June 2018

The Oath Keepers: Patriotism, Dissent, and the Edge of Violence

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates a prominent group in the patriot/militia movement called the Oath Keepers. It explores how the group uses references to core political ideas and important political events from American history. It argues that these rhetorical strategies serve three purposes: (1) helping the group's supporters to make sense of contemporary America, (2) providing the group's supporters with models of appropriate behavior in response to ongoing events, and (3) help the group to gain additional support. It also argues that different rhetorical strategies are useful for different purposes and target different audiences.

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Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Science.

Syracuse University
June 2018

Acknowledgements

The list of people who have inspired this project or helped it to take shape is long indeed. I am incredibly grateful to the members of my committee – Michael Barkun, David Bennett, Mark Rupert, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, and Edwin Ackerman – for support, advice, and encouragement throughout my years at Syracuse University. Thanks especially to Michael, David, and Mark, who encouraged me to take up this project when I was deliberating between several possibilities for my dissertation topic.

Early on, I realized that I wanted to do computational things that I did not have the skillset to do. Sincere thanks to the numerous people who helped me find tools, suggested new skillsets that would be helpful, reviewed code, and helped me develop new tools and ways of thinking about data: J.M. Berger, Mahboobeh Harandi, Yatish Hegde, Jeff Hemsley, Nancy McCracken, Todd Metcalfe, Justin Seitz, and Shan Zhang.

A number of people provided invaluable conversations and feedback on drafts and related projects – in seminars, over email, and at conferences. Thanks to J.M. Berger, Olga Boichak, Jeff Broxmeyer, John Burdick, Joel Busher, Robert Churchill, Elizabeth Cohen, Lindsay Cohn, Francesca Grandi, Matt Lacombe, J.J. MacNab, Alex Meleagrou-Hitchens, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Mark Pitcavage, Victoria Reyes, Fabian Virchow, and Liz Yates.

A number of other scholars served as inspiration for this project from a distance. Ruth Braunstein, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Rogers Smith led me to new ways of thinking about the relationship between political identity and various forms of political behavior. James Aho pointed my attention at understudied forms of American political extremism. Saul Cornell, Jill Lepore, David Sehat, and Garry Wills helped me think about the enduring legacy of the nation's founding

– in particular, the ways that remembering the Revolution shapes contemporary political thought and behavior.

All of these folks helped shape this project. I hope they all find something to appreciate in this. Any success of this work, I share with them; all errors are mine alone.

Table of Contents

A Note on Grammar

This project is a case study of the Oath Keepers, a right-wing anti-government extremist group in the patriot/militia movement in the U.S. As will become clear, the group itself is the unit of study, rather than prominent individuals or the rank-and-file membership. That leads to a strange grammatical situation. "The Oath Keepers" sounds like a plural noun, which may lead readers to expect plural verbs. But, since the group is the unified unit of study for this project, I deliberately use "the Oath Keepers" as a singular noun, and I accompany it with singular verbs. Unless otherwise indicated, "the Oath Keepers" refers to the group, not to multiple members of the group.

To reduce the confusion that this may cause, I frequently refer to the Oath Keepers as "OK" or as "the group" – nouns which seem a better match for the singular verbs that follow them.

Introduction

This chapter introduces the dissertation. It briefly introduces the Oath Keepers. It presents the research question and answer. It introduces and defines core concepts for the project. Finally, it outlines the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

On April 19, 2009, a group of self-described patriots gathered on the Lexington Green, a park outside of Boston, Massachusetts that commemorates the first battle of the American Revolution. On the 234th anniversary of that battle, these Americans came together to renew their oaths to "support and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic, so help us God." This was the first official event for a new group called the Oath Keepers.

This was not to be a benign civic organization meant to celebrate America in a widely-appealing manner; it was not to be the organizational form of a Fourth of July parade with flags, fireworks, and firetrucks. Instead, these first members of the Oath Keepers were responding to what they saw as critical threats facing the nation. The most important of these perceived threats came from the federal government. Those gathered on the Green believed the government to be tyrannical, violating more and more rights that belong to Americans. These angry Americans believed that many government officials have broken their oaths to uphold the Constitution, and in doing so have forsaken the legacy of the Founders who designed the American political system and wrote the founding documents.

From the beginning, it was clear that the Oath Keepers was not merely a feel-good patriotic organization. Instead, the group embodies an extreme position in the trend of political dissatisfaction most often associated with the Tea Party. While the Tea Party movement mobilized

hundreds of thousands (perhaps even millions) of Americans to participate in protests, town hall meetings, and political education efforts, the more radical discontent in the Oath Keepers led smaller numbers of Americans – likely less than 50,000 in the past decade – to plan for a future conflict with government that would require direct confrontation between agents of the government and the Oath Keepers.

Since 2009, the profile of the group has fluctuated between obscurity and prominence. It has periodically received attention from national media outlets, beginning with an incendiary profile published in *Mother Jones* in 2010.[1] This attention often follows the organization's involvement in high profile public events, such as the Bundy Ranch standoff in 2014; the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and 2015; and the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Despite this fluctuation in the public's awareness of the group, the Oath Keepers has been remarkably consistent (at least until mid-2016) in the ideas it promotes, the events it anticipates, and the behavior it advocates. For years, the group has warned that the federal government is preparing to attack patriotic Americans in some way, and it urges Americans to prepare for that conflict by gathering supplies and engaging in paramilitary training. For years, it has warned that the global economy is on the verge of collapse, and it urges Americans to prepare for that collapse by gathering supplies and forming community-based economies.

This perception of threats (particularly the threat coming from the government) combined with the group's understanding of its members as patriots – as model Americans – reveals a paradox: these Americans who view themselves as patriots believe that they may need to take up weapons to fight the government. This group claims that many of its members are current and

[1] Sharrock, "Oath Keepers and the Age of Treason."

former military and police; at the same time, it advocates for a set of political beliefs that may lead those members to point their guns at other current police (and maybe even military).

In this dissertation, I explore this apparent paradox. I investigate how the Oath Keepers justifies its radical political goals and the behavior it uses to pursue those goals (which may include the use of violence) all while describing its members as patriots. I argue that the group draws on American history and core political values to situate its goals and behavior. In particular, I suggest that the Oath Keepers retells the stories of moments of conflict and crisis from American history to help its members and the wider American public make sense of the political situation in which they find themselves and to provide examples of how to engage with that political context. Across three empirical chapters, I build this argument, beginning with the group's references to natural rights, a foundational idea in American politics; moving to the group's references to the Revolutionary War, the foundational event in American history; concluding with the group's references to the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco Texas in 1993 and the government's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, two moments of crisis from recent American history. Through this argument, I provide a richer understanding of the Oath Keepers and the broader patriot/militia movement; I also contribute to more general understandings of how radical political movements make sense of their political context and pursue support from a less-radical public.

To make this argument, I conduct a close reading of thousands of texts (containing more than 1 million words) posted to the internet by the Oath Keepers.[2] This project uses framing analysis to examine how the Oath Keepers talks about politics, history, and forms of political behavior. In other words, this project is my attempt to understand how the group talks to its

[2] Some scholars would refer to this as discourse analysis. I choose not to use that term because it means very different things to different scholarly communities.

members and the wider public in order to convince both its members and the wider public that its political goals are just and that its preferred forms of political behavior are justifiable. As the internet has become a central channel for this type of discursive work, the data used for the project consist of documents, images, and videos that the Oath Keepers has shared online through its website, blogs, and YouTube channel. These documents are all texts that the group has chosen to share with a wide audience on platforms where it can control the content. I do not include data posted by others about the Oath Keepers, instead focusing on the documents that the group has decided to use to build its reputation online. These documents represent an explicit attempt by the group to communicate to a large audience; as such, they are excellent sources of data for my attempt to understand how the Oath Keepers frames its political goals and behavior.

In the next section of this introduction, I set the stage for the rest of the dissertation by situating the Oath Keepers in American politics. In the closing section, I describe the plan for the remainder of the dissertation.

The Oath Keepers's Place in American Politics

"Right-wing"

Observers of American politics often talk about the right-wing versus the left-wing. Though this single-dimension spectrum is dramatically reductive, ignoring much of the diversity of political thought in America, it still provides some insight into trends in American politics. Following many other authors, I use "right-wing" as a label for political thought or actors that aim to preserve or restore traditional politics.[3] Put differently, right-wing politics is a response to a perception that

[3] "Right-wing" and "conservative" can be thought of synonymous, so long as "right-wing" does not exclusively mean the far right (or radical right, or right-wing extremism) but also includes mainstream right-leaning politics. For relevant discussions, see, among many others, Durham, *The Christian Right*, chap. 1;

changes in structures of authority, privilege, or wealth are unjustly hurting people who have traditionally enjoyed authority, privilege, or wealth. Different factions of the political right focus on different things: social conservatives wish to maintain the influence of traditional religion in public life, often playing out in opposition to gender and sexual equality, non-archetypal families (i.e., anything other than a man married to a woman, particularly where families include children), and abortion; fiscal conservatives wish to revert to a time with less economic activity from the government, a massively reduced welfare state, and maximum independence from the global economy; libertarians wish to return to a golden age of minimal government and maximum independence; isolationists wish to see the nation restored to the principle of minimal international involvement in issues where America does not have strong self-interests, rooted in George Washington's wish that the nation "steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world."[4]

Importantly, the traditions that right-wing movements aim to preserve or restore may not have actually ever existed. Arguably, America never embraced isolationism, given early expansionist efforts such as the Louisiana Purchase and the annexation of the Southwest. Arguably, traditional Christianity was never as dominant as social conservatives claim, given the heterodox religious beliefs of those who wrote the nation's foundational legal documents.

Put most simply, right-wing politics sees its ideal political community somewhere in the past (or its ideal community is a new embodiment of past political values), whereas left-wing politics sees its ideal political community somewhere in the future. Again, this dichotomy is dramatically reductive,

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Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, chap. 1; Bjørgo, "Introduction: Terror from the Extreme Right"; Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, 3; Blee and Creasap, "Conservative and Right-Wing Movements"; Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, chap. 1; McVeigh, "What's New about the Tea Party Movement?"

[4] Washington, "Farewell Address."

ignoring much of what distinguishes different factions of the left or the right from other factions on the same side of the spectrum. But as will become clear, this definition of the political right that focuses on its efforts to restore or repeat a past golden age is helpful in making sense of the Oath Keepers.

Right-wing extremism

Political extremism, or "purposeful disruptive political activity that aims to replace or fundamentally alter the dominant political system," has a long tradition in American history.[5] The nation was founded out of attempts to fundamentally alter the political system, replacing distant monarchical government with (relatively) local democratic government. Within just a few years, relatively marginal groups pushed back against the political elite that some scholars have argued served the interests of financial elite: for example, during the Whiskey Rebellion, farmers in the frontier of western Pennsylvania undertook armed action to prevent the government from enforcing taxes on whiskey, which disproportionately hit these farmers who converted their excess crops into alcohol, allowing it to be transported to markets in towns and cities to the east.[6]

Later in the 19th century, anti-slavery activists ignored state and federal laws by refusing to help return runaway slaves to their former owners.[7] Other abolitionists advocated for more direct action, engaging in armed clashes with pro-slavery activists: for example, John Brown (who would later become infamous for attempting an armed rebellion against the government, starting with his

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[5] Jackson, "Non-Normative Political Extremism," 1.
[6] Bouton, *Taming Democracy*; Cornell, "Mobs, Militias, and Magistrates."
[7] This activity would later lead advocates of nullification – where some actor (whether a state, a court, a jury, or a small armed group) declares a law to be null and void based on an evaluation that it violates the Constitution – to argue that nullification was not the cause of the Confederacy, but was a tactic favored by anti-slavery Northerners. For example, see Sheriff, "The Untold History of Nullification."

attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859) led groups of armed volunteers in conflicts with pro-slavery residents of Kansas in the late 1850s.[8]

After the Civil War ended the question of slavery, white supremacists (especially but not exclusively in the South) worked outside the law to roll back Reconstruction – most notably in the case of the first iteration of the Ku Klux Klan terrorizing black communities to prevent them from exercising the new political rights promised to them by the Reconstruction Amendments.[9]

The early twentieth century saw new forms of extremism emerge: militant labor unions; women's suffrage; communism, anarchism, and the First Red Scare that accompanied them. As in prior American history, these variants of extremism were not limited to the political right or left; rather, political actors across the spectrum pursued radical political goals, seeking fundamental changes to the American political system. Those on the right sought to return the nation to an imagined prior golden age.[10] Many of those on the left saw America as an incomplete political experiment and wanted to extend its progress.[11]

This can certainly be seen in the examples of right-wing extremism that emerged after World War 2. For example, in the Second Red Scare – epitomized by Senator Joseph McCarthy's campaign to identify and purge communist influences within the American government – right-leaning Americans fretted over the global influence of the Soviet Union and advocated for limiting civil liberties in the name of preventing subversives from destroying America. Though McCarthy's influence lasted only a few years, his flamboyant fear of communism infused the American right, soon embodied by the John Birch Society (JBS). Founded by candy mogul Robert Welch, JBS

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[8] Tsai, *America's Forgotten Constitutions*, chap. 3.
[9] Rapoport, "Before the Bombs There Were the Mobs."
[10] Murphy, "Longing, Nostalgia, and Golden Age Politics."
[11] Murphy, "Two American Jeremiads."

promoted conspiracy theories that depicted communism as a dire threat to America's existence. Welch gained notoriety when he accused President Dwight Eisenhower of being a communist agent. This rabid conspiracism led the conservative establishment (in the form of William Buckley Jr.) to denounce JBS in the early 1960s; just a few years later, JBS itself attempted to purge what it considered to be unjustified extremism in the form of bigotry from its ranks, severing ties with Revilo P. Oliver, a classics professor who was an influential anti-communist conspiracy theorist who also embraced white supremacism and antisemitism.[12]

By the 1990s, a new form of right-wing extremism had emerged in America. Up to this point, right-wing extremism had focused on threats posed by racial minorities or ideologies explicitly linked to foreign states. Following burgeoning movements that complained about the scope of the federal government (for example, with the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Montana Freemen, and Posse Comitatus), groups began to emerge that saw the federal government as the primary threat to American lives and American values. The most well-known of these groups – like the Michigan Militia and the Militia of Montana – were paramilitary groups whose members prepared for an armed conflict with the government. These groups burst into public awareness after Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. McVeigh would later reveal that part of his motivation for killing more than 150 people (including 15 children) was the federal government's actions at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in 1993, where hostile interactions between Americans and law enforcement led to the death of scores of people. McVeigh viewed these two incidents as the opening shots in a war between Americans and their government – actions which he believed

[12] Durham, *White Rage*, 117.

justified his use of indiscriminate violence against the government and Americans who died as (in his view acceptable) collateral damage.[13]

Some observers have argued that these groups declined in popularity immediately after the Oklahoma City bombing, given widespread beliefs that McVeigh was connected to this new patriot/militia movement; others argue that the increased attention that militias received from major media outlets led to a short-term growth in the movement for the next several years.[14] What is certain, though, is that the patriot/militia movement was far larger and more influential in the 1990s than in the early 2000s. After failed predictions of societal collapse with Y2K hurt the credibility of many prominent voices in the movement, al-Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001 further shifted attention away from potential domestic threats to liberty and onto international threats to security.[15] Rather than seeing the federal government as a threat to liberty, Americans across the political spectrum rallied around the flag in support of military intervention against foreign terrorism.

Attention remained focus on the threat posed by violent jihadi terrorism for much of the 2000s. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan raised controversy, but these conflicts did not seem to lead to a resurgence of the patriot/militia movement. Certainly, the movement was not dead, but it remained mostly dormant for much of George W. Bush's presidency.

That would change in 2008 and 2009. Between the financial crisis and government responses to that crisis, the emergence of Barack Obama as America's first black president, and the explosive growth of the Tea Party, the stage was set for an active, angry resurgence of the

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[13] Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing*, 164.
[14] See the discussion in Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 4–5; Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy: The Militia Movement From Ruby Ridge to Y2K."
[15] Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy: The Militia Movement From Ruby Ridge to Y2K."

patriot/militia movement. The Oath Keepers formed in 2009, after Stewart Rhodes and some friends decided in 2008 that they would form an organization mobilized around a perception of imminent tyranny. Michael Vanderboegh, a long-time activist in the movement, began a blog called Sipsey Street Irregulars in November 2008, which became one of the homes for the burgeoning Three Percenters Movement that Vanderboegh had recently founded.[16]

Rhodes, Vanderboegh, and other prominent figures in the patriot/militia movement found much to like about the Tea Party movement, even going so far as to speak at Tea Party events and otherwise support that movement. But these individuals were not content to participate in rallies and town halls, to write letters to elected representatives and donate money to their preferred political candidates. Those in the patriot/militia movement believed that the government in general (and the federal government in particular) was so corrupt that these normal forms of political activity would likely prove insufficient; without necessarily opposing voting and letter-writing campaigns, Rhodes and others in this movement encouraged like-minded Americans to prepare for more direct confrontation with the government.

This trend would continue throughout Barack Obama's presidency. The patriot/militia movement was quick to voice opposition to any and all policies proposed by the Obama administration; it was also quick to explain events around the world as the result of a conspiracy of hidden actors working in secret to benefit themselves at the expense of most people. Harkening back to the communist conspiracy theories prevalent in the Cold War, many in the patriot/militia movement today still argue that there is a communist (or socialist, Marxist, progressive, collectivist, statist, or globalist) conspiracy to erode American sovereignty and put an end to individual liberty.[17]

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[16] Vanderboegh, "What Is a 'Three Percenter'?"; Vanderboegh, "A Brief Three Percent Catechism -- A Discipline Not for the Faint-Hearted."
[17] Jackson, "Conspiracy Theories in the Patriot/Militia Movement"; Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.

These conspiracy theories manifest in opposition to things like gun control, environmental regulations, public health initiatives, police militarization, and immigration policies.

This conspiracism also influenced how those in the patriot/militia movement viewed the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The movement was already anticipating crisis, given the strong candidacy of Hillary Clinton. Since the 1990s, anti-government extremists of all stripes have viewed Hillary and Bill Clinton as major enemies, willing – perhaps even eager – to violate Americans' rights at any turn for their own benefit. A convergence of other factors (including Russian disinformation, much of which was aimed at the far right) exacerbated the movement's concern about the election.[18] Groups like the Oath Keepers pounced on information provided by Project Veritas, a conservative activist group known for conducting manipulative video stings of progressive organizations, that allegedly documented organized attempts by Democrats to rig the election.[19] The Oath Keepers anticipated wide scale voter fraud during this election, and the group warned of catastrophic consequences if that happened.

Of course, in the end there was no evidence of systematic voter fraud, and Donald Trump won the presidency despite losing the popular vote. Trump had energized the far right throughout his campaign, and the patriot/militia movement was no exception to this. Trump enjoyed widespread enthusiastic support throughout the movement, in part due to his opponent in the election, in part due to his intense opposition to anything related to Barack Obama, and in part due to his vitriolic rhetoric about Muslims and immigrants.

After his election, the patriot/militia movement made clear their ongoing support for

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[18] For example, see Michel, "Opinion | How the Russians Pretended to Be Texans — and Texans Believed Them"; Michel, "Former CIA Director Says Russian Bots Amplified Jade Helm Conspiracies."
[19] Williams, "The Oath Keepers, the Far-Right Group Answering Trump's Call to Watch the Polls, Explained."

Trump. Members of the Oath Keepers traveled to Washington, D.C. to serve as informal security during Trump's inauguration. The group fixated on the alleged threat posed by anti-Trump activists, especially Antifa (short for antifascist) groups that the Oath Keepers interpreted as a fascist threat to America. In a very short period of time, the patriot/militia movement pivoted from seeing the federal government as the primary threat of the American people and the American way of life to seeing those who oppose Donald Trump as the primary threat. This change is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is important to note. Time will tell whether the movement will continue to support Trump.

Dissertation Outline

The Oath Keepers is perhaps the most prominent group in the patriot/militia movement today. In the pages that follow, I investigate this group to provide insight into the larger movement.

In the next chapter, I provide basic information about the Oath Keepers. I introduce important figures in the group, describe the its structure, and explore some of the significant activity that the group and its members have engaged in over the past several years. I also briefly describe political issues that are important for the group, such as illegal immigration and gun control.

In chapter 3, I review three bodies of scholarship that inform this study: studies of the American far right, nationalism and national identity literature, and social movements literature. Additionally, I review scholarship on the Tea Party, given that movement's close ties with the patriot/militia movement.

In chapter 4, I describe the data and methods used in this study. Given the volume of text used as data here, I use computational text analysis techniques to collect and process these

documents; I describe these techniques in detail to allow other researchers to replicate or extend this work. Using computational methods, I provide an overview of the distribution of topics in the data. As this chapter will show, though, I do not use computational methods to analyze data for this project; instead, I rely on inductive, qualitative analysis through careful reading of the texts.

Chapter 5 begins the analytical portion of this dissertation. In this chapter, I focus on the role of "natural rights" as a rhetorical frame for the group. I argue that this frame is an example of the Oath Keepers deploying strategic ambiguity to motivate opposition to the government without specifying particular reasons to motivate that opposition. I demonstrate how the group uses this ambiguous frame to legitimize vigorous – possibly even violent – activity to oppose the government.

Chapter 6 continues the analysis, exploring how the Oath Keepers uses the Revolutionary War as an interpretive schema to make sense of the America that the group's members find themselves in and to provide models of appropriate political behavior that they might use to pursue their goals. This chapter also investigates the different ways that OK invokes the Revolutionary War, including quotes from leaders, stories of model actors, and details of battles.

In Chapter 7, I demonstrate that the Oath Keepers also uses more recent political events to make sense of contemporary America and to guide its members behavior. This chapter focuses on the standoff at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas in 1993 and on the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I review the argument built through the previous three chapters about how the Oath Keepers uses the rhetorical frames of core political ideas and American history. I argue that these different frames target different audiences and serve different purposes. Next, I suggest that it is important to understand this group because it poses two types of threats: threats to

physical security (related to armed criminal behavior) and threats to political norms. Finally, I close by considering changes in the group since the 2016 presidential election, suggesting a couple of possible futures for the group.

The Oath Keepers: Background

This chapter provides background and context on the Oath Keepers. It describes the group's organizational structure, profiles some of the key figures in the group, and documents significant activity by the group and its members.

On April 19, 2009, the Oath Keepers (OK) gathered outside of Boston, Massachusetts, on Lexington Green, the site of the opening battle of America's War for Independence from Great Britain. In this, the group's first public event, supporters met on the 234th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington to commemorate the beginning of the Revolutionary War and to reaffirm their oaths to "support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, so help us God."[20] As the group says, "The principle mission of Oath Keepers is to prevent the destruction of American liberty by preventing a full-blown totalitarian dictatorship from coming to power."[21] To accomplish this mission, the group seeks to "reach, teach, and inspire" (RTI) Americans to recognize the threats they face (especially those threats that come from the government) and prepare to defend themselves against those threats.[22] This RTI effort involves recruiting new members to join the Oath Keepers, and it also more generally consists of "reach[ing] out to both current serving and veterans to remind them of their oaths, to teach them more about the Constitution they swore to defend, and to inspire them to defend it."[23]

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[20] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Welcome to Oath Keepers."
[21] Oath Keepers Blogspot.
[22] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Oath Keepers Update and SITREP."
[23] OathKeepers.org, "About."

