a theme that should be reinforced at every opportunity.

The violence is related to political disagreements. Militias reject legitimate methods of political activism for guns.

Militias are antidemocratic. Violence is not an acceptable means of resolving our political disagreements.

Militias are not credible. The conspiracy theories advanced by those in the militia movement are so fantastic that they are simply not credible on their face. (Go back to research and debunk a few so the reporter can have a ready example.)

There are also themes that can be developed from a positive perspective that challenge what militia groups have to say. These include:

Public service is respected. A community should respect its members who

work in public service. That doesn't mean we don't disagree; it means that we value their participation. This deconstructs the separation of the people and the government.

Intimidation is wrong. People in communities have a right to participate in public processes free from any fear of violence.

Government can do good things. Much of the militia mentality is that government is bad. The reality is that we need government and that government really has done some very good things for society. Seek out local examples and bring them to the fore.

We all have responsibility. In many ways militia groups are like little children throwing tantrums. Living in a free society carries with it the responsibility to participate in a constructive manner. Militia groups shirk this responsibility, choosing instead to act in a way that hinders public participation and the day-to-day tasks of public officials.

Developing Campaigns

A campaign is a set of planned activities designed to achieve a specified goal over a defined (usually fairly short) period of time. Community groups will often develop campaigns to address specific issues surrounding militia activity.

Developing a campaign goes like this:

Problem: Militia supporters are aggressive in the community and engaged in some petty criminal activity. Government officials are receiving threats from militia groups. Law enforcement is hesitant to react to militia activity. The local sheriff has said that he agrees with the ideas of militia groups but disagrees with their tactics.

Goal: To create an environment in which law enforcement feels empowered to confront illegal militia activity and which proscribes militia activity.

Themes: Violence and threats are unacceptable; We are a society of law; We are all part of the government and support our elected officials.

Activities: Rally for Democracy in the park to be held on the Fourth of July. Invite dignitaries and local officials to make brief statements: governor, attor-

ney general, mayor, sheriff, etc.

Full-page endorsement ad in the paper with a statement about democracy with as many signatures as possible. Minimum of 500 signatures to run on the Fourth of July.

Letter-to-the-editor campaign during the month of June—two letters per week on themes.

“We support our elected officials” signs in local businesses last two weeks of June.

Local petition drive expressing support for local government to be presented at the rally. Goal of 1,500 signatures.

Radio and TV public-service announcements to run last throughout June on themes

Local radio and TV talk-show appearances by board members/spokespersons last week of June.

Once the group has established a plan with goals and activities, it is important to delegate tasks to assure that the plan is executed. This is often most effectively done by setting up committees to do specific activities. The committee members can do the planning and execute the activity. This is the group's opportunity to expand its base of workers and activists. The campaign plan provides tasks that are well defined and have a discrete beginning and end. For example:

Activity: Rally for Democracy in the park to be held on the Fourth of July. Invite dignitaries and local officials to make brief statements.

Tasks: Reserve park and get permit; send out invitation to guests; arrange for security; get public-address system; decorate the area; print up a program; get volunteers for cleanup.

There should be a mechanism for checking to ensure that things are getting done and that people have the help they need to get things done. This is often done by members of a steering committee or ad hoc committee.

(Planning a campaign is best done by working backward. Take a calendar and mark your target date. Work backward day by day specifying what needs to be done when.)

Warning! Warning! Warning! While this all sounds simple, rest assured that there will be bumps along the way. Plan to be flexible and recognize that some elements of a campaign may have to be dropped because they just aren't getting done.

Other activities. There are a host of activities that a group may want to engage in in a community. Whether lobbying for some specific item with local government or raising public awareness in a community event, the power of citizens coming together is enhanced by the community's recognition that the group is a credible force and accomplishes what it sets out to do. Most people find the more a group does, the more recognized it is by the community leaders, the easier it is to maintain the organization.

Conclusion

The modern-day militia movement is a chilling echo of groups like the Silver Shirts and the Christian Front that were active in the 1930s. And before the 1930s, following the Civil War, hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan flourished. Then, as now, such groups preyed on people using bizarre conspiracy theories and antigovernment sentiment. Then, as now, violent terrorist acts were planned by these groups as they sought to change the political character of America. We now struggle with these groups just as preceding generations have.

There is a tendency to view extremist activity as a law-enforcement issue. But the law addresses the symptoms and ignores the cure. Law-enforcement agencies confront the illegal acts committed by extremist groups and their members. Throughout history law-enforcement action has sometimes unintentionally increased public support for these groups by creating martyrs. The law does not, and should not, deal with the ideology that drives these groups.

The lesson that emerges from history is that these groups are hindered more by the attitudes of the community than they are by laws. Fear and silence

allow hate groups to flourish. People coming together, organizing and speaking out—saying “Not in my town!”—make the extremists’ tasks that much more difficult.



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165 East 56 Street
New York, NY 10022-2746

November 1995

Single Copy \$2.50
Quantity prices on request