

Excerpted from **NEWS: Guns and Bibles**

Militia extremists blend God and country into a potent mixture.

Joe Maxwell and Andres Tapias

Norm Olson's store in Alanson, Michigan, sells two items: guns and King James Bibles. The 48-year-old father of three has been removed as head of the Michigan Militia and pastor of Calvary Baptist Church because of views he expressed in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing April 19. Yet Olson is still involved in the militia and the pulpit. He recently preached in an auction barn in Wolverine, Michigan, to 30 militia members wearing fatigues and sitting in folding chairs. "Hey, they need the Lord Jesus Christ," he told CHRISTIANITY TODAY. "One young man received the Lord that day."

As with many state militia members, Olson, who calls himself a "pistol-packin' preacher," defies easy stereotyping. His grandmother was Jewish; he is a dispensational, Calvinistic evangelist and former pastor in the General Association of General Baptists. He served in the U.S. Air Force, then worked as a Christian school principal. But two details are clear: "I am a military man, and God raised me up as a warrior for the Lord," Olson boasts.

The combining of biblical injunctions with this sort of militancy has created widespread concerns and oversimplifications about the religious base of militia organizations. While some militia members subscribe to a twisted, racist gospel (one newsletter suggested bumper stickers to read "Ethnic Cleansing-The Only Way!" and "Speak English or Die"), others appear to embrace a genuine evangelicalism.

As far apart as mainstream evangelicals see themselves from some of the more fanatical elements within the militia, the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing-which occurred on the anniversary of the 1993 Waco conflagration-illustrates that the line between evangelical Armageddon symbolism and that of millennial views distorted by conspiracy and racist theories has been frighteningly blurred.

Timothy McVeigh, charged in the bombing that killed 167 people in Oklahoma City, fits the profile of a right-wing extremist. He had served in the U.S. Army, become familiar with citizen militia groups, and been angered by the federal raid on Waco that left more than 80 members of the Branch Davidian religious sect dead.

FAITH AND FIREPOWER: The mixing of faith with firepower has a long history. Olson notes that some Christian preachers served as members of America's first militias, which helped overthrow British rule during the American revolution.

Michael Barkun, professor of political science at Syracuse University in New York and an authority on right-wing millennial groups, says that a significant proportion of today's militia groups use "religious symbols." He says there are religious underpinnings in many cases, but not a universally held belief system.

Randy Bytwerk, an expert on propaganda who is a communications professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, says manipulation of religious symbols in militias "allows members to feel like they are still holding on to the Christian faith, but the content is no longer Christian. It sounds like they are saying the same thing." For outsiders, it can be difficult to tell the difference between orthodox Christian teachings and the militias' belief systems.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the groups themselves may hold some beliefs in common, but they may dramatically disagree on other beliefs.

Among the subgroups are:

* **Christian Identity and Aryan Nations.** These are white supremacist groups tracing their origins to British Israelism's doctrine that whites are the true Israelites who migrated to North America, the new Promised Land. They advocate armed provocation against a government now seen as satanic.

*** Christian Patriots.** This movement is inspired partly by biblical and partly by constitutional interpretation; it opposes large federal government authority in favor of county management.

*** Constitutionals.** These groups overlap with the Christian Patriots and call the federal government illegitimate, in part because they recognize only the original Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but not the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, and the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed newly freed slaves equality under the law.

What these groups share, says Bethel College theology professor Roger Olson, is a "folk theology based on personal ideas, experience, rural and urban legends, and cliches," fueled by angst about the approaching new millennium. "Both believers and nonbelievers have a pervasive cultural sense of both expectation and dread," he says.

In addition, the common fear of the federal government is not confined to militia members. According to a recent Gallup poll, 40 percent of those surveyed said they fear a threat to their own personal liberties.

"When things one depends on fragment, some will cling to an utopian ideology," says Heriberto Lopez, professor of Bible at Puerto Rico Evangelical Seminary in San Juan and an expert in millenary matters. "Today some white males feel great concessions have been given to groups such as blacks, Latinos, women, and gays. 'What happened to the American Dream?' they ask. 'This is someone else's dream.' "

Jeffrey Kaplan, an expert on religion and violence who teaches history at Arctic Sivunmun Ilisagvik College in Barrow, Alaska, says members of militia groups in some cases are searching for answers. "They ask 'Why has prayer been taken from schools? Why Roe v. Wade? Why are condoms being distributed to teenagers? Why the rise and acceptance of the gay movement?' It does not take a sharing of their particular world-view to give you pause."

"These people aren't nuts," adds Samuel Solivan, theology professor at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts. "That's what's so dangerous about them. This world-view is how they understand life."

END-TIMES SCRIPTS: Religion scholars say a fault line runs through world-views that see government as evil incarnate and the end times as imminent.