The Oath Keepers formed in March 2009. It consists of a national leadership along with state, county, and local chapters in all 50 states.[24] The national leadership, centered around a Board of Directors led by Stewart Rhodes, president and founder of the group, controls the group's primary website and social media presence. Rhodes and other leaders periodically issue calls to action and release official organization statements. Much of the on-the-ground activity of the Oath Keepers is left to the group's chapters, though, with local and state leadership organizing meetings, demonstrations, and training exercises. Periodically, a chapter will become involved in an issue that gains public attention, which leads national leadership to release a statement and call for supporters from other areas to travel to support the local chapter. This organizational structure means that national leadership is primarily responsible for developing the reputation of the Oath Keepers writ large, despite much of the activity being driven by local affiliates.

In 2014, Stewart Rhodes told the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* that his group has approximately 35,000 dues-paying members across the nation; the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center both estimate actual membership to be less than 5,000.[25] OK reserves full membership for retired and current serving military members and first responders, welcoming those with no such experience as associate members; there seems to be no substantive difference between these two categories of membership.[26] Rhodes and others have stated that they want to bring in individuals with military service who would serve as the "tip of the spear" if the federal government were to use the military to infringe on Americans' rights: this would leave the government with fewer individuals to carry out such orders and it would give the Oath Keepers

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[24] It is not clear how often state chapters lack local leadership or exist only on paper. OathKeepers.org, "Board of Directors"; OathKeepers.org, "Find a Chapter Near You."
[25] Bogan, "Police Shut down Mysterious 'Oath Keepers' Guarding Rooftops in Downtown Ferguson"; Anti-Defamation League, "The Oath Keepers: Anti-Government Extremists Recruiting Military and Police."
[26] OathKeepers.org, "Bylaws of Oath Keepers."

more individuals with skills to actively resist the government.[27] Additionally, the focus on recruiting current and former members of the police and military – and especially the group's efforts to convince county sheriffs to join their cause (discussed more below) – demonstrates that the Oath Keepers hopes to reach, teach, and inspire those who legally participate in violence sponsored by the government (whether the police at home or the military abroad). Having allies in these institutions may reduce the likelihood of violent conflict, and it may reduce the likelihood of any law enforcement response to Oath Keepers activity. Yet this attempt to reduce the chances of violence does not completely remove a paradox for the group: it describes its members as patriots, many of whom are veterans; but if the expected conflict with government happens, its members will point their firearms at members of the military and law enforcement.

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[27] Feuer, "The Oath Keeper Who Wants to Arm Black Lives Matter"; OathKeepersOK, *4-16-09 Oath Keepers Stewart Rhodes on Alex Jones 1 of 2*. The group repeatedly emphasizes the importance of individuals with military service. Most directly, Rhodes writes that "We are in a battle for the hearts and minds of our own troops. To win that battle, Oath Keepers will use written and video testimony of active duty military, veterans (especially combat vets), and peace officers to reach, teach, and inspire our brothers in arms in the military and police to fulfill their oaths and stand as guardians of the Republic." Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Principles of Our Republic Oath Keepers Are Sworn to Defend." During one interview on a radio show based in New Orleans, he said of current and former military and first responders: "That's the message to the military and police is, you need to make a real hardcore decision right now. Look inside your soul. What are you? Are you just an enforcer for the power that, the illegitimate powers that be? Are you going to crap all over the American Revolution and our Bill of Rights? Or are you going to do the right thing?... You have to make a decision right now, going down in history. How will you go down in history? As a traitor to your own country and the Bill of Rights? Or as a defender of the Constitution you swore an oath to defend? We're at that point now. We have to make a decision. I made my choice a long time ago. I know many others have also. We will not be like Nazi Germany, because this country, there will be another revolution. Whether we'll be successful or not if we have to do that will also depend largely upon the police and military, on whose side will you be on?" OathKeepersOK, *Stewart Rhodes on the "Baldy & the Blonde Radio Show" Discussing Senate Bill 1867*. In an interview with Alex Jones, he is more succinct: "I'm talking to the military out there especially. Either you are a son of the republic and you will defend the Bill of Rights and the Constitution or you are a traitor to your country and you are nothing but a lowly dog, an obedient dog to the powers that be. Choose now whom you shall serve." OathKeepersOK, *Stewart Rhodes Interview - Senate Detention Bill Is Pure Treason - Declares War on American People*. Similarly, he suggests that "This Republic cannot fall without their consent, without [the military] going along and obeying unlawful orders. We are confident that when we reach them and teach them more about the Constitution, they will do what's right." OathKeepersOK, *OK4TROOPS Constitutional Care Package Drive Promo Video*."

The Oath Keepers describes itself as a non-partisan organization.[28] As its website says in several places, the group believes that tyrants and corrupt politicians come from both parties. Rhodes has argued that Americans "have a heritage of defeating any tyrant that tries to put his boot on the back of our neck, I don't care if it's a left boot or a right boot."[29] He also has stated that he decided to start the organization before Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election; in fact, John McCain, a prominent Republican, has been a recurrent target of Rhodes' ire.[30] Repeatedly, the group portrays itself as not being partisan. Yet it is clear that members of the Oath Keepers almost never support the Democratic Party while occasionally (or perhaps even regularly) supporting the Republican Party. Though the Oath Keepers likes to present itself as independent and willing to work with all Americans to improve the country, the group's claim to be non-partisan rests on a general argument that neither of the two major political parties are sufficiently conservative (in the sense of adhering to a fixed set of political ideas espoused by 18th century politicians). In no sense is the Oath Keepers centrist or moderate.

The Oath Keepers adamantly rejects any accusations that it is racist or white supremacist or associated with the so-called Alt-Right. The group's bylaws bar anyone "who advocates, or has been or is a member, or associated with, any organization, formal or informal, that advocates discrimination, violence, or hatred toward any person based upon their race, nationality, creed, or color" from joining the Oath Keepers.[31] Rhodes has scoffed at the idea that he personally is a racist: "I'm a quarter Mexican, so it's kind of hard for me to be a white supremacist."[32] The group

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[28] The organization says this in many places, including OathKeepers.org, "About."
[29] OathKeepersOK, *4-16-09 Oath Keepers Stewart Rhodes on Alex Jones 1 of 2*.
[30] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 2 of 10*; Thompson, "Oath Keepers Founder: Traitor McCain Should Be 'Hung By The Neck Until Dead.'"
[31] OathKeepers.org, "Bylaws of Oath Keepers," sec. 8.02(b).
[32] Heffernan, "In Ferguson, Oath Keepers Draw Both Suspicion and Gratitude."

is fond of highlighting its minority members: for example, for several years, the home page of the OK website featured a video interview with a member named David Berry, an African American Navy veteran. Yet, though specific demographic information about the group is not available, images from the group's public events inevitably show that most of its members are white. Clearly, those in the Oath Keepers think of themselves as rejecting racism, yet they and allied groups have served as de facto security for neo-Confederate and so-called Alt-Right groups.[33] In other words, like most of the contemporary militia movement, the group is not organized around a perception of racial identity, but it also is not as free of racism and other forms of bigotry as it likes to claim.[34]

Further complicating the role of racism in the group, it has repeatedly made vocal statements attacking so-called "illegal immigrants." The group has featured interviews with leaders of informal volunteer paramilitary border patrol groups like Tim Foley of Arizona Border Recon (AZBR) and has encouraged its members to give time or money to groups like AZBR who work to help (or replace) the government's efforts to patrol the border.[35] Some videos about these groups, as well as interviews with individuals who live in border communities, assert that criminal organizations (like MS-13) and terrorist organizations (like ISIS) take advantage of inadequate security to enter the United States illegally.[36] Rhodes defends himself from accusations of racism by pointing to his Mexican heritage, yet his group disseminates videos that demonstrates bigotry towards undocumented migrants and Mexicans more generally. This bigotry is better described as a form of nativism (which considers those deemed to be "un-American" to be enemies or threats

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[33] Michel, "How Militias Became the Private Police for White Supremacists."
[34] Jackson, "Don't Assume the Militias at the Charlottesville Rally Were White Supremacists. This Is What They Believe Now."; Cooter, "Americanness, Masculinity, and Whiteness: How Michigan Militia Men Navigate Evolving Social Norms."
[35] OathKeepersOK, *True Grit - An Interview with Tim "Nailer" Foley of AZBR.*
[36] OathKeepersOK, *Border Rancher Warns of Cartel Border Takeover on U.S. Soil*; OathKeepersOK, *Border Rancher Overrun by Men With Gang Tattoos, Not "Children."*

to the nation, where the definition of "Americanness" might focus on birthplace, language, or adherence to an abstract set of American norms) rather than as a form of racism (which defines enemies or threats to the nation based on perceived genetic lineage).[37]

The organization's bylaws also reject discrimination on the basis of "creed" (which presumably means religion). Yet the group frequently describes a threat that America faces stemming from jihadi terrorism, and the rhetoric used to describe this threat sometimes slips into Islamophobia.[38] Posts on the Oath Keepers website also recommend content from well-known Islamophobic websites like Gates of Vienna.[39] This form of bigotry has translated into on-the-ground action. For example, members of the organization provided "security" for demonstrations organized by ACT for America in the summer of 2017 to protest what ACT sees as a threat of sharia law being implemented in the U.S.[40] Clearly, despite the Oath Keepers's claim that the organization does not discriminate on the basis of religion, this organization is part of a broad segment of the American population that sees Islam as incompatible with American values and is unwilling to grant Muslims freedom to their religious beliefs.

This incomplete rejection of bigotry is further complicated by the group's frequent engagement with conspiracism (that is, a tendency to understand events in the world as caused by conspiracies). Many conspiracy theories supported by other far-right American political actors are imbued with racism, anti-Semitism, or religious bigotry.[41] Conspiracy theories supported by the Oath Keepers carry many of the same themes from these bigoted conspiracy theories but (at least

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[37] David Bennett defines classical nativism as "fear of 'foreign' religions and 'foreign' peoples." Later, fear of "foreign" political views became an important feature of nativism. *The Party of Fear*, xii–xv.
[38] Williams, "The Oath Keepers, the Far-Right Group Answering Trump's Call to Watch the Polls, Explained."
[39] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Pledges to Fight ISIS in U.S."
[40] Morlin, "ACT's Anti-Muslim Message Fertile Ground for Oath Keepers."
[41] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*; Bennett, *The Party of Fear*; Aho, *Far-Right Fantasy*.

on the face of things) remove the bigotry. For example, a frequent target of the Oath Keepers's wrath is the global financial elite; sometimes OK specifically names groups like the Bilderbergers and the Rothschilds as the primary culprit behind economic crises.[42] In other contexts, conspiracy theories about the financial elite – and especially about the Rothschild family – are antisemitic, portraying these elites as greedy, manipulative Jews.[43] For the Oath Keepers, though, the salient aspects of the identity of these financial elite is their elite status, not their race or religion.

Financial elites are not the only subject of conspiracy theories endorsed by the Oath Keepers. Many of the conspiracy theories the group engages with focus on ideas of gun control or confiscation. As I show later, the Oath Keepers perceive any attempt at gun control as an attempt by a powerful elite to cripple potential resistance to that elite's authority. As with others in the patriot/militia movement, this group argues that gun control proposals are not actually about reducing gun violence or gun crime; instead, they are attempts to consolidate governmental power and make it harder for Americans to defend themselves and their rights against tyranny and abuse.

Again following a line of thought common in the patriot/militia movement, OK has repeatedly argued that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is an organization intended to facilitate the implementation of martial law. Stewart Rhodes has argued that federal budget appropriations to FEMA for emergency relief are actually intended to be used to identify, round up, and intern political dissidents. Specifically, he has suggested that FEMA emergency relief camps are "dual use": the government states their public use is emergency relief, but their covert purpose is for the internment of Americans.[44]

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[42] For example, OathKeepers.org, "A Snowball Named Reuters"; OathKeepers.org, "A Century Of American Figurehead Presidents Marching To The Beat Of Wall Street And The New World Order."
[43] Anti-Defamation League, "Jewish 'Control' of the Federal Reserve."
[44] OathKeepersOK, *Stewart Rhodes on the "Baldy & the Blonde Radio Show" Discussing Senate Bill 1867.*

Engaging with yet another conspiracy theory common among anti-government extremists in the patriot/militia movement, the Oath Keepers has worried about the United Nations (UN) being a vehicle for tyranny. The group warns about the potential use for foreign troops under UN command,[45] and about the United Nation's Arms Trade Treaty being a "de facto repeal of the Second Amendment."[46] A particular issue of interest for OK is the UN's Agenda 21, a non-binding sustainable development plan that the Oath Keepers interprets as an attempt to violate America's sovereignty by dictating land use policy based on lies about climate change and sustainable development – or perhaps even an attempt to "seiz[e] total control of everyone on the planet, in every aspect of your life."[47] As is the case for others in the patriot/militia movement, the UN is a particularly prominent threat for the Oath Keepers, embodying their fears about tyranny, internationalism, and the loss of American sovereignty.

The Oath Keepers also helped spread conspiracy theories about Jade Helm 15, a large-scale military exercise that took place in the summer of 2015 in the American Southwest. Documents shared by the group about Jade Helm range from the cautiously suspicious ("Nothing about Jade Helm 15, in my opinion, looks good")[48] to the apoplectic ("If we do not stop Jade Helm 15 there may be no future for our children").[49] Some leaders in the group (like Elias Alias, the former editor of the group's website) thought that Jade Helm was an elaborate "psy-op" (psychological operation), part of an information war meant to make the American people more likely to go along with violations of their rights;[50] others (like Rhodes) thought it was more likely

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[45] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."
[46] OathKeepers.org, "U.S.-EU Statement Calls For Enforcement Of UN Arms Treaty."
[47] Jackson, "Conspiracy Theories in the Patriot/Militia Movement"; OathKeepers.org, "Wilderness Corridors," 21; OathKeepers.org, "Agenda 21 Primer."
[48] OathKeepers.org, "Jade Helm 15 – To 'Operate Undetected Amongst Civilian Populations.'"
[49] The Liberty Brothers Radio Show, *If We Do Not Stop Jade Helm 15 There May Be No Future for Our Children!*
[50] For example, see OathKeepers.org, "JADE HELM 2015."

that the operation wasn't a direct effort to wage war on Americans, but instead was a chance for the government to practice implementing martial law and to gauge the public's reaction to that kind of activity coming from the military.[51] Either way, the Oath Keepers urged Americans to recognize the threat this military exercise allegedly posed, to see it as proof of the government's intention to implement tyranny and steal Americans' rights.

The group also advocates for more run-of-the-mill conspiracy theories. For example, OK anticipated widespread voter fraud in the 2016 U.S. presidential election (orchestrated by the Democratic Party or other opponents of Donald Trump). Shortly before the election, its leaders announced "Operation Sabot," their efforts to "prevent criminal vote fraud and attempted criminal voter intimidation."[52] Stewart Rhodes described videos from Project Veritas, an activist organization known for obtaining video footage under false pretenses and releasing misleading edits of conversations with liberal politicians and activists, as "smoking-gun confirmation that organized vote fraud has been going on for decades and will be attempted this election as well."[53] In response, he called on the group's members – particularly those with special forces training – to covertly monitor polling places for voter fraud and intimidation.

In response to all of these threats – illegal immigrants, terrorism, financial elites, a rogue federal government, and psychopathic liberals – the Oath Keepers encourages local groups to form Community Preparedness Teams (CPTs). These teams, originally called "Civilization Preservation Teams," are described as armed neighborhood watches and are modeled on Special

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[51] The Liberty Brothers Radio Show, *Stewart Rhodes on Jade Helm 15 on The Liberty Brothers*.
[52] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers CALL TO ACTION to Spot, Document, and Report Vote Fraud or Intimidation on Election Day, 2016."
[53] OathKeepers.org.

Forces teams.[54] Rhodes and others argue that Americans need to be prepared to respond to disasters, whether natural or otherwise. Guidance for CPTs indicates that each team should have individuals focused on emergency medicine, communications, engineering, and security. Rhodes encourages these teams to train together to respond to threats: "Whether it is a husband and wife, father and son, or neighbors, you need to know how to move, shoot, and communicate as a team. Bad guys, like MS-13 or ISIS, attack in teams."[55] Rhodes has encouraged the Oath Keepers to use the model of the Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) program run by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to gain wider support for their CPT teams: "whatever it takes to get your neighbors off their butt."[56] More explicitly, he suggested using the CERT program as cover for the CPT program: neighbors might see that as a seal of approval from the government and thus be more likely to get involved.[57] According to Rhodes, the CPT program works equally well as preparation for a conflict with ISIS or with the "secret police."[58]

Key Figures

As mentioned above, the national Oath Keepers organization is built around the national Board of Directors. The makeup of this group has changed over the years, but Stewart Rhodes has been the central figure of the Oath Keepers since the group started. He is the founder and president of the group, though in a speech Rhodes notes that others (including Dave Freeman) were involved in the group's formation.[59] His status is even written into the group's bylaws, which

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[54] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Is Going 'Operational' by Forming Special 'Civilization Preservation' Teams."
[55] OathKeepers.org, "CPT - Community Preparedness Teams."
[56] Oath Keepers, *Webinar - March 4, 2016*.
[57] Oath Keepers.
[58] Oath Keepers.
[59] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 3 of 10*.

state that he is president of the group for life, unless he resigns or is found incompetent.[60] His leadership has been questioned at times, with some prominent former Oath Keepers (such as Joseph Rice, described further below) citing Rhodes's poor leadership as a reason for leaving the group.[61]

Rhodes has an interesting background. At the age of 18, he joined the Army and served as a paratrooper for several years until he was injured in a night jump exercise. After leaving the military, he worked as a Congressional staffer in Washington, D.C. for Ron Paul. In the early 2000s, he graduated from Yale Law School. Though the Oath Keepers is part of a large anti-elite movement that targets higher education as a threat to America, Rhodes touts his education at Yale and is quick to point out that a paper he wrote on "enemy combatant status" being used to detain Americans without trial as part of the War on Terror won the Judge William E. Miller Prize for best paper on the Bill of Rights.[62] For several years, Rhodes wrote a column for S.W.A.T. Magazine called "Enemy at the Gate."

Until November 2016, a man who goes by the name "Elias Alias" served as editor for the Oath Keepers and wrote many of the emails sent to the Oath Keepers's membership. Alias, a veteran of the Vietnam War, has long been involved in online anti-government extremism. He owns and operates The Mental Militia, a website and forum frequented by individuals who are fond of discussing conspiracy theories and extreme libertarian politics.[63] On a webpage describing the history of The Mental Militia, Alias says that this forum is where he first met Stewart Rhodes, who joined the forum in October 2006 under the screenname "Stewart the Yalie."[64] The Mental

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[60] OathKeepers.org, "Bylaws of Oath Keepers," secs. 1.05; 2.01.
[61] Lenz, "Leader of Josephine County Oath Keepers Breaks with Stewart Rhodes Over Leadership Style."
[62] OathKeepers.org, "Board of Directors."
[63] Elias Alias, "History of The Mental Militia."
[64] Elias Alias.

Militia hosted an early webpage for the Oath Keepers, setting up a dedicated subforum for the group.

From 2009 to 2016, Alias wrote frequent articles and lengthy emails for the Oath Keepers. While the tone of most of Stewart Rhodes's writing is relatively measured and focuses on relatively reasonable issues, Alias occupies the opposite side of the spectrum of reasonableness, writing frequently about "MindWar," "Psyops," and "unconventional warfare" tactics that the federal government is using against the American people. He wrote one of the more elaborate and breathless descriptions of Jade Helm 15, saying that many people (seemingly including himself) thought it would be

> a portentous government plan, a pre-fabricated and pre-constructed umbrella under which a black op by the Deep State's compartmentalized agencies could possibly "*Go Live*" in a fantastic sort of Shock and Awe False Flag psycho-coup to jar the public mind of America through fear into acceptance of some nefarious policy the government desired, such as the establishment of Martial Law and the complete loss of individual liberty and our Constitution.[65]

Some of Alias's writing also implicitly suggests that he supports sovereign citizen ideas. Sovereign citizens describe themselves as sovereign and thus under the authority of no government, arguing that they have opted out of alleged hidden contracts that give governments authority over citizens.[66] For example, Alias argues that America's official name is not the United States of American, but the united States of America; this lexicographical oddity is similar to the practices of the Republic

[65] OathKeepers.org, "JADE HELM 2015," 15.
[66] Berger, "Without Prejudice: What Sovereign Citizens Believe."

for the united States of America, which the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as "the largest and most organized sovereign group in the United States today."[67]

Richard Mack has also long been affiliated with the Oath Keepers, serving on the group's Board of Directors for several years. He delivered a speech at the group's first public event in Lexington, Massachusetts, on April 19, 2009, in which he argued that the federal government "read the supremacy clause [of the Constitution, Article VI, Clause 2] wrong," and that the 10th Amendment actually means that the federal government does not have authority over local governments.[68] Mack is the founder of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA), an organization that encourages county sheriffs to prevent federal agencies from enforcing laws that the sheriff believes to be unconstitutional.[69] The Oath Keepers includes CSPOA as the first in its list of "Friends of Oath Keepers," a list of websites that appears on the side of every page of the group's website, and the group has posted articles praising CSPOA and some of its members.[70] The group also uploaded a video series to its YouTube channel of a lecture Mack gave based on his book called *The County Sheriff: America's Last Hope*.[71] In the description of the first video in that series, the Oath Keepers wrote that Mack's book proves "once and for all that the sheriffs in this country are indeed the ultimate law authority in their respective jurisdictions," revealing that the group advocates for county supremacy, a form of radical localism where sheriffs have the authority to prevent the FBI, the IRS, and other federal agencies from

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[67] Oath Keepers, "Vietnam Vet Gives Heartfelt Testimonial"; Lenz, "Republic for The United States of America Plagued by Criminality"; Anti-Defamation League, "The Sovereign Citizen Movement."
[68] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 7 of 10*.
[69] Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, "Our Leadership."
[70] For example, see OathKeepers.org, "New Mexico Sheriff Standing Tall For The Constitution."
[71] OathKeepersOK, *The County Sheriff America's Last Hope Richard Mack Oath Keeper 1 of 7*.

enforcing federal law within their counties.[72] In fact, Stewart Rhodes has argued that "the most important political race in the country is not for president, it's for sheriff, it's for sheriff in your county."[73]

John Karriman has become increasingly important to the group since 2014. He first received national attention when, as the Missouri chapter leader, he helped organize the Oath Keepers operation in Ferguson, Missouri in November 2014 to provide volunteer for security for local businesses amidst reports of burglary and arson during the unrest after Michael Brown was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, an on-duty police officer.[74] Karriman is an instructor at a police academy in Missouri; that existing relationship with law enforcement led to his current position as an Oath Keepers National Peace Officer/LEO (Law Enforcement Officer) Liaison.[75]

Several individuals have contributed many articles to the Oath Keepers website. One of the most prolific authors is David Codrea, who started writing for the group in 2015 and has since posted more than 200 articles to the group's website. Codrea describes himself as a "long-time grassroots armed citizen advocate" who "has been writing professionally about the right to keep and bear arms since 1999."[76] He has blogged at waronguns.blogspot.com since 2005, posting more than 40,000 entries in the past 13 years.[77] Codrea has also written for Guns Magazine, AmmoLand.com, and Soldier of Fortune Magazine.

Most of Codrea's writing is about gun politics: commenting on the alleged threat posed by particular gun control proposals, arguing that supposedly pro-gun politicians aren't sufficiently pro-

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[72] I discuss radical localism in Jackson, "Non-Normative Political Extremism," 8–9. See also Tsai, "The Troubling Sheriffs' Movement That Joe Arpaio Supports"; Barkun, "Purifying the Law"; Powers, "The Renegade Sheriffs."
[73] Oath Keepers, *Webinar - March 4, 2016*.
[74] Bogan, "Police Shut down Mysterious 'Oath Keepers' Guarding Rooftops in Downtown Ferguson."
[75] OathKeepers.org, "Board of Directors."
[76] Codrea, "David Codrea on about.Me."
[77] Codrea.

gun, and suggesting that having more Americans regularly carrying firearms will make the country safer from violent crime. Codrea also writes about illegal immigration, frequently promoting a conspiracy theory that political elites are orchestrating the "cultural terraforming" of America.[78] He has received awards from groups like the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, the Second Amendment Foundation, and Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership for his work investigating "Operation Fast and Furious," an operation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) to monitor gun trafficking from the U.S. to Mexico by allowing illegal firearms purchases in order to trace them to criminal organizations; controversy surrounded the operation when Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was allegedly killed with firearms that the ATF allowed to be purchased and subsequently lost track of.[79]

Another individual, writing under the pseudonym "Navy Jack," has also become a frequent writer for the Oath Keepers website since summer 2016. Navy Jack is a self-described Navy veteran and a Patron Life Member of the NRA. He has positioned himself as an intelligence analyst for the Oath Keepers, writing articles in preparation for the group's organized activities (especially Operation Hypo, discussed further below, which was the name the Oath Keepers gave to their efforts to provide informal security for Donald Trump's presidential inauguration in Washington, D.C. in January 2017) and in response to disasters – both natural and otherwise. He is an avid supporter of President Trump and advocates for various conspiracy theories, including assertions that Hillary Clinton personally benefited from a deal involving Uranium One, a Canadian company whose purchase by the Russian nuclear agency Rosatom was approved by the

[78] OathKeepers.org, "Chattanooga Shootings Show We're Up to Our Necks in It"; OathKeepers.org, "Red-Green Axis Spells Out Danger Threatening to Destroy the Republic"; OathKeepers.org, "Times That Try Men's Souls Are Overwhelming by Design."
[79] Codrea, "David Codrea on about.Me"; "Operation Fast and Furious Fast Facts."

Obama administration in 2013.[80] Navy Jack is very active on Twitter, where he has more than 30,000 followers.

Brandon Smith is another prominent writer for the OK website. Smith primarily writes about what he calls "alternative economics": he is self-taught, promotes a version of Austrian economics, and consistently anticipates imminent economic collapse. Many of his articles encourage his readers to develop alternative economic systems (especially local barter economies), allowing them to opt out of the normal economy and therefore avoid most of the effects of the crisis that an economic collapse would bring. He began writing for the Oath Keepers under the "Alternative Market project" after Stewart Rhodes "approached him with the idea of starting a grassroots movement to get people to decouple from the fiat system, to unplug from the Matrix."[81] Smith was also featured in a video posted by the Oath Keepers in which he demonstrates a "thermal evasion suit" used to avoid detection by drones during combat and suggests that concerned Americans buy this suit for themselves. As the description of the video says, the makers of the suit (Snakebite Tactical, which seems to be Brandon Smith)

> believe fully in the cause of liberty for all peoples, and we believe that thermal evasion is just as essential in maintaining that liberty as the right to bear arms is. We hope that this contribution to the liberty movement as a whole will help turn the tide of tyranny back, and give Americans a chance to rejuvenate the constitutional principles that once made our society honorably unique in the pages of history.[82]

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[80] NavyJack, "I Want My Country Back. If You Want Your Country Back Also; M A K E T H E C A L L S ! #U1Ppic.Twitter.Com/HziXrkshOW"; Sullivan, "What Is the Uranium One Deal and Why Does the Trump Administration Care So Much?"
[81] OathKeepersOK, *Alex Jones Round Table with Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, Michael Boldin & Brandon Smith*.
[82] OathKeepersOK, *Defeating Drones*.

The bylaws for OK state that the group will not allow anyone to join who has ties to racism or other forms of bigotry, who has ties to plots to overthrow the government, who has been convicted of a felony "unless restored to civil rights," or who has been "adjudicated mentally incompetent, unless restored to legal capacity."[83] Despite this, the group has been forced to distance itself from some individuals who were previously associated with it. The most prominent example of this is Charles Dyer. While serving in the Marine Corps, Dyer gained notoriety for YouTube videos that he uploaded under the name "July4Patriot," in which he wore a mask to conceal his identity and espoused radical anti-government ideas. He was present at the first Oath Keepers event on April 19, 2009 in Lexington, Massachusetts, where he said he joined the group. In a post to the group's blog in 2009, Stewart Rhodes announced that Dyer would "represent Oath Keepers at the July 4 Tea Party in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma...."[84]

In 2010, Dyer was charged with raping a minor.[85] When police arrested Dyer, they discovered a grenade launcher that was later traced back to a theft from a military base in 2006. Once these charges became known – and especially after Dyer was convicted in 2012 – the Oath Keepers began to distance itself from Dyer.[86] Rhodes released a statement saying that Dyer never actually joined the Oath Keepers, and the post mentioning Dyer is no longer on their blog.[87]

In other cases, members of the group have been arrested for crimes committed while involved in anti-government activism. Jerry DeLemus, a New Hampshire man known for starting a

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[83] OathKeepers.org, "Bylaws of Oath Keepers," secs. 8.01, 8.02.
[84] Neiwert, "After Dyer's Rape Arrest, 'Oath Keepers' Disavow Any Association With Onetime Key Figure."
[85] Curry, "Manhunt for 'Dangerous' Ex-Marine Ends."
[86] Lenz, "Oklahoma Oath Keeper Convicted of 6-Year-Old Daughter's Rape."
[87] Neiwert, "After Dyer's Rape Arrest, 'Oath Keepers' Disavow Any Association With Onetime Key Figure"; Morlin, "Ex-Marine and Fugitive Tied to Oath Keepers Arrested."

Tea Party group and for serving as co-chair of a veterans group supporting Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, is a prominent example of this.[88] In 2014, DeLemus drove from New Hampshire to Nevada to participate in the Bundy Ranch standoff. In a blog post from April 16, 2014, the Oath Keepers posted an update about the standoff, and they mentioned that DeLemus was one of six Oath Keepers from New Hampshire who drove across the country to participate, and that he served as the head of security for the ranch.[89] DeLemus was pictured with a Barrett M82, an enormous .50 caliber semi-automatic rifle that, at its cheapest, costs $9,000 new.[90]

In 2016, DeLemus was arrested and charged with nine federal crimes based on his activity at the Bundy Ranch. He was accused of being a "mid-level leader" at the ranch, organizing security patrols and checkpoints.[91] In August, he pleaded guilty to the charges, and in May 2017 he was sentenced to seven years in federal prison.[92]

With a few notable exceptions (like the Bundy Ranch standoff), the Oath Keepers and its members carefully avoid breaking any laws when advocating for their political goals. Jon Ritzheimer, though, has had trouble finding that safe space of legal dissent. Ritzheimer, who has identified himself as a member of the Oath Keepers, is known for organizing anti-Islam demonstrations in Arizona.[93] In December 2015, he posted a video in which he described plans to

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[88] Pindell, "N.H. Man Sentenced to 7 Years for Bundy Ranch Standoff Role - The Boston Globe"; Levin, "Co-Chair of Trump Veterans' Group Pleads Guilty in 2014 Bundy Standoff."
[89] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Untitled Post."
[90] Morlin, "N.H. 'Veterans for Trump' Co-Chair Indicted for Role in Bunkerville 2014 Standoff"; Barrett, "Barrett 2017 Retail Pricing List."
[91] Tuohy and Feely, "DeLemus Supporters Sing 'God Bless America' at NH Court Appearance | New Hampshire."
[92] Levin, "Co-Chair of Trump Veterans' Group Pleads Guilty in 2014 Bundy Standoff"; Pindell, "N.H. Man Sentenced to 7 Years for Bundy Ranch Standoff Role - The Boston Globe."
[93] Padilla, "Jon Ritzheimer, Organizer of Various Anti-Islam Rallies, Appears in Oregon Protest Videos"; Wyloge, "Hundreds Gather in Arizona for Armed Anti-Muslim Protest"; Holley, "The 'Unhinged' Oregon Protester That the FBI Has Been Tracking for Months."

confront a Muslim organization in New York state while brandishing a pistol; the FBI announced that they had notified law enforcement in New York about Ritzheimer.[94]

Just a few months before this, Ritzheimer announced that he intended to arrest Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) for treason based on her support for the Iran nuclear agreement. The Oath Keepers saw this as too drastic; Jason Van Tatenhove, then the group's national media director, told *The Washington Times* that the group did not support this plan and was moving to revoke Ritzheimer's membership.[95]

The winter of 2015-2016 proved to be a busy time for Ritzheimer. He drove from his home in Phoenix to the Northeast shortly after posting his video about confronting a Muslim organization in New York, leading the FBI and other law enforcement to track him for a time. By the end of the month, he was back across the country in rural Oregon for the protests that preceded the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation. Ritzheimer stayed in Oregon for that occupation, where he was a prominent figure among the occupiers. Just before law enforcement arrested several of the occupation leaders in late January, Ritzheimer left the refuge and drove back to his home in Arizona. Later that day, he surrendered to the FBI outside of Phoenix. In August, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges; in November 2017, he was sentenced to one year in prison plus one year in a residential re-entry program.[96]

The Oath Keepers has not been shy about engaging in mudslinging disputes with disgruntled former members. For example, Sam Andrews was one of the Oath Keepers who organized the group's presence in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and 2015, during ongoing protests

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[94] Ernst, "Meet the Anti-Islamic Organizer Who Set off an FBI Manhunt"; Rayman, "FBI Warns NY Police about Anti-Islam Arizona Man."
[95] Thompson, "Anti-Muslim Activist Says He Plans To Arrest Dem Sen. Debbie Stabenow."
[96] Bernstein, "Oregon Refuge Occupier Jon Ritzheimer."

after Michael Brown's death.[97] Andrews helped provide security for local businesses and for an Infowars employee. He soon decided that he wanted to organize an open carry march for local residents – most of whom would be black – alongside Oath Keepers – most of whom would be white. Steve Homan, then the national vice president, told Andrews that Stewart Rhodes would need to sign off on the march and that Homan thought providing firearms training would be a better idea than a march. Later, John Karriman told Andrews that the national Board of Directors decided not to go forward with the march.

Infuriated, Andrews left the group, started his own organization, and moved forward with his march.[98] He accused Rhodes and the Oath Keepers of a "racist double standard": Rhodes "was perfectly willing to 'confront the cops' at Bundy Ranch, but is unwilling to say that when it is black people arming themselves to 'confront the cops.'"[99] In response to this, the Oath Keepers posted a YouTube video in which Rhodes claimed to have court records that reveal Andrews to be abusive, "potentially unstable and potentially very violent."[100] Rhodes and the other OK leaders in the video urged the group's members to disassociate themselves from Andrews. In the end, Andrews organized a march, but the day of the event, less than 20 participants showed up.[101]

Andrews is not the only prominent Oath Keeper to have a falling out with the group. Perhaps a more significant defection for the organization is Joseph Rice. Rice was the leader of the Josephine County (Oregon) chapter of the Oath Keepers. His chapter led the "security operation" at Sugar Pine Mine in rural Southwest Oregon in early 2015, which gained prominence as Stewart

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[97] Feuer, "The Oath Keeper Who Wants to Arm Black Lives Matter"; Cush, "Whose Side Are the Oath Keepers in Ferguson On?"
[98] Sainato, "Ferguson Oath Keepers Leader Sam Andrews Forms Splinter Group."
[99] Walker, "Oath Keeper Who Called for #BlackOpenCarry March in Ferguson Leaves the Group, Plans His Own March; Oath Keepers Say the Original March Will Proceed - Hit & Run."
[100] Feuer, "The Oath Keeper Who Wants to Arm Black Lives Matter"; Oath Keepers National, *Urgent Message about Sam Andrews.*
[101] Feuer, "The Oath Keeper Who Wants to Arm Black Lives Matter."

Rhodes and other national organization leaders encouraged Oath Keepers to support the operation with their time and money. Rice's profile continued to grow as he, along with Brandon Curtiss of the Idaho III%, formed the Pacific Patriots Network (PPN), an umbrella group of Oath Keepers and Three Percenter chapters in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.[102] Rice, Curtiss, and others from the PPN gained additional notoriety for their actions during the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Occupation in January 2016, when Ammon Bundy led a group of 40 armed individuals to occupy this national park in Burns, Oregon, in the remote southeast part of the state. The PPN described its goal in Burns as being "a buffer between the government authorities and the refuge authorities."[103] Rhodes described their role more bluntly: PPN was acting "as a buffer to prevent another Waco incident."[104]

By mid-2016, though, Rice had decided to leave the Oath Keepers.[105] According to Ryan Lenz of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Rice said that "Stewart [Rhodes] is not a leader. He has no leadership ability."[106] Rice argued that Rhodes's lack of leadership was hampering the mission of the Oath Keepers, which Rice still supported, and was a barrier to high-ranking current and former military officers joining the group. Having left, Rice created a new group called Liberty Watch of Josephine County.[107]

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[102] OathKeepers.org, "Historic 'Militia' Moment: Pacific Patriot Network (Including Oath Keepers) Calls On FBI."
[103] Peacher, "There's Another Armed Group In Burns And They're Not The Bundys."
[104] OathKeepers.org, "Historic 'Militia' Moment: Pacific Patriot Network (Including Oath Keepers) Calls On FBI."
[105] Stall, "PPN, the Occupation, and Security Buffers."
[106] Lenz, "Leader of Josephine County Oath Keepers Breaks with Stewart Rhodes Over Leadership Style."
[107] Lenz.

Key Events

The Oath Keepers started in dramatic fashion. Though the group began posting to its blog in March 2009, its first real action was a public gathering on April 19, 2009. Several dozen Oath Keepers from around the country traveled to Lexington, Massachusetts – just outside of Boston, and the site of the Battle of Lexington Green, the first battle of the Revolutionary War in 1775. The group posted a series of videos from that event on its YouTube channel.[108] The day's events centered around speeches from a few individuals: Stewart Rhodes, Richard Mack, and Guy Cunningham.[109] Those speeches described a number of threats that America faces, many of which were described in the group's "Declaration of Orders We Will NOT Obey" that they read out during the event: citizen disarmament, military tribunals, martial law, foreign troops, and citizen internment. Richard Mack and Stewart Rhodes spoke about the need for the people to reassert their sovereignty in more immediate ways, whether by supporting state sovereignty or by electing a "constitutional sheriff" who would refuse to enforce tyrannical laws and would refuse to allow others to enforce them.[110] This event served as the first public opportunity for supporters of the Oath Keepers from around the country to gather together, and – as I argue in chapter 6 – it

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[108] Though the titles suggest that there should be 10 videos, only 7 appear on the YouTube channel. 3 additional videos are "private" – they can only be viewed by people who have been individually given permission to see them.

[109] Lt. Commander Ernest Guy Cunningham authored a notorious survey in 1994 that asked Marines if they would follow orders to serve under the UN and if they would fire on Americans who resisted attempts to disarm them. Some in the patriot/militia movement took this survey as proof that the federal government was intending to use the military to disarm American citizens, but Guy Cunningham has argued that his survey was meant to identify the extent to which Marines were ignorant of the Constitution: those who would be willing to fire on Americans while attempting to disarm them demonstrate with this answer a lack of knowledge about their obligations as members of the military, according to Cunningham. McManus, "Twenty-Nine Palms Survey: What Really Motivated Its Author?"; OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 8 of 10*.

[110] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 4 of 10*; OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 7 of 10*.

illustrated the group's tendency to draw parallels between contemporary America and America during the struggle for Independence.

In these early days, the group primarily focused on getting out its message and recruiting new members. The group encouraged its members to travel to Tea Party rallies to talk about the group. In one notable example, Stewart Rhodes spoke at a Tea Party rally in Knoxville, Tennessee, on April 15, 2009, a few days before the group's first meeting on April 19. While there, he led the crowd of several thousand people in an oath swearing ceremony, where they promised to support and defend the Constitution.[111]

For the next several years, the group lived in relative obscurity. The Anti-Defamation League reports a number of examples of individual members of OK committing crimes – some relatively minor (such as David M. Phillips, convicted of firearms charges and sentenced to two and a half years of jail time) and some quite substantial (such as Matthew Fairfield, an Ohio OK leader indicted on 97 charges including those related to illegal possession of explosives, possession of stolen property, and child pornography; and Darren Huff, who was convicted of a firearms charge after traveling from Georgia to Tennessee in an attempt to put government officials under citizen's arrest for refusing to indict President Obama).[112]

It was not until the Bundy Ranch standoff in 2014 that the Oath Keepers gained substantial national attention. After Nevadan rancher Cliven Bundy refused for decades to pay fees to graze his cattle on federal land, a federal judge ordered the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to confiscate some of Bundy's cattle.[113] In response, Bundy issued a national call to action for like-

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[111] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Knoxville Tea Party: How's This for an April 19 Warm Up?"
[112] Anti-Defamation League, "The Oath Keepers: Anti-Government Extremists Recruiting Military and Police"; Johnson, "Darren Wesley Huff Convicted in Plot to Seize Tennessee Courthouse."
[113] Chokshi, "The Federal Government Moved Some Cattle and Nevada's Governor Isn't Happy about It."

minded people to travel to his county to help him resist the BLM.[114] Members of the Oath Keepers (including Stewart Rhodes, Richard Mack, and Jerry Delemus) were among those who traveled to southeast Nevada to join Bundy.[115] After the BLM decided to stop its operation because of concerns about the safety of its employees, Bundy and his supporters declared victory and reclaimed his cattle; a video posted by the Oath Keepers shows Stewart Rhodes helping to remove a temporary fence separating Bundy's supporters from the cattle.[116]

In addition to gaining some public attention for its involvement in the Bundy Ranch standoff, the Oath Keepers gained the ire of some of Bundy's other supporters. Rhodes and others stayed at the Bundy Ranch for several weeks after the BLM operation stopped on April 12.[117] Rhodes believed that the Oath Keepers needed to remain at the ranch to prevent the federal government from coming back to confiscate cattle after Bundy's supporters had left. He called on members of the group to travel to the ranch "not because there is any great emergency, but is a preventative measure – sort of like doing a rotation on the DMZ."[118] By April 27, the Oath Keepers claimed to have received credible intelligence that Eric Holder, then the U.S. Attorney General, had authorized a drone strike against those at the ranch. After attempting to vet the intelligence, Rhodes and other OK leaders on site decided to warn the Bundy supporters to either leave the camp or create fortified positions.[119] When the Oath Keepers left, other militia members who stayed at the ranch called them cowards and deserters.[120] Shortly after, OK posted a lengthy video

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[114] Wyler, "The Bundy Ranch Standoff Was Only the Beginning for America's Right-Wing Militias"; Bundy Ranch, "DONATE."
[115] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Untitled Post"; Wyler, "The Bundy Ranch Standoff Was Only the Beginning for America's Right-Wing Militias."
[116] OathKeepersOK, *Bundys Cowboy Up And Get Cattle Back*.
[117] Fuller, "The Long Fight between the Bundys and the Federal Government, from 1989 to Today."
[118] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Untitled Post."
[119] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Bundy Ranch Debrief*.
[120] Neiwert, "Back at the Bundy Ranch, It's Oath Keepers vs. Militiamen as Wild Rumors Fly."

defending their decision to leave and their activity throughout the standoff; they also used that opportunity to attack other Bundy supporters.[121]

Along with many others in the patriot/militia movement, the Oath Keepers viewed the standoff at Bundy Ranch as a major success for the movement. Since 2014, it has become one of the events that the group consistently refers to when talking about what the movement should do, how the tyrannical federal government can be defeated by American patriots.[122] And the Oath Keepers (along with other similar groups) has undertaken similar sorts of action, hoping to replicate the success of that moment.

Some of this activity since the Bundy Ranch standoff has been smaller and has received less attention. This was certainly true for the so-called "security operation" at the Sugar Pine Mine in Josephine County in southwest Oregon. In April 2015, the BLM issued a stop work order to two miners due to a dispute over the miners' claim.[123] In response, Rick Barclay, one of the miners, approached the Josephine County Oath Keepers, asking them to provide security for his property while he and his partner appealed the BLM's order. Though the BLM said that the agency had no plans to take any action before the miners' case was heard by a judge, Joseph Rice, leader of the Josephine County Oath Keepers, organized an around-the-clock security operation at the mine, and his group released calls to action asking for volunteers.[124] Dozens of armed men provided security; a volunteer served as camp cook; and Mary Emerick served as a spokesperson for the group as national media came to cover the events. Emerick claimed that at least 700 volunteers

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[121] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Bundy Ranch Debrief.*
[122] This understanding of the Bundy Ranch standoff is likely to increase after Cliven Bundy and other leaders of the standoff won an important legal victory when a judge declared a mistrial in their prosecution, later dismissing the charges against this group due to prosecutorial misconduct. Montero, "Judge Dismisses Case against Nevada Rancher Cliven Bundy and His Sons."
[123] Pogue, "The Oath Keepers Are Ready for War with the Federal Government"; Neiwert, "Oath Keepers Descend Upon Oregon with Dreams of Armed Confrontation over Mining Dispute."
[124] Pogue, "The Oath Keepers Are Ready for War with the Federal Government."

participated in the operation, which ended in late May with the miners being allowed to continue to operate their mine while waiting for the resolution of their court case.[125] As at the Bundy Ranch, the Oath Keepers claimed victory with this operation. In their eyes, the security team at the mine protected the miners from anticipated acts of aggression from the BLM; and their presence (along with the miners' steadfast demands) led the government to honor the miners' due process rights, which the Oath Keepers expected that the government would have violated otherwise.

In August 2015, the Oath Keepers engaged in yet another "security operation." In "Operation Big Sky" near Lincoln, Montana, the group again supported miners who believed that the federal government (this time through the U.S. Forest Service (USFS)) was violating their rights.[126] This operation received much less attention than the Bundy Ranch Standoff or even the Sugar Pine Mine operation. Like the BLM in Josephine County, Oregon, the USFS denied that it had any plans to take aggressive action against the mine; a spokesperson for the Forestry Service even stated that the organization was working with the miners to reach a resolution that would allow the miners to continue working.[127] Though the Oath Keepers issued a request for volunteers on their website, it seems there was never a large presence at the mine or in Lincoln. By September 18, the group had posted an after-action report from one volunteer to its website, and the operation received little mention after that.[128]

Before this operation had even finished, the Oath Keepers attempted to insert themselves into a much higher profile situation. Kim Davis, a clerk in Rowan County, Kentucky, gained

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[125] Wiles, "Sugar Pine Mine, the Other Standoff."
[126] OathKeepers.org, "Operation Big Sky"; Talwani, "'Patriot' Groups Protecting White Hope Mine near Lincoln in 'Operation Big Sky.'"
[127] Talwani, "Lincoln Remains Quiet as Oath Keepers Continue 'Operation Big Sky.'"
[128] OathKeepers.org, "After Action Report - Operation Big Sky - Lincoln Montana." In fact, this operation faded from attention to such a degree that the Oath Keepers do not mention its resolution, either more narrowly in terms of their involvement or more broadly in terms of the miners' situation.

national notoriety when, after the Supreme Court decided in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that the Constitution allows same-sex marriage, she refused to comply with a federal court order to issue same-sex marriage licenses.[129] On September 3, 2015, Davis was sent to jail when a federal judge found her in contempt of court for this refusal.[130] On September 8, Davis was released from jail after her deputies began issuing licenses to same-sex couples; the judge instructed Davis's deputies to continue to do this and warned her that any attempt to interfere with this would lead to additional sanctions.