One element of the militia world-view has similarities to Manichaeism, a Christian heresy that originated in the fourth century. "This sees everything in the cosmos in terms of stark good and evil," Bethel's Olson says. "There is no gray."

Kaplan explains, "Conspirators become Satan worshipers, and then everything becomes clear. Absolute evil undergirds it all." This type of world-view, he says, stimulates its adherents to view both reality and rumor through the lens of an alleged global conspiracy. Rumored black helicopter sightings are said to prove UN infiltration of North America. Microchip technology is seen as a stepping-stone to the mark of the beast described in Revelation, an interpretation that various evangelical prophecy buffs have been touting for years.

"It's a misuse of prophecy," says premillennial, end-times expert John Walvoord, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary. "The world government that is going to come in the future is going to be during the Great Tribulation. They just ignore the Rapture completely."

Many in the militia movement believe the Tribulation already has begun, and the faithful will endure it. "Where do we get this idea that we are supposed to sit down and let a corrupt government get worse and worse?" demands Norm Olson. "Our Lord told us to contend for the faith and occupy until he comes."

Yet, University of Chicago theologian Martin Marty says this is one of the most disturbing departures from established end-times interpretation: that Christians should physically-even violently-resist the evil around them.

Barkun asserts the line is blurring between evangelical and nonevangelical interpretations of the end times. "There was for a long time a very clear difference between evangelical and Christian identity based on the logical disagreements," Barkun says. "But what is happening now is you are getting variations on the so-called New World Order idea that are ... beginning to bridge that theological gap."

The "New World Order" concept, a term popularized by Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson, develops the assertion that the U. S government is actively working toward the goal of one-world government.

Militia members are not alone in opposing the growth of the federal government. Many established evangelicals do, too. The incorporation of some mainstream political views within the militia movement further complicates the process of isolating where the militias go wrong.

For example, Matthew Krol, commander of the Central Michigan Regional Militia, has sharply rejected racism and has even spent a year in Haiti, working with a church mission. At the same time, he worries about the true agenda of the United Nations and believes that a one-world government is a very real threat. To bolster his argument, Krol says he has seen documentation proving that Mikhail Gorbachev is holed up in a Southern California naval base helping to oversee closure of U.S. military bases.

WACO SHOCKWAVE: With the Oklahoma bombing on the anniversary of the Waco tragedy, a deeper review of the conflict between the Branch Davidians and the FBI has come into focus.

For some, Waco has become a watershed, confirming a conspiratorial eschatological vision shared by nearly all militia members. Some of the concerns, raised by militia members and others, have found an audience among certain religion scholars.

"No weapons laws had been broken. The government later acknowledged it did not have proof of child abuse, and the government violated this community's constitutional right of freedom of expression," Andover Newton's Solivan says. "If the government did it in Waco, then there is nothing they won't do elsewhere, goes their thinking."

According to a review of Waco, published in the May issue of the religious journal *First Things*, federal ATF and FBI agents showed little understanding for the faith element motivating Koresh and his followers, calling Koresh's talk "Bible babble."

The article's author, Dean Kelly, a religious-liberties scholar, documents how federal agents, who pored over Gideon Bibles in their motel rooms in a feeble effort to understand Koresh, cited his teachings as proof they should invade Mount Carmel.

Kelly believes Waco ultimately is about government threatening freedom of religion and speech.

He worries about calls by the Clinton administration, since the Oklahoma bombing, for new search-warrant guidelines. "It could unleash the FBI to infiltrate and survey groups that it thinks might pose a terrorism threat ... on the basis of speech rather than action," Kelly says.

This could have broad implications not only for militia groups, but also for pro-life groups such as Operation Rescue, which is known for strong and aggressive rhetoric.

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: The separatistic nature of the militia groups can be further understood by the reality that they keep themselves outside the established political process.

While some evangelicals are enthusiastic about the impact Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition can have nationally, the organization garners little respect from the likes of Norm Olson. He believes the cause is now too bleak to hope for political solutions. "I think that right now politics is absolutely corrupted."

Meanwhile, most Christians see neither the ballot box nor bombs as the solution to the reform and renewal of society.

Stu Roy, an Asbury College graduate, pastors Deford Community Church in Deford, Michigan. One of his members is James Nichols, who was freed May 23 from a federal prison after 31 days as a suspect in making bombs with his brother, Terry, and McVeigh. Despite the (now dismissed) accusations about Nichols, church members recently tilled his farm and planted his oats. "He's their friend," Roy says.

Still, some are troubled that Nichols became interested in militia activities while going to Roy's church. Though Roy does not support the militia's religious justifications and symbolism, Nichols apparently saw no contradiction between attending an evangelical church and radically opposing the federal government. As the line between the two is more blurred, evangelicals will be challenged in defining why they should not be confused with the militia movement.