In response, the Oath Keepers offered to protect Davis from what the group considered to be unlawful imprisonment. Stewart Rhodes argued that the judge "grossly overstepped his bounds and violated Mrs Davis' [sic] due process rights, and in particular her right to a jury trial." He argued that this was an example of America's "imperial judiciary that not only legislates from the bench but is attempting to expand their 'contempt' power to likewise swallow up our Bill of Rights and circumvent jury trial."[131] Rhodes himself planned to travel to Rowan County to be part of an armed security team that would protect Davis from any attempt by U.S. Marshals or anyone else to imprison her.[132]

During a conference call that the Oath Keepers later posted to YouTube, Rhodes, John Karriman (who was one of the leaders of the Oath Keepers activity in Ferguson, Missouri, discussed below), Denny Peyman (a former Kentucky Sheriff), and Allen Larderi (West Virginia's Oath Keepers leader) discussed why the group was offering this protection. These men decided that the group would approach the Rowan County sheriff to "educate" him about his right and

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[129] Blinder and Pérez-Peña, "Kentucky Clerk Denies Same-Sex Marriage Licenses, Defying Court."
[130] Ortiz, Gutierrez, and Silva, "Kim Davis, Kentucky Clerk Blocking Gay Marriages, Held in Contempt."
[131] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Offers Kim Davis Protection From Further Imprisonment by Judge."
[132] Oath Keepers National, *Oath Keepers Offer of Protection for Embattled Clerk Kim Davis.*

responsibility to prevent anyone from violating the Constitution in his county, even federal judges and law enforcement officials.[133]

National media outlets quickly picked up on this plan, publishing numerous stories about the Oath Keepers.[134] Just as quickly, when Davis's legal team learned of the group's offer, they turned it down.[135] In response, the Oath Keepers cancelled its security operation, insisting that "We always seek the full consent and cooperation of anyone we protect, and we must respect their wishes if they decline that protection."[136] The group noted that its members could choose as individual citizens to go to Kentucky to protest on Davis's behalf, but it urged them to instead save their resources for the next security operation.

Those itching for a chance to take action wouldn't have to wait long. Just a few months later, individuals in the patriot/militia movement began paying close attention to the case of Dwight and Steven Hammond in rural Burns, Oregon. The Hammonds, father and son, were local ranchers who were convicted of arson after burning brush on federal land to make way for grazing for their cattle. Though there is a five-year minimum sentence for that crime, the judge in the Hammond's case issued substantially shorter sentences. The Department of Justice appealed the sentencing, and an appeals court agreed that the Hammonds had to serve the minimum sentence. At this point, the two men had already served their original sentences and had returned home.

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[133] Oath Keepers National.
[134] For example, Markus, "Oath Keepers Put 'Boots on the Ground' to Guard Oath-Breaking Kim Davis from 'Dictator' Judge"; Dizard, "Oath Keepers Armed Group Offers to Protect Kim Davis from Arrest"; Sneed, "Oath Keepers On Their Way To 'Protect' KY Clerk Kim Davis From US Marshals."
[135] Pierce, "Kim Davis Turned Down the Oath Keepers' Offer of Armed Security"; "Kim Davis Declines Offer From Oath Keepers To Protect Her From The Feds."
[136] OathKeepers.org, "Kim Davis' Legal Team Declines Oath Keepers' Offer to Protect Her Against Unlawul Arrrest."

With the appeals court decision, they were ordered to return to prison in January 2016 to serve the remainder of their sentence.[137]

Many people in the patriot/militia movement – and even observers outside of anti-government extremism – interpreted this as double jeopardy: overlooking the details of the case (namely, that there was no second trial, just an appeal of the sentence imposed in the only trial), they said that this re-sentencing amounted to two convictions for the same crime.[138] Ammon Bundy, one of Cliven Bundy's sons, became a vocal leader in a group of people who took interest in the Hammonds' case.[139] In November and December 2015, dozens of people traveled to Burns to protest the Hammonds' return to prison. On January 2, 2016, supporters of Dwight and Steven marched through Burns, waving flags, making speeches, and tossing pennies at the courthouse, symbolically "buying back their government."[140] After the demonstration, Ammon Bundy declared that it was time to take a hard stand against the tyrannical federal government. A group led by Bundy drove to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge an hour away and occupied the headquarters building. This marked the start of an occupation that would last more than a month and result in the death of one person (Lavoy Finicum) while resisting arrest.[141]

From the beginning, the Oath Keepers was opposed to any attempt to use force to prevent the government from returning the Hammonds to prison, and the group also opposed the occupation of the refuge. Stewart Rhodes repeatedly urged Ammon Bundy to back down from his heated rhetoric through the end of 2015, arguing that Dwight and Steven had explicitly rejected any

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[137] Koerner, "Here's The Story Of The Ranchers Whose Case Sparked A Militia Standoff In Oregon."
[138] See, for example, Levin, "'I Still Don't Believe It'"; Goins-Phillips, "Glenn Beck"; Esparza, "Civil Unrest, Militia On Alert As Government Attempts Double Jeopardy By Imprisoning Ranchers."
[139] Bundy Ranch, "Facts & Events in the Hammond Case."
[140] Associated Press, "Protesters Led by Cliven Bundy's Son Occupy a Building at Oregon Wildlife Refuge."
[141] Hersher, "'It Was Time To Make A Hard Stand'; Closing Arguments Completed In Malheur Trial"; KOIN 6, "LaVoy Finicum's Death, One Year Later."

offers of armed assistance to keep them out of prison and wanted to peacefully serve out their sentences.[142] By January 6, just four days into the occupation, Rhodes called on Ammon to end the occupation, asserting that Bundy and his supporters had no right to take action that local residents did not support.[143]

Throughout the occupation, Rhodes and others in the Oath Keepers continued to express their opposition.[144] Despite this, the Pacific Patriots Network (PPN) – an umbrella group that included the Josephine County Oath Keepers, the lead group in the Sugar Pine Mine operation in 2015 – was present at the refuge. PPN described its mission as providing a buffer between law enforcement and the occupiers to prevent any violence, often stationing themselves just outside the refuge.[145] PPN members were heavily armed – even more so than the occupiers – raising tensions in the community. Joseph Rice, leader of the Josephine County Oath Keepers and a co-founder of PPN, was part of the PPN's presence outside the refuge. Though the leaders of the Oath Keepers opposed the occupation, they supported this operation by PPN.[146] Rhodes called it a "righteous mission, if done right, and we stand in full support of it."[147]

Of course, the Oath Keepers has also engaged in other activity outside of these armed security operations that aim to protect individual Americans from the government. Sometimes, the group has seen a threat posed to Americans by other individual Americans. A prominent example of this can be seen in the group's actions in Ferguson, Missouri in November 2014 through August

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[142] OathKeepers.org, "The Hammond Family Does NOT Want an Armed Stand Off, and Nobody Has a Right to Force One On Them."
[143] OathKeepers.org, "A Recommended Honorable Exit Strategy For Ammon Bundy."
[144] OathKeepers.org, "Oregon Standoff A Terrible Plan That We Might Be Stuck With"; OathKeepers.org, "Ammon Bundy - Martyr or Revolutionary?" I explore this opposition further in chapter 6.
[145] Peacher, "There's Another Armed Group In Burns And They're Not The Bundys."
[146] OathKeepers.org, "Historic 'Militia' Moment: Pacific Patriot Network (Including Oath Keepers) Calls On FBI."
[147] OathKeepers.org.

2015. The city of Ferguson was experiencing substantial unrest as local residents and activists from around the country gathered night after night in the city's streets to protest the death of Michael Brown, a young African American man who was shot by an on-duty police officer under unclear and controversial circumstances. These protests grew into larger protests about racial injustice and police militarization and were one of the key episodes in the explosive growth of Black Lives Matter, a social movement that aims to raise awareness of racial injustice in the American legal system.[148]

After an aggressive, heavily armed police response to these protests, the Oath Keepers argued that this response was both ineffective and a violation of the rights of the protestors. The group said that this example of police militarization could "only anger and frighten the people and reinforce the perception that it is 'the police vs. the people' rather than the police vs. a small number of criminals."[149]

By November 2014, some self-identified members of OK appeared in Ferguson. Ultimately, though, they did not come to protest the police response; they came to volunteer to defend local businesses after hearing reports of burglary and arson.[150] Dramatic images appeared in a number of media outlets, showing men standing on the roofs of businesses, clothed in camouflage, some with covered faces, all with long rifles.[151] This volunteer security role was not without controversy: after a few days of confusion, local police ordered the Oath Keepers to leave their rooftop posts, threatening them with arrest for operating as security without a license. The Oath Keepers initially complied, but they resumed their security operation just a few days later,

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[148] Lowery, "Black Lives Matter"; Luibrand, "How a Death in Ferguson Sparked a Movement in America."
[149] OathKeepers.org, "Open Letter of Warning to Governor Nixon From Missouri Oath Keepers."
[150] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Guarding Businesses in Ferguson, Missouri."
[151] Bogan, "Police Shut down Mysterious 'Oath Keepers' Guarding Rooftops in Downtown Ferguson"; Heffernan, "In Ferguson, Oath Keepers Draw Both Suspicion and Gratitude."

saying that, as volunteers, they did not need a license.[152] While in Ferguson, these Oath Keepers provided security for four local businesses, three minority owned – a fact the group has mentioned repeatedly, arguing that it further demonstrates that the group is not racist (though, as noted above, the group's actual relationship with racial identity is more complicated).[153]

The next summer, the Oath Keepers was still active in Ferguson. At this point, Sam Andrews was leading a small group of Oath Keepers carrying long rifles and walking the city's streets. Joe Biggs, a writer for Alex Jones's Infowars[154] website, asked the Oath Keepers to provide security for him as he observed and wrote about the demonstrations taking place on the first anniversary of Michael Brown's death.[155] Just like the previous fall, the media published articles describing these gun-toting Oath Keepers in Ferguson's streets, complete with pictures of men in Oath Keepers hats wearing body armor with rifles strapped to their chests.[156] Despite this dramatic action in fall 2014 and summer 2015, the Oath Keepers in Ferguson seem to have done little except posture with their weapons, talk to media, and argue with police.

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[152] Heffernan, "In Ferguson, Oath Keepers Draw Both Suspicion and Gratitude."
[153] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Guarding Businesses in Ferguson, Missouri." In an interview with Al Jazeera, Stewart Rhodes said "we have black members, and we're guarding a black lady's bakery...[sic] So why would we do that if we're some kind of racist organization?" Heffernan, "In Ferguson, Oath Keepers Draw Both Suspicion and Gratitude."
[154] Alex Jones and Infowars gained substantial public attention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Jones was an avid supporter of Donald Trump's candidacy, and Trump gave Jones interviews and promised not to let Jones down. Jones is known for promoting innumerable conspiracy theories, from claims that FEMA is planning to intern American citizens in concentration camps to claims that the attacks on 9/11 were an inside job to claims that the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012 was a "false flag attack" orchestrated by the government or didn't actually happen to claims that Democratic operatives were running a pedophilia network out of a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. Hananoki, "A Guide To Donald Trump's Relationship With Alex Jones"; Murphy, "How Trump Became Our Conspiracy Theorist in Chief." Roig-Franzia, "How Alex Jones, Conspiracy Theorist Extraordinaire, Got Donald Trump's Ear"; Hsu, "Comet Pizza Gunman Pleads Guilty to Federal and Local Charges"; Jackson, "Conspiracy Theories in the Patriot/Militia Movement." Stewart Rhodes has appeared on Jones's show numerous times, and Jones has repeatedly promoted the Oath Keepers.
[155] Cush, "Whose Side Are the Oath Keepers in Ferguson On?"
[156] Al Jazeera America, "Oath Keepers Return to Ferguson as Protests Dwindle"; Al Jazeera America, "Oath Keepers Return to Ferguson, Fueling Racial Tension"; Cush, "Whose Side Are the Oath Keepers in Ferguson On?"

One of the prominent paradoxes in the group is, on the one hand, its description of its members as patriots and its efforts to recruit current and former military and law enforcement, and on the other hand, these "security operations" where those in the Oath Keepers prepare for conflict with current military and law enforcement and warn military and law enforcement leaders not to test them unless they want a shooting war. This paradox is further complicated by the fact that some of the Oath Keepers's activities do not antagonize military and law enforcement but directly support them. A prominent example is Operation Protect the Protectors.

On July 16, 2015, a Kuwaiti-born American shot and killed four Marines and a Navy sailor at a recruiting center and a Navy Reserve center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, before being shot and killed by police.[157] Regulations prohibit military personnel from carrying firearms at recruiting centers, leaving most of those near the shootings unarmed.[158] In response, several state chapters of the Oath Keepers began organizing armed volunteer security at recruiting centers. On July 21, the group's national leadership put out a call to action, expanding the volunteer security teams – now called "Operation Protect the Protectors" – nationwide. In a statement announcing the operation, Stewart Rhodes encouraged Oath Keepers across the country to contact local military installations and offer to provide them with armed protection "until the DOD [Department of Defense] changes its idiotic policy of insisting that recruiters go unarmed."[159] Rhodes argued that unarmed military recruiters were in just as much danger as if they were to "walk unarmed, but in uniform, down the streets of Baghdad. The exposure is the same because any jihadist can simply look in the local phone book and find unarmed military service members to attack."[160] In response, Oath

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[157] Fausset, Blinder, and Schmidt, "Gunman Kills 4 Marines at Military Site in Chattanooga."
[158] Griffin et al., "New Details In Chattanooga Shooting Reveal How Unarmed Marines Fled From Shooter."
[159] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers National Call to Action."
[160] OathKeepers.org.

Keepers chapters around the country – along with other organizations affiliated with the patriot/militia movement like the Three Percenters (III%) – visibly stood guard at recruiting centers.[161] While the Oath Keepers saw itself on the other side of the conflict from military and law enforcement during events at the Bundy Ranch and in Ferguson, Missouri, it aligned itself with military and law enforcement in this conflict – explicitly and without recognizing any apparent contradiction in its actions.

For most of the group's short history, it has been focused on domestic threats to the Constitution coming from politicians and the government. Over the past several years, though, the Oath Keepers and others in the patriot/militia movement have increasingly turned their attention to non-governmental actors they consider threats to the Constitution (or more generally to the nation). In large part, this coincided with the 2016 presidential election – campaigning for which began in March 2015 – and was driven by the candidacy of Donald Trump. Though the Oath Keepers as a group never endorsed Trump explicitly or implicitly, much of the patriot/militia movement including members of the Oath Keepers supported him, especially when it became clear that the general election would pit Trump against Hillary Clinton. The Clinton name has long been anathema to the movement, given several events that occurred during Bill Clinton's presidency (including the standoff at Waco in 1993 and the passage of the Assault Weapons Ban in 1994). The movement has also long spread conspiracy theories about the Clintons, and this was true during the 2016 campaign as well.[162]

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[161] OathKeepers.org, "Protect The Protectors - Update."
[162] For example, see OathKeepers.org, "WikiLeaks."

By early November 2016, the Oath Keepers was convinced that Donald Trump would win the popular vote unless there was orchestrated, wide-spread voter fraud.[163] After Project Veritas (a conservative activist organization) released videos that allegedly captured Democratic Party operatives talking about how they would carry out voter fraud, the group decided that voter fraud was likely and that its members should try to document that fraud to prevent Clinton from stealing the election.[164] Stewart Rhodes issued a call to action for "Operation Sabot," in which he called on the group's members to "form up incognito intelligence gathering and crime spotting teams" to document voter fraud and intimidation. It singled out "our retired police officers, our military intelligence veterans, and our Special Warfare veterans (who are well trained in covert observation and intelligence gathering) to take the lead and apply their considerable training in investigation, intelligence gathering, and fieldcraft to help stop voter fraud."[165] Rhodes and other Oath Keepers held several webinars in the weeks before the election to prepare the group's members to conduct this surveillance operation and to respond to any civil unrest that might occur in the aftermath of the election.[166] For this operation, the group specifically instructed its members to only act as surveillance teams, reporting any voter fraud they witnessed to law enforcement and not taking any direct action to stop it. The call to action also instructed members to not wear any Oath Keepers clothing or other attire: the group did not want to give "partisan Democrat activists and the media

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[163] Oath Keepers, *Webinar - November 7, 2016*; MacNab, "According to OK's Interpretation of 'Real Polls' Trump Will Win with 290+ Delegates, Unless There's 'Wide-Scale Fraud.'"
[164] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers - A Sabot in the Machine to Stop Voter Fraud & Intimidation."
[165] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers CALL TO ACTION to Spot, Document, and Report Vote Fraud or Intimidation on Election Day, 2016."
[166] Williams, "The Oath Keepers, the Far-Right Group Answering Trump's Call to Watch the Polls, Explained"; Holley, "Race Riots, Terrorist Attacks and Martial Law."

(essentially the same thing)" any ammunition to paint the Oath Keepers as themselves engaging in voter intimidation.[167]

In the end, of course, Donald Trump won the election (though Clinton won the popular vote by several million votes, leading Trump to repeatedly claim without evidence that she only won the popular vote because of voter fraud).[168] And, of course, the country did not see the widespread violent uprising led by leftists that OK was anticipating after a Trump victory. However, Americans across the country began protesting against Trump on November 9 – just hours after his victory – and some of the demonstrations saw isolated clashes and vandalism.[169] Petitions urging the Electoral College to choose Clinton received millions of signatures.[170] Some radical groups even pledged that they would attempt to prevent Trump from being inaugurated on January 20, 2017.[171]

The Oath Keepers saw the isolated violence in the protests in the days after Election Day as a sign of an orchestrated plan by "the political elite that is determined to subvert the will of the American people."[172] More insidiously, they declared that "Communists Intend to Overthrow the United States before Inauguration Day."[173] In November, the group decided to take action again, announcing "Operation HYPO," in which some members "burrow[ed] deep inside these protest organizations to collection information regarding tactics, motivations, schedules and logistics."[174] In January, the Oath Keepers announced "Operation DefendJ20," encouraging its members to form

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[167] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers CALL TO ACTION to Spot, Document, and Report Vote Fraud or Intimidation on Election Day, 2016."
[168] Marcin, "Trump Voters Believe the President's False Claims That He Won the Popular Vote."
[169] Mele and Correal, "'Not Our President'"; Swaine and Staff, "Anti-Trump Protesters Gear up for Weekend Demonstrations across the US."
[170] Walsh, "Millions Sign Petition Urging Electoral College to Elect Hillary Clinton."
[171] Simpson, "Anarchists Threaten to Disrupt Trump Inauguration, Police Say Ready"; Fandos, "Trump Inauguration Security Planners Brace for Wave of Protesters."
[172] OathKeepers.org, "NavyJack - Operation HYPO."
[173] OathKeepers.org, "NavyJack - Communists Intend to Overthrow the United States before Inauguration Day (Updated 01/12/2017)."
[174] OathKeepers.org, "NavyJack - Operation HYPO."

security teams to help prevent violence in Washington, D.C. during Trump's inauguration.[175] Stewart Rhodes himself travelled to Washington for this operation. He tweeted a picture of himself standing outside the DeploraBall, an inauguration party on January 19 that many observers anticipated would have many attendees affiliated with the so-called "alt-right."[176] In fact, the Oath Keepers claims to have prevented a chemical attack on the DeploraBall by providing the D.C. police with intelligence about plans for the attack that the group's members gathered as part of Operation HYPO.[177]

Since Trump's inauguration, the Oath Keepers have continued to see anti-Trump activists as the main threat facing America. In response to the appearance of the "alt-right's" influence in the Trump campaign, a marginal movement of leftists in the U.S. known as Antifa grew dramatically.[178] Adopting a name, iconography, and tactics rooted in leftist street movements opposed to fascist movements in the early 20th century, Antifa activists began confronting those they identified as fascists, sometimes violently.[179] Those in the movement viewed the rise of the "alt-

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[175] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Call to Action"; OathKeepers.org, "UPDATE," January 14, 2017.
[176] Oath Keepers, "Long Line to Get Thru Security at Deploraball. Cops Pepper Spraying Disrupters Outside Pic.Twitter.Com/SF4D0PKjfw"; Gambino, "DeploraBall." The self-named "alt-right" is a new incarnation of American white supremacism. Many of the people who describe themselves as part of the "alt-right" are younger and male, and many of them first became involved with the movement in the dark corners of the internet (such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit). See Marwick and Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online"; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*.
[177] OathKeepers.org, "NavyJack - Oath Keepers at the Inauguration."
[178] Beinart, "The Rise of the Violent Left"; Cammeron, "Antifa"; Reeve, "We Camped out with the Antifa Activists Plotting to Disarm the Alt-Right."
[179] Jaffe, "The Long History of Antifa"; Cammeron, "Antifa"; Anti-Defamation League, "Who Are the Antifa?" One particular confrontation stands out. Richard Spencer, perhaps the most notorious figure in the alt-right known for saying inflammatory things like "Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory" (a clear allusion to the Nazi slogan "Heil Hitler"), was in Washington, D.C. for Donald Trump's inauguration. He was giving an interview when a protestor dressed in black with his face covered ran up, punched him in the face, then ran away. This conflict became a meme, with hundreds of people setting the video of the punch to music; others debated over whether punching a Nazi was acceptable in contemporary America. Appelbaum and Lombroso, "'Hail Trump!'"; Tiffany, "Right-Wing Extremist Richard Spencer Got Punched, but It Was Memes That Bruised His Ego"; Stack, "Attack on Alt-Right Leader Has Internet Asking."

right" as a sign that fascism could be growing in size and influence in America, and they believe that fascist groups and movements should be confronted and disrupted – with counter-demonstrations, doxxing (or connecting an anonymous online persona to an identifiable person), boycotts, and even violence – before those movements can grow large enough to have substantial impacts on politics, both in and out of institutional politics.[180] Pro-Trump actors framed Antifa's actions as attempts by the intolerant left to stifle free speech. The Oath Keepers jumped on this framing and began attending far right rallies featuring the "alt-right" and the "alt-lite" (Trump supporters who are not racist enough to fit in the "alt-right"), providing security for these groups under the guise of protecting their freedom of speech.[181] Though the Oath Keepers condemns racism, the group and others like it have acted as de facto security for racist organizations.[182]

The group has also continued its flirtation with Islamophobia. In June 2017, ACT! For America (an anti-Muslim organization founded by Brigitte Gabriel, a notorious Islamophobe) organized "Marches against Sharia" in cities across the nation. ACT asked groups including the Oath Keepers to provide security for the marches after Antifa groups announced that they would protest these marches.[183] The Oath Keepers encouraged its members to turn out to marches in every city to protect the freedom of speech of those attending the marches, and members were spotted at several of the demonstrations.[184]

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[180] Feuer, "Antifa on Trial"; Reeve, "We Camped out with the Antifa Activists Plotting to Disarm the Alt-Right"; Ellis, "White Supremacists Face a Not-so-New Adversary Online."
[181] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Battle of Berkeley April 15 After Report"; OathKeepers.org, "Help Defend Free Speech in Berkeley"; OathKeepers.org, "CALL TO ACTION."
[182] Michel, "How Militias Became the Private Police for White Supremacists"; Jackson, "Don't Assume the Militias at the Charlottesville Rally Were White Supremacists. This Is What They Believe Now."
[183] Gjelten, "'March Against Sharia' Planned Across The U.S."
[184] OathKeepers.org, "Help Support Defending ACT for America Marches Against Sharia This Saturday, June 10, Nationwide"; Morlin, "ACT's Anti-Muslim Message Fertile Ground for Oath Keepers."

While much of what the Oath Keepers does walks along the edge of violence in the midst of conflicts with other Americans or with the government, this is not all they do. The group encourages its supporters to be good members of their community, and they also see good neighborly behavior as an opportunity for them to gain more support from the wider American public. Joseph Rice, formerly the leader of the Josephine County Oath Keepers, organized community service activity: for example, his chapter built a playground and installed wheelchair ramps for local residents.[185] More recently, the group has encouraged its members to get involved in hurricane relief in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico, after a series of hurricanes devastated communities in these areas.[186] The group is not consistently active on Twitter, but Stewart Rhodes and other members of the group posted frequently throughout October as they volunteered in Puerto Rico, delivering supplies to remote locations and helping to rebuild homes.[187] Curiously, they also provided security for a hospital, though I could find no reports of violence in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria to which the Oath Keepers might have been responding.[188]

Perceptions of Threat

As demonstrated in the previous pages, the Oath Keepers is a group animated by the perception of imminent threats: to America, to themselves and their neighbors, and to the ideals of freedom and liberty. These threats come from a variety of different actors: an international conspiracy of financial and political elites, tyrannical government, and terrorist and criminals.

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[185] Wiles, "Sugar Pine Mine, the Other Standoff."
[186] Later, journalists found that groups like the Oath Keepers used the aid they provided to communities near Houston, Texas to coerce local communities into rejecting government aid. Hardy, "How Far-Right Groups Took Over a Refugee Community After Harvey."
[187] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers Need Your Help in Puerto Rico!"; OathKeepers.org, "UPDATE," October 11, 2017.
[188] OathKeepers.org, "UPDATE," October 11, 2017.

Sometimes, the threat is more abstract: for example, when American identity is threatened by non-Americans flooding across the nation's borders. More often, though, the threat is concrete and dramatic: physical security is threatened (primarily by terrorists or militarized government officials); financial security is threatened (primarily by financial and political elites); liberty and natural rights are threatened (primarily by the government).

These threats require different responses. Threats to American identity can be combatted by reaching, teaching, and inspiring Americans about what constitutes the nation. This RTI effort also serves as an early response to concrete threats by encouraging Americans to prepare for a future physical conflict that may result from attacks on physical security, financial security, or natural rights. As these more concrete threats became more imminent, more direct responses are required: withdrawing from the normal economy by engaging in hyper-localist barter communities; stockpiling food, medicine, ammunition, and tools; and forming local paramilitary teams that train and drill together regularly. The group responds to critical threats even more directly, traveling across the country to participate in "security operations," using firearms and other overt signs of a willingness to use violence to influence the behavior of the government or other enemies.

These perceptions of threats and responses to threats coexist with an absolute conviction by the Oath Keepers that its members are patriots – model Americans embodying core American values. The group describes its members as "guardians of the Republic" and insists that the actions it calls for are honorable and in line with the oath that members of the military and first responders swear to the Constitution.

The hostility that results from these perceptions of threat sits in tension with this self-perception of honor. Conspiracy theories about nefarious hidden actors and potential violence directed at the government are not typical features of American political activity. In this

dissertation, I explore one strategy that the Oath Keepers uses to resolve this tension: retelling the stories of moments of conflict and crisis to interpret the contemporary political situation and to provide models of the appropriate behavior in response to this political situation.

Literature Review

This dissertation that examines the political ideas and rhetoric of the Oath Keepers builds on several existing strands of scholarship: first, studies of far-right extremism in the U.S.; second, studies of nationalism and national identity; and third, studies of political activism and social movements more broadly. Additionally, prior scholarship on conservative movements – especially the Tea Party – informs this project and helps me to situate the Oath Keepers in the broader American political context.

Far-Right Extremism

As I noted in the introduction, America has a long tradition of political extremism. Much of this is right-wing extremism, which is an amorphous category that includes conservative or regressive forms of extremism that are based on a desire to preserve existing political structures or return to previous structures. Right-wing extremism contains two primary categories: race-based extremism and anti-government extremism (though leftist anarchism could also be considered a form of anti-government extremism) (see figure 1).

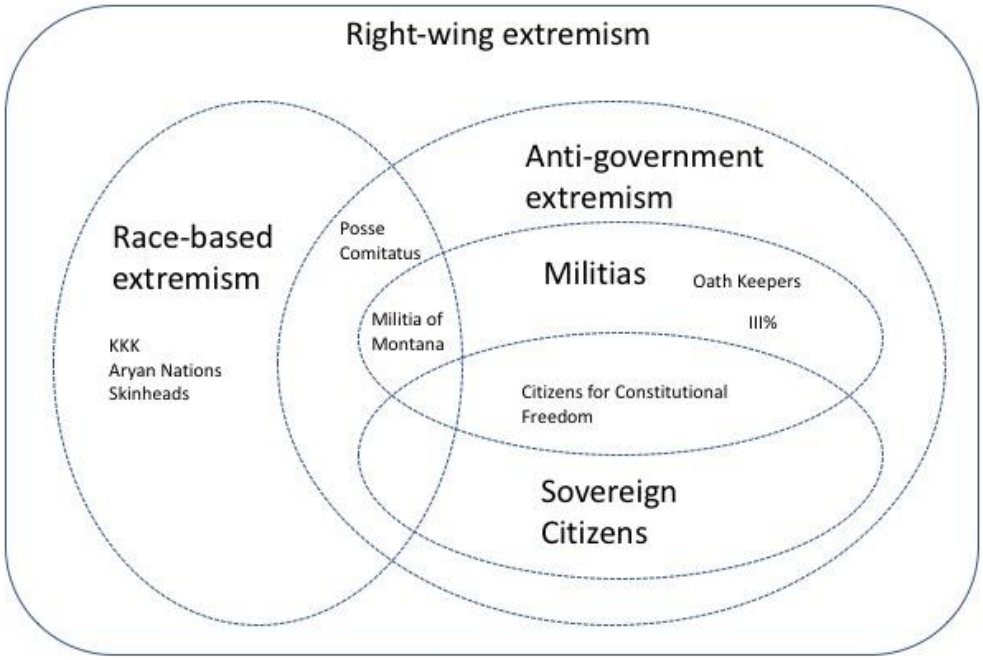

Figure 1: Diagram showing different components of right-wing extremism. Words in larger text are names of components. Words in smaller text are examples of groups or movements that belong in those components. Size and shape of circles are not meaningful.

For the past several decades, scholars have produced a substantial amount of research on race-based extremism, particularly on various incarnations of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and skinheads.[189] Far less scholarship has examined anti-government extremism, except where this form of extremism overlaps with race-based extremism.[190] Some researchers go so far as to define right-wing extremism as necessarily race-based: for example, Martin Durham says that the "extreme right" consists of "those on the right who are committed to white supremacism and/or anti-Semitism," reserving the term "radical right" for "non-racist conspiracists"; Durham suggests that, together, the extreme right and the radical right make up the far right.[191]

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[189] A comprehensive bibliography of such work is beyond the scope of this chapter, but prominent examples include Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness*; Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*; Bennett, *The Party of Fear*; Durham, *White Rage*; Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*; Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*.
[190] For example, Barkun, "Violence in the Name of Democracy."
[191] Durham, *The Christian Right*, xii–xiii.

This definition tends to lead to one of two results: either anti-government extremism is overwhelmingly overlooked or it is assumed to be necessarily race-based.[192] Indeed, very few studies examine forms of right-wing extremism that are not organized around (imagined) racial identity. Yet anti-government extremism is and has been a prominent problem in America, particularly since the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh, a man with ties to the militia movement (though the exact nature of his relationship with the movement is a matter of contention). In fact, from the Whiskey Rebellion in the 1790s to John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 to "massive resistance" to federal civil rights legislation in the mid-20th century to the Bundy ranch standoff in 2014, Americans throughout the nation's history have disregarded federal law and even taken up firearms to resist the federal government.[193] As for those studies that assume that all forms of anti-government extremism are also racist, we will see that this assumption does not hold for groups like the Oath Keepers. Similarly, Amy Cooter has convincingly argued that those in the Michigan Militia in the 2000s sincerely believed themselves to be un-biased, even as they advocated for politics that would disproportionately harm minorities.[194]

Anti-government extremism in America falls into two primary categories: the patriot/militia movement and the sovereign citizen movement (see figure 1).[195] The patriot/militia movement is

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[192] Amy Cooter makes a similar observation in "Americanness, Masculinity, and Whiteness: How Michigan Militia Men Navigate Evolving Social Norms."

[193] Robert Tsai has also documented eight attempts by Americans to create independent political communities within the United States, though many of his cases are not based in anti-government extremism per se. Tsai, *America's Forgotten Constitutions*.

[194] Cooter, "Americanness, Masculinity, and Whiteness: How Michigan Militia Men Navigate Evolving Social Norms."

[195] J.J. MacNab, a leading analyst of anti-government extremism, instead chooses to break this form of extremism into six categories: sovereign citizens, tax protesters, militias/Oath Keepers, constitutional sheriffs, survivalists/preppers, and Moorish Sovereigns. In her version of this diagram, there is also substantial overlap between the different categories, though Moorish Sovereigns are a subset entirely contained by sovereign citizens and constitutional sheriffs are a subset entirely contained by militias/Oath

characterized by a perception that the federal government is increasingly adopting tyrannical policies, threatening the political system based on individual liberty set up by the Founders in the 18th century. This perception of threat leads those in the movement to prepare themselves in numerous ways for violent conflict with the government: learning how to use natural remedies for health problems, becoming self-reliant for all basic needs like food and shelter, and engaging in paramilitary training with powerful weapons. Those in this movement often argue that Americans need to rise up, band together, and cast off tyrannical government, working together to restore their individual liberties.[196]

Sovereign citizens also consider the current federal government to be illegitimate. Rather than identifying a creeping trend towards tyranny, though, adherents of this set of beliefs argue that the government is a sham, typically identifying a moment in American history (often the ratification of the 14th Amendment) where an action replaced "the original, legitimate 'de jure' government... with an illegitimate, tyrannical 'de facto' government."[197] A central idea in the movement is that the federal government replaced "natural" citizenship with an artificial 14th Amendment citizenship (which granted citizenship to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States"). Sovereign citizens believe that the original political system is still authoritative, even if overwhelmingly supplanted with the new tyrannical system; they believe that, by going through a series of arcane, complex, and frankly bizarre actions, they can exempt themselves from the allegedly illegitimate system and reassert their rights under the original American political system. Thus, they file

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Keepers. Personal correspondence. Mark Pitcavage, Senior Research Fellow for the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, prefers a simpler division of right-wing extremism into three categories: white supremacy, anti-government extremism, and "single issue" movements like anti-abortion extremism, anti-Muslim extremism, and Sagebrush Rebellion-style extremism. Pitcavage, "Want a Handy, Simple Visual Guide to U.S. Extreme Right?"

[196] Jackson, "Conspiracy Theories in the Patriot/Militia Movement."

[197] Anti-Defamation League, "The Sovereign Citizen Movement"; Berger, "Without Prejudice: What Sovereign Citizens Believe."

"declarations of sovereignty" with county clerks, create homemade vehicle license plates and driver's licenses, add lexicographical oddities to their names[198], and declare themselves to be "idiots" who are not subject to the jurisdiction of courts.[199]

These two categories of anti-government extremism are conceptually distinct, though in practice individuals often subscribe to both militia and sovereign citizen thought. A prominent example of this is the Bundy family. Cliven Bundy thrust his family into the national spotlight with the Bundy Ranch standoff in 2014. Cliven rejected the authority of the federal government, attempting to pay production taxes to the state of Nevada and his local county instead of federal grazing fees. He argued that the federal government had no constitutional authority to control public land, and therefore had no authority to require ranchers to pay fees to graze their cattle on the land it illegitimately claims to control. He also argued that his county sheriff had the authority – even the obligation – to prevent federal law enforcement from enforcing laws and court orders that, in Bundy's view, were unconstitutional or otherwise illegitimate.

Cliven's son Ryan has embraced sovereign citizens ideas more openly. In the opening days of 2016, after Ammon Bundy called for Americans to take a "hard stand" against an overbearing federal government, he and Ryan led a group – most of them armed – to occupy the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in rural Oregon. After being arrested in late January, Ryan began filing legal documents that rejected the jurisdiction of the federal courts, declared himself to be a man rather than a "person" defined by the law, and demanding enormous sums of money in return for him playing the role of defendant in the case.[200] This was just the latest example of Ryan Bundy's

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[198] For example, a prominent prepper and survivalist who has adopted some sovereign citizens ideas is James Wesley, Rawles. Rawles includes a comma before his family name to distinguish himself from his family.
[199] Anti-Defamation League, "The Sovereign Citizen Movement"; Haas, "Ryan Bundy Declares Himself 'Idiot' Not Subject To US Courts."
[200] Haas, "Ryan Bundy Declares Himself 'Idiot' Not Subject To US Courts."

attempts to put into practice his belief in the illegitimacy of government at all levels: he had previously been arrested or cited for things like resisting arrest, driving without a license, and interfering with an animal officer.[201]

With the overwhelming focus on race-based extremism, there has been a limited amount of research into right-wing extremism that isn't race-based. In 2004, D.J. Mulloy wrote a very approachable introduction to the patriot/militia movement.[202] In 2009, Robert Churchill published a detailed book investigating the movement and its historical precedent. Churchill argues that there are two main divisions in the patriot/militia movement: "constitutionalist" militias (which are concerned about the government violating civil liberties and reaching past the authority granted to it by the Constitution) and "millenarian" militias (which are animated by conspiracy theories about nefarious forces stealing freedom for their own benefit). While this is a useful analytical distinction, Churchill's own study reveals that most supporters of the movement advocate a mix of constitutionalist and millenarian ideas.[203] This is certainly true of the Oath Keepers.

Both of these books are important and useful studies of the patriot/militia movement, but they (necessarily) focus on an earlier iteration of the movement. As the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has noted, the movement exploded throughout Barack Obama's presidency: though an imperfect measure of the movement's actual size, the SPLC counted 149 active anti-government groups in 2008, jumping to 512 groups in 2009 and peaking at 1360 in 2012 before falling to around 1000 in 2015.[204] These important studies therefore miss the important developments in the movement that accompanied this massive growth after they were published.

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[201] Brosseau, "Ryan Bundy Fought with Government Long before Oregon Standoff."
[202] Mulloy, *American Extremism*.
[203] Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant's Face*.
[204] Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," February 17, 2016; Berger, "The Hate List."

I am aware of only one study that looks at the patriot/militia movement after this change began. In 2013, Amy Cooter published a dissertation based on fieldwork she conducted with militia groups in Michigan from 2008 through 2011. Cooter's excellent work focuses on the questions of race and gender in the movement, a particularly important topic given widespread assumptions that the movement is racist.

These studies leave a gap that this dissertation attempts to fill: how do influential thinkers in the contemporary iteration of the movement understand their political context? How do they make sense of the problems they identify? How do they decide how to respond to these problems, and how do they convince others that their response is appropriate?

In addition to this analytical gap, this dissertation attempts to fill a more basic one: we have relatively little systematic knowledge about the patriot/militia movement – about their ideas, demographics, and processes of radicalization into the movement. While some of the lessons learned from other forms of extremism may hold for this movement, scholars have not undertaken much research to find out whether this is true. For example, scholars of race-based extremism have found that individuals typically join the movement because of personal relationships with people in the movement or out of a desire to participate in the adventure of violence, not because they hold racist beliefs and seek out an extremist group that advocates for those beliefs.[205]

Again, Amy Cooter's work is an exception to this trend. She extends work on the role of race in right-wing extremism in arguing that racism in militia groups that aren't organized around (imagined) racial identity is likely similar to racism found in the general population: some (perhaps relatively small) proportion of militia members are ideologically racist (in the sense of white

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[205] Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*; Blee and Yates, "The Place of Race in Conservative and Far-Right Movements."

supremacism), but a larger portion support a color-blind politics that disproportionately harms people of color.[206]

A larger portion still engages in other forms of bigotry, especially nativism and Islamophobia. Though nativism looks much like racism, outsiders are determined not based on their skin color or alleged racial identity but on whether they "belong."[207] For the patriot/militia movement, this sense of belonging is tied up in understandings of immigration, legal status, and English-language use. Border security is a frequent talking point for those in the movement, many of whom have traveled to the U.S.-Mexico border to engage in paramilitary security operations or have donated money to these border militia groups.[208] Some of these groups are led by self-identified racists (like David Duke, the notorious former Klansman); but many of the participants believe that they are not motivated by racial identity but by concerns of criminality, violence, and the fairness that comes through following immigration laws.[209]

Similarly, Islamophobia has become more and more prevalent in the patriot/militia movement over the last decade. Much of this is due to the broader political context in which too many people cannot separate Islam from terrorism. The movement also has ties to the "creeping sharia" movement, whose supporters believe that there is an international conspiracy to replace the Constitution and American legal system with Islamic religious law.[210] As mentioned in the last chapter, in the summer of 2017, militia groups and members of Oath Keepers around the nation served as "security" for rallies organized by ACT for America to warn about the threats of sharia

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[206] Cooter, "Americanness, Masculinity, and Whiteness: How Michigan Militia Men Navigate Evolving Social Norms," 131–81.
[207] Bennett, *The Party of Fear*.
[208] Shapira, *Waiting for José*.
[209] Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, 34–35; Shapira, *Waiting for José*.
[210] I wrote more about this movement in Jackson, "Non-Normative Political Extremism."

law.[211] In its annual "Year in Hate and Extremism" report, the SPLC noted the "adoption by leading [anti-government] groups of hardline anti-Muslim ideology" as one of the most important trends in 2016.[212]

As with the Oath Keepers, these forms of bigotry complicate the claims by many anti-government extremists that they aren't racist and that accusations of bigotry are attempts to defame them. It is true that the categories of "others" that are the target of animus from those in the patriot/militia movement typically aren't racial categories as such, but any tendency to harass or condemn categories of people including "illegal" immigrants and Muslims is difficult to distinguish from racism and often serves as a more palatable set of ideas for those who wish to avoid being accused of racism.

Nationalism and National Identity

These forms of bigotry prevalent within the patriot/militia movement can be understood as emerging from the form of American national identity espoused by those in the movement. Militia members considers themselves to be patriots, and they think of themselves as protecting the legacy of those who founded the nation.

As Benedict Anderson famously observed decades ago, nations are "imagined communities."[213] That is, they are political communities whose members may never meet or otherwise interact; yet these members believe themselves to be part of the same community. Thus, nations are constructed in the minds of their members and non-members: members ostensibly

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[211] Gjelten, "'March Against Sharia' Planned Across The U.S."; Morlin, "ACT's Anti-Muslim Message Fertile Ground for Oath Keepers."
[212] Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," February 15, 2017.
[213] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

share some common set of features that gives them membership, and non-members ostensibly all lack that set of features.

Even within a single nation, though, there may be multiple definitions of that nation. Cynthia Miller-Idriss argues that "Nations... are not only imaged once; they are re-imagined again and again by different groups of individuals, as different versions of, and narratives about, nationhood potentially compete, coexist, or succeed one another over time."[214] In other words, different groups of Americans may have different ideas about what America is. Deborah Schildkraut has investigated these different ideas about what makes an individual an American (or not): some definitions focus on who your family is (genetics define national belonging), some focus on where you live (location defines national belonging), and yet others focus on what you believe or what you do (political beliefs or civic behavior define national belonging).[215]

As will become clear, an understanding of what America is and what it means to be an American is central for the Oath Keepers. The group's members call themselves patriots and "guardians of the Republic," suggesting that their enemies are foreign or are domestic traitors to the nation. They view any deviation from their originalist understanding of the Constitution as illegitimate, as an act of treason that must be resisted by any means necessary.[216]

The group's version of American national identity is a form of civil religion. Scholars use the term "civil religion" to refer to two different things: for some scholars, civil religion refers to the numerous ways that a basic form of Protestant Christianity has been diffused into the nation; for

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[214] Miller-Idriss, *Blood and Culture*, 171; Fox and Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood."
[215] Schildkraut, "Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century"; Schildkraut, "The More Things Change... American Identity and Mass and Elite Responses to 9/11."
[216] "Originalism" refers to a form of literal textual interpretation of the Constitution that asserts that the original intent of the document's writers (or the original understanding of the American people) holds supreme legal authority today. Cornell, "People's Constitution vs. the Lawyer's Constitution." See also Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*.

others, civil religion refers to a form of nationalism that treats the nation as a deity and foundational political texts as sacred and inerrant.[217] This is certainly true for groups like the Oath Keepers who view America as the last outpost of freedom in a world of tyrants, and who view the Constitution and other founding documents as fixed, authoritative, and flawless – so perfect that people do not even need to interpret them, and instead should follow the (alleged) plain meaning of the words of these texts, thought to be so clear that every well-intentioned American can accurately understand them with no training in the law.[218] Protecting their vision of America becomes the telos (that is, the ultimate purpose or goal of life) for members of the Oath Keepers, many of whom assert their willingness to fight and die for that vision.

This rigid national identity – based on a literalist reading of foundational documents and a reverence bordering on sacralization of the men thought to have given birth to the nation –serves to help supporters of the patriot/militia movement to understand themselves and their cause; as I will argue, it also has the potential to win support from the wider public. Most Americans may not be quick to agree with the political goals of groups like the Oath Keepers; but many Americans are also quick to express unwavering reverence for the Founders. Thus, extremist groups may find mainstream support for their radical politics to the extent that they are able to convincingly tie themselves to the Founders and other revered Americans.

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[217] These two ideas are laid out in the opening words of Robert Bellah's seminal "Civil Religion in America." Bellah's article began a line of work that focuses on the second, non-Christian understanding of civil religion.

[218] Crapanzano compares the textual literalism of conservative Christianity and conservative politics in America in *Serving the Word*.

Political Activism and Social Movements

Social movement scholars have done a substantial amount of work on how political actors use language in an attempt to win support and make success more likely, with most of this work falling into the strategic framing branch of social movement theory.[219] Theories of strategic framing assert that actors make strategic choices about how to talk about themselves and the issues they care about, driven (at least in part) by expectations about how that language will affect their movement. For example, "pro-life" is a strategic framing choice by activists who want to outlaw abortion, positioning themselves as advocating life and implicitly positioning their political opponents as anti-life; "pro-choice" is similarly a strategic framing choice by activists who want to keep abortion legal or expand access to abortion, positioning their cause as one concerned with individual freedom and autonomy and implicitly positioning their political opponents as authoritarians.[220] Scholarship about strategic framing has investigated how actors use ideas to identify problems and solutions (with diagnostic and prognostic framing), bridge divisions between activists with similar goals (with frame bridging and frame extension), and motivate supporters of the movement (with frame amplification and motivational framing).[221] Research has also found that some rhetorical frames are so effective in mobilizing support that they are adopted by unrelated actors pursuing unrelated causes; in contemporary America, these master frames include "freedom" and "civil rights."[222]

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[219] Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment"; Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation."
[220] Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Ideologies and Frames in Social Movement Research," 39.
[221] Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation"; Snow and Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization."
[222] Snow and Benford, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest"; Lio, Melzer, and Reese, "Constructing Threat and Appropriating 'Civil Rights.'"

Some social movement scholars have pushed back on this assumption about the rationality of framing choices, arguing instead that how actors talk about themselves and the issues they care about may be driven more by existing ideas and commitments (perhaps religious beliefs or cultural identity). In other words, the language that activists use may follow from ideology *or* strategy.[223]

Most likely, though, most choices about how to talk about themselves and their issues are made based on a combination of established ideas and strategic thought. These pre-existing ideas and beliefs define the universe of possible language used by an actor; out of these options, strategic considerations about the consequences of this language may guide the actor's final decision. In the end, this combination shapes actors' self-understanding, in terms of both identity and behavior: we are these kinds of people who do these kinds of things. As we will see, this is certainly true for the Oath Keepers.

These ways that actors talk about themselves and their goals are not merely words. They are important subjects of study for scholars who want to understand what actors care about; but they are also important for actors who join a group or movement to pursue political goals. For decades, scholars have observed that the stories that political actors tell can help them make sense of their world, build collective identity, and began to articulate political problems and their solutions.[224] Groups like the Oath Keepers tell stories about themselves and about individuals they venerate or loathe, about ongoing events and events from the past; these narratives serve all of these purposes and more.

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[223] Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements"; Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Ideologies and Frames in Social Movement Research"; Snow and Benford, "Comment on Oliver and Johnston: Clarifying the Relationship between Framing and Ideology."

[224] Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach"; Polletta, "'It Was Like a Fever...' Narrative and Identity in Social Protest."

Goals for political actors in social movements may take different forms.[225] They may be institutional-instrumental (e.g., elect certain candidates or support certain policies). They may be noninstitutional-instrumental (e.g., prevent the enforcement of certain laws or undermine the legitimacy of institutions). Or they may be cultural (e.g., change broad perceptions of what government ought to be, what "America" means, how (and even whether) to work for the common good). And, of course, goals may simultaneously be more than one thing: the patriot/militia movement might openly flout laws prohibiting high-capacity rifle magazines as a step towards rolling back enacted legislation on firearms regulations and towards returning American identity to one centered around rugged individualism and self-reliance.

Studying how groups like the Oath Keepers talk about themselves and their political context can help us understand their goals and the behavior they might use to pursue those goals and to gain wider support more generally; understanding these groups can help us design interventions to combat this form of right-wing extremism. Ultimately, if we want to reduce the risk of threats posed by groups like the Oath Keepers – threats like political violence and the erosion of political norms – we must understand who they believe themselves to be, what problems they think threaten themselves and America, and what kinds of action they are willing to take in pursuit of their goals.

The Tea Party

Before closing this chapter, it is important to recognize that, though scholars have directed little attention to the patriot/militia movement, there has been a reasonable amount of research

[225] Amenta et al., "The Political Consequences of Social Movements."

conducted on the Tea Party.[226] Bursting onto the scene in the same political moment that the patriot/militia movement experienced explosive growth, the Tea Party movement shares many characteristics with the patriot/militia movement, though there are important differences as well.

Both can be seen as part of an upwelling of distrust of the government. Some of this is certainly attributable to the election of America's first African American president in Barack Obama; but some of it is also independently attributable to anger over the government's response to the financial crisis that began in 2008, as well as the surge in support for the Democratic Party that gave them the presidency as well as majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Scholars disagree about the degree to which racial prejudice was the primary driver of this movement.[227] It seems likely that some of the voices in this angry crowd were motivated by racism; others were motivated by bias they did not recognize to stem from racism; and others still were motivated entirely by the version of fiscal conservatism that originally spawned the Tea Party protests.[228]

In fact, some members of the patriot/militia movement were closely involved in Tea Party organizations, and the Oath Keepers viewed Tea Party rallies as good opportunities to recruit new members.[229] This is not surprising, given their shared distrust of the federal government, a mutual

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[226] To name just a few examples: Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes*; Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*; Van Dyke and Meyer, *Understanding the Tea Party Movement*; Braunstein, *Prophets and Patriots*.

[227] Parker and Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In*; Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*; Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*.

[228] I do not mean to suggest that the fiscal conservatism that originally motivated the Tea Party movement was devoid of racism. The producerist populism that Mark Rupert, Michael Kazin, and others have described – where the "productive classes" feel used by the elite and cheated by the unproductive poor – is at play here, with Tea Party supporters (who were overwhelmingly white and often upper middle classes) rejecting bank bailouts and any form of stimulus that may have aided those with less economic security than they had – many of whom were minorities. Rupert, "Articulating Neoliberalism and Far-Right Conspiracism: The Case of the American 'Gun Rights' Culture"; Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 34.

[229] Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 149–53.

desire to shrink the size and power of government, and references to the same events and figures from American history to situate themselves and legitimate their goals.[230] In her excellent investigation of Tea Party activists in Upstate New York, Ruth Braunstein finds that these activists were guided in their goals and behavior by a belief that citizens had a responsibility to be watchdogs, alert for corrupt politicians; this understanding of citizenship led them to adopt an aggressive, confrontational relationship with the government.[231] This is another point of similarity with the patriot/militia movement, whose supporters emphasize that the federal government is tyrannical and that all patriotic Americans should prepare for violent conflict with that government to restore their liberty and defend the Constitution.

This distrust of government leads both the Tea Party and the patriot/militia movement to support conspiracy theories about the government: whether about healthcare reform leading to "death panels," Barack Obama fabricating his birth certificate, or the United Nations conspiring to erode American national sovereignty and attack individual liberty. Both movements also contain elements that engage in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim nativism, arguing that immigrants (or perhaps "illegal immigrants") or Muslims (or perhaps "radical Muslims") can never truly be American, that they will never assimilate, or that they are invading the nation with the intention of fundamentally reshaping it according to their un-American views.

Despite these many similarities, there are some important differences between the Tea Party and the patriot/militia movement. Most notably, Tea Party activists are engaged with the political system. They support political candidates, encourage people to vote, go to town halls, and sign petitions. The patriot/militia movement, on the other hand, tends to argue that such behavior

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[230] Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes*.
[231] Braunstein, *Prophets and Patriots*.

will not succeed in protecting their vision of America; instead, the movement believes that Americans need to be ready for a shooting war if they are to reclaim their rights. As we will see, while groups like the Oath Keepers are happy to support candidates who share their political perspective, their primary form of political participation is outside the normal forms of participation in America.

Perhaps the most significant difference between these two movements is the level of resources available to some parts of the Tea Party. While some Tea Party groups are grassroots affairs, run by volunteers with limited financial resources, other Tea Party groups have been backed by major financial interests (especially the Koch brothers).[232] The patriot/militia movement, on the other hand, is almost entirely driven by group membership fees and small donations from like-minded individuals. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of its supporters are blue-collar workers or are unemployed; for example, Michael Vanderboegh, a long-time leader in the movement, lived for many years off government benefits, especially after facing a series of health problems. This general lack of resources is exacerbated by the enormous expense of the weapons, emergency food supplies, and other stockpiles and gear that the patriot/militia movement encourages its members to acquire.

In summary, there is very limited scholarship on the patriot/militia movement (and on anti-government extremism more broadly). This dissertation aims to begin to fill the gap in our empirical and theoretical knowledge about this movement. To do this, I draw on research focused on a range of other topics that hold the promise of shedding some light on this movement. Specifically, I use research on nationalism and national identity, social movements, and the Tea

[232] Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism."

Party to guide my work investigating how the Oath Keepers uses its understanding of American national history to guide its political goals and behavior and pursue widespread public support.

Data and Methods

In this project, I investigate the ways that the Oath Keepers (OK) makes sense of its political context. In particular, I focus on how the group talks about American history to help its members understand the threats they face and to help its members decide how to confront those threats; this same rhetoric may also attempt to convince the wider public that the Oath Keepers aren't the bad actors they are sometimes made out to be. This kind of question fits into the branch of social movement research focused on strategic framing,[233] and the methods I use here are a form of framing analysis.[234] In short, framing analysis examines the language used by social movement actors in order to discover the ideas these actors use to make sense of themselves, their context, and their behavior.

Perhaps the dominant trend in social movement research, including work on strategic framing, is positivistic: research that attempts to uncover causal patterns between frames and various outcomes (such as social movement mobilization, changes in public opinion, or even policy change) as revealed in correlations that exhibit "lawlike regularity."[235] In other words, positivistic framing analysis looks for consistent patterns in the effects of language used by social movement actors.

This research follows the different logic of interpretivism.[236] Instead of looking for consistent patterns that might indicate a causal relationship, I am setting out to understand[237] how

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[233] But see chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of strategic framing and related areas of social movement research including studies of ideology and of collective identity.
[234] Johnston, "A Methodology for Frame Analysis: From Discourse to Cognitive Schemata."
[235] Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, 18–19; Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry*, 12, passim.
[236] Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, 35.
[237] Daniel Little even suggests that "explanation" and "understanding" are two quite distinct goals of social science. "Explanation involves identifying general causes of an event, whereas understanding involves

the Oath Keepers engages in meaning-making, what the group does to make sense of the world around it that seems so hostile.

In this chapter, I describe the approach of my research. I describe the sources of the data I use, as well as how I collected and processed that data. I elaborate briefly on the analytic methods I employ. Finally, I present a brief high-level look at the data.

Data

Data for this project consist of textual, audio, and video material posted by the Oath Keepers online. The internet provides a means for the group to spread its message to a wide public, recruiting new members, portraying itself as mainstream or legitimate, and organizing on-the-ground activity. The group receives coverage in mainstream media outlets from time to time;[238] it sees this coverage as collectivist propaganda meant to slander the group and depict it as filled with racists and terrorists.

The internet allows the Oath Keepers to present its own side of the story. Unlike older forms of communication used by right-wing extremists (like pamphlets, telephone hotlines, and video cassettes), having a website means that even those with a casual interest in the group might easily come across an essay or video produced by the Oath Keepers.[239] OK is able to tell its own version of its involvement in the Bundy Ranch standoff or the Ferguson, Missouri protests after

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discovering the meaning of an event or practice in a particular social context." Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, 68.

[238] For example: Sharrock, "Oath Keepers and the Age of Treason"; Bogan, "Police Shut down Mysterious 'Oath Keepers' Guarding Rooftops in Downtown Ferguson"; Heffernan, "In Ferguson, Oath Keepers Draw Both Suspicion and Gratitude"; Markus, "Oath Keepers Put 'Boots on the Ground' to Guard Oath-Breaking Kim Davis from 'Dictator' Judge"; Holley, "Race Riots, Terrorist Attacks and Martial Law"; Williams, "The Oath Keepers, the Far-Right Group Answering Trump's Call to Watch the Polls, Explained."

[239] Berlet, "Who Is Mediating the Storm? Right-Wing Alternative Information Networks."

Michael Brown's death. This is not to say that the internet levels the information playing field for the Oath Keepers, giving the group as much control over its reputation as national media outlets; it simply makes it possible for the group to present itself to a wider public than was previously possible.

The data used in this project is all publicly available: none of it requires an Oath Keepers membership or special permission to view. This project investigates the public story that the group tells about what it means to be an American. This story helps its supporters make sense of the threat they perceive, and the group may hope that it will justify OK's vigorous dissent and its possible use of violence.

Since this project focuses on the ways that the Oath Keepers makes sense of the contemporary political situation facing America, my data exclusively consist of material posted by the Oath Keepers or by Stewart Rhodes, the group's founder and president. While there is much more material featuring Oath Keepers but disseminated by others (for example, many speeches given by Stewart Rhodes are only shared by accounts not controlled by the group), focusing on material disseminated by the group allows me to focus on the material it wants to share widely. This data collection strategy assumes that the material shared on various platforms by accounts belonging to the group is material that the group most wants a large audience to see. The logic behind this is that the Oath Keepers curates certain information for the public, selecting what it wants the public to see coming from the group, and in doing so shaping the public's perception of the group.[240]

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[240] Thorson and Wells, "How Gatekeeping Still Matters: Understanding Media Effects in an Era of Curated Flows."

Any project that studies ongoing activity threatens to never be finished. To ensure that I finished this project in a timely manner, I examine material posted to the web on or before February 23, 2016. This date includes material produced during and immediately after the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon. With this cut-off date, I miss the reaction of the Oath Keepers to the shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016, but I include the group's reaction to the shooting in San Bernardino, California, in December 2015.

Data Sources

Since forming in 2009, the Oath Keepers has maintained an active presence on the internet. Initially, it utilized the blogspot platform to host its early content. Later, it created a free-standing website. The group conducted a major renovation of this website in December 2014, just prior to my first round of collecting data from this site. Before starting the group, Stewart Rhodes also had a personal blog.[241] His activity on this blog decreased dramatically after he started the Oath Keepers. In total, his personal blog contains 113 posts, ranging from October 28, 2006 to November 6, 2012, with no posts appearing in 2010 or 2011. I collected data from Rhodes's blog on May 8, 2015. As of February 2018, the most recent post on this blog was dated November 6, 2012.

The Oath Keepers blogspot site contains 334 posts, posted between March 2, 2009 and April 6, 2015.[242] There were no posts to the blogspot site between November 2009 and April 2014, and there were no posts between May and November 2014. The site was briefly used in December

[241] http://stewart-rhodes.blogspot.com/
[242] http://oath-keepers.blogspot.com

2014 and January 2015 while the main Oath Keepers website was being updated. I collected data from this blog on May 20, 2015. As of February 2018, the most recent post on this blog is dated April 6, 2015.

The primary Oath Keepers website first came online shortly before July 13, 2009.[243] Initially, I had planned to create a local archive of the website on January 1, 2016, and I had intended to use that date for my cut-off point for data collection. Due to technical hurdles, I was unable to collect data from the group's website until February 23, 2016.[244] The local archive I created on this date contains more than 9000 pages; after filtering out duplicate pages, the archive contains more than 1600 pages.[245]

The group has also been active on YouTube since March 2009. For this project, I examined videos uploaded to three YouTube channels. "OathKeepersOK" is the group's primary channel, with 132 videos uploaded as of February 23, 2016, totaling 34 hours and 35 minutes. Videos posted to "OathKeepersOK" range from March 2009 to January 2016, with a gap from June 2015 to late October 2015. Links to YouTube from the group's website and blog point to this channel. The national group also uses a channel called "Oath Keepers National," which contains 6 videos totaling 2 hours and 30 minutes. All videos posted to "Oath Keepers National" were posted between September 4, 2015, and October 23, 2015. The group also used a channel called "Oath Keepers," which contains 9 videos totaling 25 minutes. All of the videos on this channel relate to

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[243] http://oathkeepers.org

[244] Around this time, any attempt to save a page from the Oath Keepers website as an HTML file failed, whether collected using recursive download tools or saved individually through the "Save As" function in a web browser. After being downloaded, these local HTML files infinitely reload. Eventually, I discovered that this problem was due to several lines of Javascript code in each page. I removed these lines of Javascript from my local copies of the Oath Keepers website, which allows the pages to be viewed normally.

[245] The Oath Keepers website includes comments on posts. The website generates a unique URL for each comment on each post. I filtered out files that were effectively duplicates corresponding to comments on posts.

the security operation at the Sugar Pine Mine in Josephine County, Oregon, in late spring 2015, with each video uploaded between April 18 and May 3.

In total, this project examines approximately 2000 webpages across the primary Oath Keepers website, the Oath Keepers blog, and Stewart Rhodes's personal blog, along with 147 videos totaling 37.5 hours.

Data Collection

Though it is all publicly available online, I archived all of the material used as data for this project, creating digital copies on my local computer that can be accessed without the internet. There is a growing recognition that qualitative researchers need to think carefully about long term data preservation and access.[246] While there are legitimate reasons for qualitative researchers to avoid creating durable and accessible versions of their data (for example, if conducting sensitive interviews that, if made publicly available, could lead to harm for research participants), those concerns do not exist for this project: the Oath Keepers has already made the decision to make this material publicly available.

Several reasons motivated my decision to create local copies for all data. First, it is possible that OK could decide to take down individual pages of its website or individual YouTube videos – perhaps no longer devoting financial resources to keeping this information available online, or perhaps deciding that it no longer wants certain information to be available to the public. It is also possible that the group could face a cyber-attack that closes off access to its web presence. In an otherwise excellent study, Robert Churchill did not make durable, accessible versions of important

[246] The DA-RT (Data Access – Research Transparency) initiative in political science is a prominent example of this. http://www.dartstatement.org

internet-based data for his study of the militia movement, and some of this data is now inaccessible (notably, the website of J.J. Johnson, a black militia member from Ohio).[247] For this project, I have developed strategies to ensure long-term durability and accessibility of all internet-based data, both to increase transparency for this study and to preserve data for future scholarship on the Oath Keepers. This type of archive is permissible under fair use doctrine.[248]

Tools

I use two primary tools for collecting data. For websites and blogs, I use wget.[249] This tool allows users to download all items and information necessary for pages to display without an internet connection, which includes images, embedded video, and other non-textual items. This results in a fully functional local copy of each website, which can be browsed without an internet connection. This tool does not result in a perfect copy, though: for example, page layout looks different and some page dependencies (such as some pictures) are not included.

I collect videos hosted on YouTube using youtube-dl.[250] This tool downloads videos along with some metadata. I use this tool to download three files for each video: the video file itself, usually in the highest available resolution; a file containing the description of the video, which appears immediately below the video on YouTube; and a metadata file containing a wide range of information about the video, such as the name of the account that uploaded the video, the length of the video, the number of views at the time of downloading, and tags specified by the user who uploaded the video (such as politics, Oath Keepers, 2nd Amendment, etc.). YouTube generates

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[247] Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant's Face*.
[248] Consultation with a copyright specialist at Syracuse University Libraries and with several lawyers confirms that this falls under fair use.
[249] https://www.gnu.org/software/wget/
[250] https://rg3.github.io/youtube-dl/

automatic captions for many videos uploaded to the site, including many of the videos in my archive. These captions are included in the metadata file for each video. I do not use these automatic captions for my analysis, because they are often not very accurate even on videos with high quality audio. Many of these videos do not have high quality audio, leading to very inaccurate automatic captions.

Data Processing and Analysis

Website text extraction

After creating local archives of the website and blogs, I used software to extract the text from each page.[251] This tool allowed me to set aside information like page headers, banners, and other items that appear on each page. For example, each page on the Oath Keepers website contains a sidebar with links to external sites and brief descriptions of important Oath Keepers documents and individuals (such as their list of "10 orders we will not obey" and their Board of Directors). Using this tool, I ignore this text and only extract the body of the content on each page. In addition, I exclude comments left on each page, most of which are written by visitors to each site. Social movement scholars have argued that both elites and non-elites participate in discourse that helps social movements make sense of their world; importantly, the results of framing analysis may differ dramatically depending on which group is the focus of analysis.[252] For this study, I focus on content produced or shared by the Oath Keepers rather than content produced or shared by individual supporters (or opponents) of the group. After excluding repeated content and comments from readers, I am able to get a more accurate sense of the amount of textual data that I

[251] This software, called BeautifulSoup, is an html processing package available for the Python programming language.
[252] Allen, "Promise Keepers and Racism."

have. This process also allows me to use automated text analysis (described below) to get an overview of my data.

Video transcription

Video data poses a greater challenge for analysis. My analysis in this project focuses on text. For videos, that means analyzing what those who appear in the video say, setting aside characteristics of the audio (for example, voice pitch or speaking speed).[253] I mostly set aside images that appear in videos as well, though I include some particular images that serve an important function for the Oath Keepers.

To facilitate analysis, I created transcriptions of each of the 136 videos collected for this project. Most videos (99, totaling nearly 29.5 hours) I transcribed by hand. 37 videos I transcribed with Trint, an automated audio-to-text service, totaling just over 8 hours of content.[254] For each video automatically transcribed by Trint, I watched the video and corrected the transcription where necessary.

Automated text analysis

In total, the data used for this project (website pages, blog posts, and video transcripts) contain approximately 1.4 million words, or more than 2500 single-spaced pages. Given this large amount of data, I used automatic text analysis to create an overview of the data. I created a list of

[253] Scholars have begun to find that characteristics of speech other than the words being used can be useful social science measures. For example, Bryce Dietrich, Ryan Enos, and Maya Sen found that the "emotional arousal" of Supreme Court justices can be measured by the pitch of their voices; emotional arousal in turn is a robust predictor of how the Court will vote on a given case. Mazie, "Supreme Court Justices May Give Away Their Votes with Their Voices."

[254] www.trint.com

446 keywords that signify the presence of certain topics and actors; several keywords also identify types of documents (for example, testimonials and documents originally published on a different website).[255] I use this list of keywords to identify 8 topics (American history, people, political issues, P/M movement, gear and tactics, political system, conspiracies, and miscellaneous) in the documents; many of these topics also contain subtopics. Each document may contain more than one topic and subtopic.

Table 1 shows a breakdown of how many documents mention each of the main 7 topics. In this project, I am particularly interested in how the Oath Keepers use American national history to make sense of their political context and to gain mainstream support. Thus, Table 2 shows a breakdown of how many documents mention each of the subtopics in American history.

Table 1

Topics	Number of Documents
American History	777
Conspiracy Theories	130
Gear and Tactics	506
Patriot/Militia Movement	1073
Public Figures (Contemporary and Historical)	582
Political Ideas	737
Political System and Policies	560

[255] The list of keywords and a diagram showing the relationship of topics and subtopics is available at https://github.com/sjacks26/PM-topic-dictionary.

Table 2

American History Subtopics	Number of Documents
Civil Rights	15
Civil War	99
Early American History	10
Founding Fathers	158
Founding Documents	558
Recent Events	206
Revolutionary War	80
Other Events	67
Other Important Documents	7

It is important to note that this method of automated text analysis does not reveal anything other than the number of documents that mention a certain topic. It does not say how much that document talks about a certain topic, or how important that topic is for the document. It does not say anything about what the author says about a topic. For example, documents about civil rights might praise Civil Rights activists for their bravery in opposing violent systemic racism, or they might attack Civil Rights activists for alleged connections to communists. In other words, this automated topic identification work provides insight into the distribution of important themes and topics across documents, but it does not reveal anything about what those themes and topics mean. To understand *how* the Oath Keepers talks about these topics, rather than just *whether* they talk about them, requires carefully reading each document.

Framing analysis

As mentioned above, this project focuses on how the Oath Keepers talks about American history to help its members understand the threats they face and to help its members decide how to confront those threats; this same rhetoric may also convince the wider public that members of the Oath Keepers aren't the bad actors they are sometimes made out to be. This analysis is a form of framing analysis, which investigates the rhetorical strategies that actors use to help themselves and others make sense of their identity, the issues they care about, and the proper way to get involved in those issues.

To do this, I analyze the texts that form the data for this project using an inductive coding strategy. Rather than defining codes beforehand and looking for instances of those codes, I closely read each text and code based on what those texts say or do. Important codes include "2nd Amendment," "Founding Fathers," "nullification," "crisis," and "Waco." Some codes are short quotes from the text, while others are summaries of what the text discusses or are analytical codes that summarize conclusions I draw from the text. Given the large amount of textual data involved in this project, I looked to computational aids to help my analysis. I used ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program, to manage and assign these inductive codes to the texts as I read them.

The Ongoing Struggle over Natural Rights

> "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." – Declaration of Independence

> "Rights come first, then government is created to protect them, not the other way around. This is something modern political and legal elites want us to forget. They don't believe in inalienable, natural rights that are ours by virtue of 'nature and nature's God.'" – Stewart Rhodes

The American Declaration of Independence famously proclaims that individuals have inherent rights, variously described as natural, inalienable, or God-given. Those would-be Americans in favor of independence from Great Britain justified their rebellion by laying out a "long train of abuses and usurpations" that violated their rights. Despite this lengthy list of reasons for independence, this document self-consciously provides only a partial list of natural rights: "among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Given the vaunted place of the Declaration of Independence in American public memory, it stands as little surprise that contemporary American political dissent often similarly points to natural rights as justification. If individuals have rights that come from "Nature or Nature's God," then those rights come before any political system and therefore trump any decisions made by political systems. And if threatened, surely natural rights must be defended – if other means fail, with violence. This logic raises several important questions, though: what are natural rights? how do Americans distinguish between the government doing something that they think is wrong but does not violate their rights from something that does violate their natural rights? and how do they know when they should take up arms to stop government action that they think is wrong?

This chapter examines how the Oath Keepers talks about natural rights. I argue that the group uses this concept as a rallying cry without developing a meaningful understanding of it: OK insists that natural rights must be defended, but it says nothing about how to know when natural rights are being violated. By using this powerful motivating frame without specifying its contents, the Oath Keepers contributes to an environment where individuals use lofty political principles shared widely by members of their political community as cover for their dissenting behavior that pursues goals not shared widely by members of their political community.[256] In other words, talking about natural rights serves as a possible way for the Oath Keepers to gain mainstream political legitimacy for their extremist behavior.

Concepts

This analysis relies on two key conceptual premises. First, "natural rights" are those that humans have simply due to their being human. Some scholars suggest that there is an alternative understanding of natural rights as those that can be identified by reason alone, with no reliance on political or religious principles that are not universal. Other scholars do not make any distinction between these two understandings. OK seems to use the term in the first sense: the usage of "natural rights" as a rallying cry for vigorous dissent derives not from how the rights are identified, but from their inherent nature.[257]

This leads to the second conceptual premise: "natural rights," "inalienable rights," and "God-given rights" effectively refer to the same rights, but they emphasize different things about those rights. "Natural rights" conveys the broadest message: these rights belong to individuals

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[256] The idea of motivating frames comes from Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," 617.
[257] This premise follows Beitz, "Naturalistic Theories." Beitz elaborates on the distinction between these two understandings, its lineage, and its significance.

simply because they are people. "God-given rights" conveys a similar message, but adds a religious component: those inherent rights come from God. "Inalienable rights" conveys a more specific message: these natural rights cannot be legitimately taken from any individual (with possible exceptions made to punish criminals, for example).[258]

Natural Rights

As a group, the Oath Keepers frequently refers back to America's founding documents (in particular, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights). Unsurprisingly, then, the idea of natural rights comes up from time to time. Sometimes, this concept comes up in texts that explicitly interpret the founding documents, while other times the concept comes up in the middle of a discussion of current events. In this second category, "natural rights" and its related terms occur as an off-hand reference: for example, in an assertion that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF, which is the primary federal agency responsible for overseeing the firearms industry) "cares not one whit about your or my unalienable rights or our Constitutional protections as American citizens. Nope. The ATF is hell-bent on tormenting anyone who would dare stand up for the fuller meaning of our Constitution and Bill of Rights."[259]

Much of the time, though, comments about natural rights are more substantial. Two main lines of thought emerge from these more substantial comments. First, natural rights start with life,

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[258] There is ongoing debate in some circles over whether there is a difference between "unalienable" and "inalienable." Krieg, "Unalienable vs. Inalienable." Some argue that the difference is vast: inalienable rights can be surrendered voluntarily, while unalienable rights cannot be surrendered under any circumstances. This difference often follows from a tenuous parsing of differences between historical dictionaries. For example, Bo Perrin, "Unalienable Vs Inalienable"; Boskey, "How the Declaration of Independence Got Hijacked"; Adask, "'Unalienable' vs. 'Inalienable.'" Both words appear in different drafts of the Declaration of Independence. On the Oath Keepers website and blog, both terms appear, but "unalienable" is far more common. In this chapter, I treat the words as synonyms.

[259] OathKeepers.org, "WACO: A NEW REVELATION."

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but they go beyond those listed in the Constitution. Second, whatever they are, natural rights must be defended when threatened, if necessary with the use of violence.

Which Rights Are Natural?

Unsurprisingly, the starting point for the Oath Keepers on natural rights is the Declaration of Independence, which the group says is "fundamentally a natural law document." "[T]he 'long train of abuses' that made revolt necessary were not only deprivations of representation... but also of natural rights, such as life, liberty, and property...." But OK argues that the Bill of Rights "does not grant any rights." The First Amendment protects "pre-existing natural rights" of free speech, free press, free practice of religion, and free assembly. The Second Amendment "is a prohibition on government action, meant to protect a pre-existing right" to keep and bear arms. The "Fourth Amendment does not grant us a right to be secure in our persons, houses, papers and effects," but "declares that our right to that security 'shall not be violated' and then it sets forth procedural requirements to protect that preexisting right. Nor does the Fifth Amendment grant us a right to life, liberty, or property. It merely prohibits the government from depriving us of those pre-existing rights without due process of law...."[260] Similarly, the group suggests that the Ninth Amendment "speaks of the enumeration... not the 'creation by the Constitution of certain rights.'"[261]

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[260] Rhodes, "THE FIRST FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION: YOUR RIGHTS DON'T COME FROM GOVERNMENT." Underlining in original.

[261] Rhodes, "THE BILL OF RIGHTS: THE CONSTITUTION'S BUILT-IN, MANDATORY MANUAL OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION." Underlining in original.

Thus, the Oath Keepers says, "We the people have natural rights, and those rights go far beyond those explicitly protected by the Bill of Rights."[262] Since the founding documents recognize and protect rights rather than creating them, and since those rights extend even beyond what the founding documents mention, those documents are only a partial guide to natural rights. "[W]henever you find yourself running to look in the Bill of Rights to see whether you have a right to do something, you are making a fundamental error. Your rights are inherently yours by nature and by nature's God."[263]

Ultimately, the group does not elaborate a longer list of natural rights beyond those mentioned in the founding documents. Instead, there is an implicit suggestion that no authoritative list is necessary. Each person can figure out what their natural rights are for themselves. Not only is it self-evident that "all men are created equal" and that "they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."[264] What those certain inalienable rights are is also self-evident.

At the same time, the Oath Keepers insists that the list of natural rights is not up for debate and it is not based on what the majority of people think is on that list. Writing before the 2016 presidential election about the possibility of new federal gun control laws if Hillary Clinton were to win on November 8, David Codrea commented that the election – and legislation or executive orders that might follow – would not affect his behavior or his rights: "Some of us do not consider the 'popularity contest' winner the last word on our unalienable rights...."[265] Codrea argued that his natural rights are unaffected by which politician wins an election – and by extension, they are unaffected by the will of the majority of voters. He argued that the natural right to keep and bear

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[262] Rhodes.
[263] Rhodes, "THE FIRST FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION: YOUR RIGHTS DON'T COME FROM GOVERNMENT."
[264] "The Declaration of Independence."
[265] OathKeepers.org, "Spending Bill Betrayal by Establishment Republicans Confirms Contempt for Base."

arms is absolute and exists despite any governmental action to the contrary. More importantly, the majority of voters have no say about what is a natural right, nor can they put any legitimate limits on natural rights.[266]

By providing only a vague sense of what our natural rights are, this argument results in ambiguity. The founding documents contain only a partial list: guided by the self-evident rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and elaborated upon by the Bill of Rights. The full list of natural rights includes more than what these documents contain, but the Oath Keepers does not provide any information about how to decide what else is on that list. In other words, the group engages in strategic ambiguity when talking about natural rights, invoking a powerful frame in an abstract way, letting individuals fill in the details for themselves. But the group also definitively argues that natural rights are not up for debate and that they are unaffected by the outcome of collective decision-making.

This argument results in an implication that all natural rights are self-evident. Each individual can discern what their natural rights are. But at the same time, the assertion that electoral outcomes should not affect interpretations of natural rights implies that the list of natural rights is fixed and that some individuals have a complete and correct understanding of that list. In other words, natural rights are so self-evident that all patriots should agree about what they are. This implication further suggests that any disagreement about what natural rights are does not come from good-faith disagreement about natural rights; instead, any disagreement means that bad faith, power hungry, would-be tyrants are trying to violate those rights. In commentary on a speech

[266] Most political and legal theorists argue that natural rights have always been understood as subject to certain restrictions. For example, the right to free speech is not absolute in that some speech can leave a speaker liable to sanction for their speech (for example, with defamation) based on the competing natural right to one's reputation. Hamburger, "Natural Rights, Natural Law, and American Constitutions."

from Ron Paul, Stewart Rhodes condemned those who "have no respect for the principles of unalienable, natural rights our Declaration of Independence proclaimed 'to a candid world.'" "... Neoconservatives, like their close cousins, the socialist far-left revolutionaries, despise the Constitution of the Founders, with its limited, divided, dual sovereignty structure."[267] These enemies of the Constitution, according to Rhodes, are eager to violate Americans' rights for their own gain.

This combination of ambiguity with a sense that any disagreement results from bad faith actors leaves open the possibility of violence. Commentary from the Oath Keepers recognizes two types of Americans who do not agree with them about natural rights: malevolent elites who are enemies of freedom, and the wider American public who have been misled by these corrupt actors. The group wants to convert the wider American public to its thinking about natural rights, illustrated by its goal to "reach, teach, and inspire." In particular, the group wants to educate military and law enforcement, since those individuals will either be the first line of defense of natural rights or the tool by which the elite will steal Americans' rights. But behind this wider misguided public is a nefarious group (often called "globalists," "the international elite," "statists," "collectivists," "progressives," or simply "Marxists") who are not well-intentioned but misinformed: instead, they are actively plotting to destroy the freedom that the Founders designed the Constitution to protect.[268]

This is an instance of the conspiratorial, us-versus-them reductionism that serves as a bedrock of the group's political beliefs and actions.[269] Those who support policy that the Oath

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[267] Rhodes, "Don't Be Neoconned. Ron Paul on Understanding the Grave Threat to Our Constitutional Republic."
[268] OathKeepersOK, *Stewart Rhodes on Alex Jones Show 2-7-10 Part 3 of 3*."
[269] Rhodes provides a fairly typical example of the conspiracism of the Oath Keepers when he says that "We were never taught [about the Bill of Rights] in school, they intentionally dumb us down in public schools

Keepers argues would violate personal rights are "loyal only to [political] party, personal ambition, and to the government they are a part of."[270] For the Oath Keepers, the contents of natural rights is so self-evident that anyone who disagrees is an enemy (or has been duped by an enemy). And enemies must be defeated, hopefully with nonviolent resistance, but with violence if necessary.

Natural Rights Must Be Defended

Again, the Oath Keepers's argument about the defense of natural rights starts with reference to the founding documents. As mentioned before, Rhodes described the Declaration of Independence as a document that lists a series of violations of natural rights "that made revolt necessary." And as egregious as these violations of rights were, Rhodes said that the colonists finally fought back when the British government attempted to remove their last means of defense of their rights: their weapons.[271]

This is a core principle for the Oath Keepers: one of the proximate causes of the American Revolutionary War was the attempt by the British to disarm the would-be Americans in 1775. Now, as then, when rights are threatened, the first defense is "speech, association, and assembly." But if these rights are denied, "the people will have no recourse but to arms."[272] In a "Declaration

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and don't teach us our own heritage and our own Constitution." His complaint about public schooling is not that it is inadequate but that "they" are using it as a weapon against the American people. OathKeepersOK, *Alex Jones Round Table with Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, Michael Boldin & Brandon Smith*.

[270] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "HOW TO BE A DEFENDER OF THE REPUBLIC – THE EXAMPLE OF JAMES OTIS.""

[271] Rhodes, "THE FIRST FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION: YOUR RIGHTS DON'T COME FROM GOVERNMENT.""

[272] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey." This mirrors an argument from the National Rifle Association that the Second Amendment (which protects the right to keep and bear arms) is "America's First Freedom" (which is the name of one of their publications). The actor Charlton Heston, who was a ceremonial president of the NRA for 5 years, wrote that the right to keep and bear arms is "the one right that prevails when all others fail, the one right that allows rights to exist at all." Heston, "Our First Freedom."

of Orders We Will Not Obey," the group described the Revolutionary War: in response to the British attempt to disarm them, "the American people fought back in justified, righteous self-defense of their natural rights."

Elsewhere, the Oath Keepers makes it clear that defense of natural rights is not just something for members of the group. Instead, it should be a "personal obligation" for every American patriot, "as the Founders intended."[273] Again, firearms are central here. The Second Amendment protects (but does not grant) an individual right to own firearms, according to this view, and that right is not primarily about hunting or self-defense from criminals. Instead, according to the Oath Keepers, the right to keep and bear arms implicitly recognizes that government is the greatest threat to natural rights and that the people should be prepared to defend their rights: the group argues that "the purpose of the Second Amendment is to preserve the military power of the people so that they will, in the last resort, have effective final recourse to arms and to the God of Hosts in the face of tyranny."[274]

Given the conspiratorial, us-versus-them reductionism that serves as a foundation for the Oath Keepers's ideas about politics, it is no surprise that any violation of natural rights would be interpreted as a malicious plot rather than good-faith disagreement over what rights are or as a limited mistake born out of complicated circumstances (such as gun confiscation during Hurricane Katrina, discussed more in chapter 7).[275] If enemies are working together to steal rights for their benefit, vigorous defense of those rights seems like a duty. If it is true that people have natural

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[273] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "HOW TO BE A DEFENDER OF THE REPUBLIC – THE EXAMPLE OF JAMES OTIS."
[274] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."
[275] Adam Weinstein has explained why arguments about gun confiscation during Hurricane Katrina are often mistaken, especially where they posit a government-orchestrated plot to disarm the residents of New Orleans. Weinstein, "The NRA Twisted a Tiny Part of the Katrina Disaster to Fit Its Bigger Agenda.".

rights that are prior to politics (and thus trump politics), and if it is true that there are bad actors out there trying to deny people those rights, then violent defense of those rights is justified, righteous, and necessary.

The Importance of Natural Rights as a Strategic Frame

The Oath Keepers argues that natural rights are those that people inherently have simply because they are people; the group does not provide a complete list of what these rights are (why provide a complete list when the items on that list are self-evident?), instead providing a partial list that includes those mentioned in the Declaration of Independence (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness), adding a few described in the Bill of Rights (such as freedom of speech and the right to keep and bear arms); and it encourages every American to make defense of natural rights a personal obligation.

This argument serves as a tool for strategic framing for the Oath Keepers. Natural rights is a familiar concept for those who pay attention to early American history. As with all things associated with them, the rhetoric of the Founders about natural rights and the moral argument in favor of rebellion against government that violates those rights is presumed by the American public to be correct, and the dominant story of American identity does not allow dissent on this.[276] This dominant story of American identity ignores the disagreement and compromise at the heart of all of the founding documents, instead portraying early American history as driven by unified patriots with God and an ingenious understanding of politics on their side.[277]

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[276] In a sense, this is a version of the policing of ideas that Alex Nowrasteh described as "patriotic correctness" in a recent episode of *This American Life*. This American Life, *Seriously?*
[277] Sehat, *The Jefferson Rule*; Cornell, "Mobs, Militias, and Magistrates."

But while natural rights are perhaps uniformly understood as a core issue in the making of America, the concept is ambiguous. As noted above, the founding documents refer to natural rights, but always in a way that provides some examples of those rights while leaving the door open for the existence of other unenumerated natural rights. The dominant story of American identity takes it for granted that there are natural rights, but says little about them other than that they are inalienable (and perhaps God-given) and that they start with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

By invoking this open-ended central concept in American identity, the Oath Keepers is able to use American history to make its extremist goals and behavior seem not all that extreme. It taps into a core part of the American story, but it takes that story in uncommon directions. In pointing to widely accepted American history and providing interpretations that are not farcical on their face, the group (and others like it) may see some success in portraying themselves as American patriots. If this argument is successful, OK might be seen as modern-day revolutionaries, the philosophical descendants of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine.

But the group does not only see itself as thinking like the Founders. It also sees itself as acting like them.

The American Revolution Redux

Over the past several years, there have been several prominent examples of activism in America originating in the patriot/militia movement that contest the authority and legitimacy of the federal government, including the standoff at Bundy Ranch in 2014 and the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in 2016. Participants in this activity often root their action in an interpretation of American history, political philosophy, and political identity. This chapter considers how the Oath Keepers relies on this history, philosophy, and identity to justify its political behavior and goals. In particular, it explores how the group uses history (especially American history) to justify its vigorous political dissent while simultaneously portraying its members as American patriots. It argues that the Oath Keepers uses its story of American patriotism to garner moral legitimacy and political support while expressing strong dissent and walking along the edge of violence.

Just as they take it for granted that there are natural rights worth defending, Americans often take it for granted that the War of Independence from Great Britain in the 18th century was just, that the violence of that war was necessary and appropriate. As mentioned in the last chapter, the popular historical understanding of that time depicts long-suffering patriots who tolerated a series of violations of natural rights until – finally – they rose up to cast off the shackles of tyranny and assert some basic truths.

The 18th century was not the last time that Americans thought that some political authority was overbearing. Americans from across the political spectrum have perceived tyranny and violations of basic rights throughout the nation's history: for example, unjust taxes (as early as 1800 with Fries' Rebellion), redistributive economic policy seen as a form of theft or slavery (with the New Deal), and intrusive surveillance (with the national security state, especially since 2001). In many of these examples, some Americans see the history of the nation's birth repeating itself in a very particular way. Once again, these Americans say, patriots are suffering at the hands of tyrants who would deny them natural rights; once again, these Americans say, there may soon came a day when patriots must rise up and fight these tyrants to reclaim their inalienable, God-given rights.

In this chapter, I examine how OK builds on its discussion of natural rights by talking about the American Revolutionary War. Specifically, the group draws direct parallels between contemporary events and the run-up to that war. As with the use of natural rights as a strategic frame, I argue that the group does this in part to garner moral legitimacy and political support for their goals for radical political change and for their preparations to use violence to pursue these goals.

The American Revolution Redux

As noted before, the Oath Keepers is part of the patriot/militia movement, whose participants identify violations of basic rights on a regular basis and who anticipate an imminent conflict with the tyrannical federal government. As we have already seen, OK develops a larger argument about tyranny and rights. Much of this argument is based on American history and American political thought, in which the events around America's struggle for independence from Great Britain hold a prominent place.

The group is deliberate in doing this. In an essay commemorating OK's sixth anniversary, Stewart Rhodes makes this clear. He starts this essay by saying that he chose the date (April 19) and location (the Lexington Green outside of Boston, Massachusetts) of the first public Oath Keepers event intentionally. The group gathered on the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary War on the 234th anniversary of that battle "to remind us all of where we have come from.... The blood of patriots was spilled on that Green, and we need to have the same conviction they had, when it comes to carrying out our duty." That battle, he says, was the real "birthday of our Republic – not July 4, 1776." This was where the nation "was born in hot lead, cold steel, and the cries of wounded men.... That is when this Republic was born."[278]

The context for this event in 2009 was not only meant to serve as a reminder of historical events of which supporters of the Oath Keepers should be proud. Rhodes chose these tangible reminders of the Revolutionary War "because there are obvious parallels to our current situation." "We are in much the same position as the patriots were in that time. We are on the eve of conflict with domestic enemies of liberty who are relentless in their pursuit of power over us."[279] With this speech, Rhodes sets the stage for arguments that those with political authority in America abuse that authority, violating individual liberty for their own benefit.

The group takes another step forward in this line of reasoning in the opening of its list of "10 orders we will not obey." The text starts with a quote from George Washington, which he used to rally his troops before the Battle of Long Island in 1776:

> The time is now near at hand which must probably determine, whether Americans are to be, Freemen, or Slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call

[278] OathKeepers.org, "Stewart Rhodes' Sixth Anniversary Essay."
[279] OathKeepers.org.

> their own; whether their Houses, and Farms, are to be pillaged and destroyed, and they consigned to a State of Wretchedness from which no human efforts will probably deliver them. The fate of unborn Millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this army.

Immediately after this quote, OK says that "Such a time is near at hand again." Previously, Rhodes argued that there are obvious parallels between the Revolutionary War and the current political situation. Here, OK makes it clear that the parallels are leading towards a crisis that will demand decisive action – violent action – like that of those who resisted the British and won America's independence.[280] Further drawing the parallel, the group says that, yet again, "The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this Army – *and* this Marine Corps, This Air Force, This Navy and the National Guard and police units of these sovereign states."[281] As in 1776, Americans today face a threat that may demand a military solution.

Having set the stage for arguments that depict the contemporary situation as parallel to the situation in the 18th century, the Oath Keepers describes specific issues that the group sees as repeating the past. The most important of these is gun control and citizen disarmament. As mentioned before, the first of the "10 orders we will not obey" is any order to disarm the American people. OK explains that "the attempt to disarm the people on April 19, 1775 was the spark of open conflict in the American Revolution.... Any such order today would also be an act of war against the American people, and thus an act of treason."[282] The group argues that the proximate cause of the Revolutionary War was the attempt to disarm the American people, specifically by confiscating the arms and ammunition belonging to colonial militias. In response to

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[280] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."
[281] OathKeepers.org.
[282] OathKeepers.org.

contemporary attempts by the federal government to implement gun control (especially through executive orders), OK argues that Americans should resist just as the militiamen resisted the British in 1775. As Rhodes explained in his essay marking the 6th anniversary of the Oath Keepers, "we need to have the same conviction" those who fought the British had.[283] The parallel with contemporary America is not just that Americans' natural right to keep and bear arms is being violated; Americans' response to that violation should be the same as well.

The Oath Keepers also reposted an article from the Tenth Amendment Center called "How the British Gun Control Program Precipitated the American Revolution." Most of this 2000-word essay describes how common understandings about the causes of the Revolutionary War are mistaken: "what finally forced the colonials into a shooting war with the British Army in April 1775 was not taxes or even warrant-less searches of homes and their occupation by soldiers, but one of many attempts by the British to disarm Americans as part of an overall gun control program." The author of this essay goes into detail, describing the relationship between confiscating weapons and enforcing unjust laws. According to this argument, British officials saw widespread possession of guns and ammunition as a threat to their rule; therefore, they "were eager to see outright gun confiscation in order to effectively suppress any resistance to their rule." While those other unjust laws may have been egregious violations of rights, it was the attempt to confiscate weapons that pushed the would-be Americans over the edge.[284]

Near the end, this essay turns from a discussion of historical events to an argument about contemporary America: "Many gun control policies in America today follow the British blueprint." Those early Americans resisted and won their freedom. Today, "Americans of the twenty-first

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[283] OathKeepers.org, "Stewart Rhodes' Sixth Anniversary Essay."
[284] OathKeepers.org, "How The British Gun Control Program Precipitated The American Revolution."

century should not squander the heritage of constitutional liberty bequeathed by the Patriots."[285] Many rights might currently be under threat from a tyrannical federal government, but citizen disarmament is still the greatest threat as it could start an avalanche of lost freedoms.[286] "[M]odern gun control advocates are the spiritual successors of the British government our forefathers opposed," and those who resist gun control are the spiritual successors of those forefathers.[287]

Though it is the one they spend the most time discussing, gun control is not the only direct parallel between contemporary events and those that led to the Revolutionary War. Seven of the ten orders in the list that OK members will not obey (including the order to disarm Americans) draw explicit parallels between the contemporary political situation and life in the colonies under British rule. The group anticipates orders from the federal government to conduct "sweeping warrantless searches of homes and vehicles," and it connects this anticipated violation of rights to another cause of the American Revolution: writs of assistance. Treating American citizens as "unlawful enemy combatants" in the War on Terror is (allegedly) like admiralty courts, the military tribunals that the British used to deny the colonists the right to trial by a jury of their peers. Martial law or a state of emergency would be like the changes in governance that concentrated power in the hands of colonial governors immediately prior to the Revolutionary War, and would likewise result in armed resistance.[288] Blockading cities to turn them into concentration camps would be like the blockade of Boston under martial law during the War.[289] Bringing in foreign troops – perhaps

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[285] OathKeepers.org.
[286] This mirrors an argument from the National Rifle Association that the 2nd Amendment protects "America's First Freedom." For example, see Heston, "Our First Freedom."
[287] OathKeepers.org, "How The British Gun Control Program Precipitated The American Revolution."
[288] "One of the causes of the American Revolution was the attempt 'to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power' by disbanding the Massachusetts legislature and appointing General Gage as 'military governor.'" OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."
[289] I come back to this point in the next chapter, in the context of the government's response to Hurricane Katrina.

under the command of the United Nations – to serve as peacekeepers in the U.S. would be like the British bringing in Hessian mercenaries to fight the patriots.[290] Confiscating private property "including food and other essential supplies, under any emergency pretext whatsoever" would be like the seizure "of American ships, goods, and supplies" prior to the Revolutionary War; and, of course, confiscating firearms was the spark of open conflict in that war.[291] These are not abstract, hypothesized policies that the government could one day enact; for the Oath Keepers, these are tangible threats, things the group anticipates may happen again soon: "Such a time is near at hand again."[292]

Other documents describe other parallels between the contemporary political situation and the lead up to the Revolutionary War. For example, Rhodes protests the very notion of a national service draft (whether for military service or civilian service) as a violation of individual rights – in fact, he calls mandatory national service "institutionalized slavery." He argues that "[o]ne of the causes of our rebellion against the Crown had been impressment of Americans into the Royal Navy." Since this was one of the causes of the Revolutionary War, it cannot be the case (Rhodes argues) that the Founders wrote the Constitution to allow compulsory service. In the face of proposals for mandatory national service, Rhodes urges Americans to "resolve ourselves to be as resolute as our forefathers in resisting this new creeping tyranny.... Let us do as the Founding generation did when their own government claimed unlimited power over their lives, liberty, and property."[293]

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[290] A long-standing conspiracy among anti-government extremists is that the federal government is complicit in a plot – usually led by the United Nations – to bring foreign troops to America to impose tyranny. See, for example, Keith, *Black Helicopters over America: Strikeforce for the New World Order*; Janofsky, "'Militia' Man Tells of Plot To Attack Military Base."

[291] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."

[292] OathKeepers.org.

[293] Rhodes, "Reinstate the Draft!: America's Youth Must Serve Their Country, One Way or Another - Sieg Heil!" Rhodes does not seem to recognize the incongruity of this argument with the widespread argument in

Rhodes also wrote about a resolution proposed in 2009 to the Montana House of Representatives that would have "void[ed] the compact by which Montana became a state" if the federal government took certain action that some people interpret as unconstitutional.[294] In arguing in favor of the right for states assert their sovereignty, Rhodes says that

> [t]his is about self-government, and about being free from onerous, oppressive, and unconstitutional federal laws and actions. One of the causes of the American Revolution was the claim by the British Parliament that it could legislate over the colonists in all cases whatsoever.... Our forefathers rejected that absurd claim. We are now rejecting the same assertion of totalitarian power by the Mordor on the Potomac [i.e., Washington, D.C.].[295]

Here, Rhodes is arguing that the contemporary federal government is asserting the same kind of tyrannical rule that the British government tried to assert over the colonies in the 18th century. And states should respond to the federal government just as the colonies responded to the British: by asserting their sovereignty in order to protect the rights of their residents.

Rhodes again draws an explicit parallel between contemporary America and the movement for independence from Britain in commentary about "armed civil disobedience," when gun rights activists in Washington State disobeyed gun laws to protest gun control legislation.[296] He argues that

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the patriot/militia movement that militia service was mandatory for all able-bodied men in the early years of the country.

[294] More, Urge protection of states rights. The resolution died in committee.

[295] Rhodes, "Montana Introduces Resolution Asserting State Sovereignty - And Threatening Secession." Despite the title he gave to this post, Rhodes insists that this is *not* secession. Instead, this would be the federal government taking action that would nullify the "compact between the states," which would result in states returning to their prior state of sovereignty.

[296] "Armed civil disobedience" in this case refers to a rally held at the Washington State Capitol where firearms activists openly carried firearms to protest state laws and rules for legislature visitors. Those activists also drew explicit parallels to the movement for independence, reminding the Governor that the "founders outlined a list of grievances against King George III," then issuing their own list of grievances. OathKeepers.org, "Kit Lange: Open Letter To Washington State Governor."

> civil disobedience is a much honored American tradition, starting with the Founding Generation which intentionally refused to comply with multiple edicts, statutes, and rules set by Parliament and King. They refused to comply and used peaceful civil disobedience for many years leading up to the outset of fighting.... Civil disobedience, nullification, and defiance were the life-blood of the cause of the Colonists in the years leading up to the outbreak of the actual American Revolution.[297]

Again, the implication is clear: contemporary circumstances are parallel to the circumstances faced by those who fought the British in the 18th century, and contemporary activists should follow the examples of the founding generation.

With each of these examples, OK builds the argument that the current situation is like the one faced by those who won America's independence. In the case of the list of 10 orders its members will not obey, OK argues that any of these would be a clear sign "that the time for another American Revolution is nigh."[298] The explicit message here from the group is that ongoing events are parallel to the events immediately prior to the start of the Revolutionary War. This is the present repeating the landmark moments in American history. The group also anticipates imminent events that will parallel the start of that war. This connection does not merely support an argument that the federal government is infringing on the rights of Americans. It provides moral justification for the possibility where members of the Oath Keepers and others in the patriot/militia movement take up arms against the federal government: "If you the people decide that you have no recourse, and such a revolution comes... we will join [our fellow Americans] in fighting against those who dare attempt to enslave them."[299] The explicit parallel drawn between life under the

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[297] OathKeepers.org.
[298] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."
[299] OathKeepers.org.

federal government in the 21st century and life under the British government in the 18th century is meant to justify the possible use of violence.

On the other hand, most of these examples are somewhat abstract. Even if gun control measures in the 21st century were similar to firearms confiscation in the 18th century, contemporary gun control mostly consists of proposals rather than measures that are backed by legislation, much less effective enforcement. Even if a draft for national service were similar to impressment in the Royal Navy, such a draft is at most a discussion point. Even if contemporary martial law were similar to the state of martial law imposed by the British, the government has not declared martial law.

However, one argument the group has made about parallels between the current situation and the 18th century is more concrete and immediate: the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon in January and February 2016. In late 2015, supporters of the patriot/militia movement traveled to rural Burns, Oregon, to protest the federal government treatment of Dwight and Steven Hammond, a father and son pair of ranchers who were convicted of arson after burning brush on public land. Dwight was sentenced to three months in jail, and Steven was sentenced to one year in prison – substantially less than the statutory mandatory minimum of five years for the crimes of which they were convicted. The Department of Justice filed an appeal over the sentencing; after the Hammonds finished serving their original sentences, a federal court resentenced them to the mandatory minimums. As mentioned before, the patriot/militia movement saw this as an example of the tyranny of the federal government. A group led by Ammon Bundy (one of Cliven Bundy's sons) asked the Harney County sheriff to prevent federal law enforcement from enforcing the new sentence, and this group offered armed

protection to the Hammonds if Dwight and Steven decided to refuse to comply with the court order to return to prison.

The Hammonds instead decided to voluntarily return to prison. With their primary cause for gathering in Harney County dissipating, Bundy and some of the others who had traveled to Burns to demonstrate on behalf of the Hammonds decided to switch gears. Bundy led a convoy of several vehicles to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, beginning an occupation that Ammon described as a "hard stand" to fight the injustice of the federal government.[300] The occupiers framed their actions as a protest against the federal government controlling public land (like his father, Ammon Bundy believes that the Constitution only allows the government to control land for Washington, D.C., and military bases), with the occupiers stating that they would remain – for years if necessary – until the federal government gave control of the Refuge to Harney County. The occupation was also an attempt to repeat the movement's success at the Bundy Ranch from 2014: using inflammatory rhetoric and a visible arsenal to prevent the federal government from doing things that the movement disagreed with.

Unsurprisingly, the movement discussed the occupation of the Refuge through the lens of the Revolutionary War. In part, those involved in the occupation intentionally cultivated this comparison. For example, Ammon Bundy and his supporters encouraged the residents of Harney County to form a Committee of Safety, adopting the name used by groups to organize resistance to the British before the Revolutionary War.[301]

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[300] Hersher, "'It Was Time To Make A Hard Stand'; Closing Arguments Completed In Malheur Trial."
[301] OathKeepers.org, "Harney County Committee of Safety's Letter Asks Ammon Bundy to Leave Refuge." As the title of this webpage indicates, this Committee later wrote a letter to Bundy and the other occupiers asking them to stop their occupation.

The Oath Keepers also interpreted the occupation through the lens of specific events in the lead-up to the War of Independence. In three separate articles, different members of the group condemned the occupation as not following the example set by those who fought the British. Specifically, they said that this occupation "is no Lexington and Concord."[302] Elias Alias, then editor-in-chief of the Oath Keepers website, argued that "At Lexington and Concord, the Minute Men were defending, not aggressing," unlike Bundy and his allies who traveled from across the country to aggressively occupy the refuge. Alias suggested that, if the occupation has a historical precedent, that precedent was the federal response to the Branch Davidians in Waco, which ended with several federal law enforcement agents and approximately 80 Branch Davidians being killed; if the government killed the occupiers, that may be the only way that the occupation leads Americans to fight the tyrannical federal government.[303]

Brandon Smith made a similar argument: "To compare events [around the occupation] to the first American Revolution, I do not see the standoff and the shooting of [Lavoy] Finicum as a Lexington Green moment.... Rather, I see it as a Boston Massacre moment."[304] Smith suggested that the true parallel was not with the start of the Revolutionary War but with one of the antecedent events that some of those resisting the British pointed to as justification for armed resistance. Few details of the Boston Massacre are known, except that a group of British soldiers fired their guns

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[302] OathKeepers.org, "Oregon Standoff A Terrible Plan That We Might Be Stuck With."
[303] OathKeepers.org, "Ammon Bundy - Martyr or Revolutionary?" I discuss the Branch Davidians and Waco in more detail in the next chapter.
[304] OathKeepers.org, "What Is The Best Method Of Rebellion Against Tyranny?" Note here the reference to "the *first* American Revolution." OK is not shy about anticipating a second American Revolution, in which they expect to participate. The group suggests in several places that a second revolution (which it sometimes calls a civil war) nearly broke out during the standoff at Bundy Ranch in 2014. If anyone had fired a shot, the group says, "many or most of the current serving trigger pullers in the Marine Corps would have sided with the resistance – joining all of us pissed off veterans – in the resulting civil war." OathKeepers.org, "The Hammond Family Does NOT Want an Armed Stand Off, and Nobody Has a Right to Force One On Them."

into a crowd of Bostonians armed with sticks and snowballs but no firearms, killing several people. For advocates of independence from Britain, this event demonstrated the brutality of British rule, and it would later catalyze support for an armed Revolution against the Crown.[305]

During the Malheur Refuge occupation, law enforcement attempted to wait out the occupation to avoid violence, and this effort was largely successful. When leaders of the occupation left the refuge for a meeting in a neighboring county on January 26, law enforcement took the opportunity to arrest these central figures. Ammon Bundy, his brother Ryan, Ryan Payne, and Brian "Booda" Cavalier all surrendered and were peacefully arrested, along with several other less prominent members of the occupation; Lavoy Finicum was shot and killed by Oregon State Police when he reached into a pocket where he was known to carry a firearm. For the Oath Keepers, Finicum's death was a tragedy: Finicum is widely hailed as a martyr who was murdered by unjust government officials. But OK also anticipates that the American people are not yet ready to openly resist the federal government.[306] This may be one of the grievances that those who fight the government might later point to as a catalyzing moment, but Finicum's death would not lead to an immediate start of open hostility.

Stewart Rhodes agrees that the occupation is not another Lexington and Concord as well: "Those who intend to try to force this into some form of modern 'Lexington Green' or 'Concord Bridge' against the wishes of the Hammonds and their neighbors need to take a hard look at the Founders' example and their wisdom."[307] He urges the patriot/militia movement to wait for a better opportunity to start the Second American Revolution:

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[305] Rapoport, "Before the Bombs There Were the Mobs."
[306] OathKeepers.org, "What Is The Best Method Of Rebellion Against Tyranny?"
[307] OathKeepers.org, "The Hammond Family Does NOT Want an Armed Stand Off, and Nobody Has a Right to Force One On Them."

> Get organized, get trained, get equipped, and help your neighbors unite in mutual defense and help to train them. Form minuteman companies and Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) in your town and county. Then let "them" come and try to take your guns. Make THAT the modern Lexington and Concord, and we will have the greatest number of Americans on our side, and the greatest number of the current serving military on our side, as possible.[308]

As in so many other documents, Rhodes here is anticipating that a new event will happen soon that will parallel the start of the Revolutionary War (i.e., the battles at Lexington and Concord). But he argues that the model of that war must be followed carefully, and that the circumstances are not right for an open conflict yet.

Time and time again, OK anticipates or perceives tyrannical abuses of its natural rights. Members of the group look to American history – especially the Revolutionary War – to better understand these violations. This history also provides them with a model for justified, righteous responses to their grievances. By looking to the past, they make sense of the present and plan for the future. Just as importantly, they find moral and political support for their understanding of the problems of contemporary America.

The Utility of the Revolutionary War

The Oath Keepers's many attempts to draw parallels between recent or imminent events and early American history are not merely thinking about the nation's history or trying to learn from that history. They serve a larger purpose. As mentioned in the previous chapter, generally speaking, Americans' reverence for the Founders does not leave open the possibility of

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[308] OathKeepers.org.

questioning whether their revolution was just. Those types of questions are out of bounds.[309] Most Americans presume that movement for independence to be an excellent example of both the reasons that justify rebellion against a government and the methods used to carry out that rebellion.

Thus, if a group is able to convincingly connect its action with the action that began the nation, that group is able to benefit from the reverence for the Founders; it gains some degree of the Founder's moral legitimacy for its own political goals and the steps it takes to pursue those goals.[310] This is one of the ways in which OK engages in strategic framing. As scholars of social movements have long noted, political actors talk about the political issues that are important to them in ways that are meant to gain support for their cause.[311] Here, it is likely that the members of the Oath Keepers who are making political arguments recognize that they have a difficult task in front of them: gaining support from larger groups of Americans, especially those who are not actively worried about tyranny on a daily basis.[312] The widespread reverence for the Founders and

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[309] This is not universally true, but it holds generally. For an exception, see a brief discussion of the role of conspiracy theories in justifications for independence in Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 2–3.

[310] D.J. Mulloy makes a similar argument about the militia movement at large. He concludes that these references to the Founders and the American Revolution fall short because the conditions that would justify revolution (namely, a decision by the people at large rather than individuals or private groups; violations of core rights rather than "light or transient causes"; and all other means of addressing the perceived problems falling short) have not been met. Mulloy, "'Liberty or Death': Violence and the Rhetoric of Revolution in the American Militia Movement."

[311] Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation"; Snow and Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization"; Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment."

[312] I say this is likely rather than that this is certainly the case because there is no direct evidence to support (or contradict) this inference. The only possible direct evidence about thought processes that affect how individuals form arguments would be (1) observing those thought processes as they happen or (2) talking with the individuals who think those thoughts. Neither is possible in this case. The arguments already exist, so I cannot observe the thoughts that shape them, for example through ethnography. I also have not spoken with the individuals who made the arguments, for two reasons. First, preliminary contact with Stewart Rhodes suggests that he would be unlikely to answer any questions that I would pose; he is distrustful of academics and journalists who do not have a track record of supporting his cause. Second, those individuals developing these arguments have an incentive to be dishonest if their framing choices were strategic rather than ideological. Members of the patriot/militia movement understand themselves to be driven by principled beliefs more than utilitarian calculation. As self-described patriots, they would not be likely to

the default assumption that America's independence from Britain was just and provides an excellent template for contemporary political movements means that this may be a successful strategy, to the extent that the parallels that OK identifies are convincing.

Of course, the Oath Keepers is not the first group to do this.[313] David Sehat has convincingly argued that even the Founders themselves fought over the legacy of the Revolutionary War for their later political activity.[314] Women's suffrage advocates wrote a document modeled on the Declaration of Independence in 1848.[315] Explaining its reasons for secession just before the Civil War, the General Assembly of South Carolina argued that the behavior of the United States government and various state governments violated the Constitution and the principles of the Declaration of Independence, using the language of the Declaration to assert its sovereignty after seceding; a similar declaration from Mississippi declared that its grievances against the federal government were greater than those that led to the War of Independence.[316] More recently, the Tea Party has wrapped itself in symbols that evoke the movement for independence and the founding generation, from its very name to its fondness for the Gadsden Flag, whose coiled snake

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answer that they draw comparisons between their movement and the Founders because they think that will be an effective way to gain support from more Americans; they would be far more likely to answer that they draw these comparisons because they are accurate. In other words, if I asked Rhodes or others why they draw these comparisons, I would expect them to say that they believe the comparisons to be accurate and enlightening even if their primary reason was actually that they believed these comparisons to be an effective way for them to gain support.

[313] As Jill Lepore has noted, "Americans have drawn Revolutionary analogies before. They have drawn them for a very long time. When in doubt, in American politics, left, right, or center, deploy the Founding Fathers." Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes*, 14.

[314] Sehat, *The Jefferson Rule*.

[315] "The Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Conference."

[316] "Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union"; "A Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union." For more, see Tsai, *America's Forgotten Constitutions*.

above the words "don't tread on me" were originally used by American marines during the Revolutionary War.[317]

In invoking the Founders and the struggle for independence from Britain, the Oath Keepers attempts to claim the Founders' legitimacy for itself. OK explicitly argues that its members are the spiritual successors of the Founders, and that the federal government is the spiritual successor of the British government. For those Americans who find this compelling, it means that the Oath Keepers (and the larger patriot/militia movement) is in the right, and that the federal government must be resisted – with violence if necessary. If anything will convince Americans to be ready to take up arms against their government, it is invocation of the Founders and the creation of the nation. But for this invocation to be compelling – for it to motivate Americans to take action against the government – Americans need to be convinced that that the government does in fact pose threats to Americans. Americans need to be convinced that tyranny is not just something to read about in history books but is something that they may well experience for themselves.

[317] Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*; Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes*; Braunstein, *Prophets and Patriots*, especially ch. 3.

"No More Free Wacos"

This chapter investigates how the Oath Keepers uses recent events to make sense of contemporary America. Focusing on the Waco siege of 1993 and Hurricane Katrina of 2005, it details how the group's understandings of these events lead the group to anticipate violence and the violation of basic rights coming from the government. The importance of these two events also illustrates that different historical moments have different purposes and different saliences for different audiences.

As the previous chapters have shown, the Oath Keepers often makes reference to remote history. The group deploys old, core political values that it sees as foundational for America; it also deploys old historical moments from the birth of the nation. These references to the nation's early history help the group to make sense of 21st century America. They also send an implicit (sometimes even explicit) message that history repeats itself in very concrete ways, and that there are timeless political values that are just as important today as they were 250 years ago.

But the Oath Keepers is not only focused on history long removed from the lived experiences of Americans today. More recent events – events that many Americans alive today remember – also help the group to make sense of ongoing political events. In this chapter, I explore two moments of crisis from recent American history that are important for the Oath Keepers: the Waco siege of 1993 and Hurricane Katrina, the storm that devastated New Orleans in 2005. I argue that, for OK, these two episodes demonstrate that the federal government today is willing – even eager – to violate the rights of Americans and to use violence in the process.

Through the group's references to Waco and Katrina, its supporters hear stories of the calamities that can result if Americans are not constantly ready to resist a tyrannical government.

The Waco Siege: 1993

As many scholars have noted, two moments loom large for the patriot/militia movement. First, in August 1992, an attempt to arrest Randy Weaver – an anti-government extremist associated with the antisemitic Christian Identity movement who sold an illegally modified shotgun to an informant for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF, now called the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives) – led to an armed standoff between the Weaver family and the Federal Bureau of Investigations and the U.S. Marshals Service. Before Weaver surrendered, his wife (Vicki) and 14-year-old son (Samuel) were killed along with a Deputy Marshal. This conflict, which took place on a remote hilltop called Ruby Ridge in northern Idaho, received substantial media coverage and drew the public's attention to the tactics used by law enforcement when confronting armed Americans accused of crimes.[318]

Just a few months later, in early 1993, the ATF attempted to execute a search warrant on the compound of the Branch Davidian group outside of Waco, Texas. The Branch Davidians were an apocalyptic offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventist church, led by David Koresh. The ATF had received information that led the agency to believe that the group was illegally manufacturing firearms and explosives; the agency also argued that the group was involved in manufacturing illegal drugs and was abusing children. In response to these allegations, the ATF partnered with other law enforcement agencies to execute a dynamic raid on the Branch Davidians' property; because of the

[318] For an excellent journalistic perspective on this event, see Goodman, "Ruby Ridge." Mulloy also provides a good summary in *American Extremism*, 12–14.

alleged drug activity and the ongoing War on Drugs, the ATF was able to borrow equipment from military units. When planning the raid, the agency also invited media, which allowed the early moments of the ATF's action and the Branch Davidians' response to be recorded and broadcast.[319]

Shortly before the raid began, a local journalist asked a mail carrier for directions to the compound; the mail carrier, who was Koresh's brother-in-law, told the Branch Davidians about the ATF's plan. Though they had lost the element of surprise, the ATF decided to go forward with the raid.

From the beginning, the raid had a paramilitary posture: ATF agents were heavily armed, and several military helicopters were used to monitor the raid and to distract the Branch Davidians. Before they had a chance to execute the search warrant, ATF agents responded to the sound of gunfire by beginning to shoot at the Branch Davidian compound, though it is unclear which side fired their weapons first. This led the Branch Davidians to fire back at the agents, resulting in a firefight that lasted several hours during which several members of law enforcement and of the Branch Davidians were killed.

After this, the FBI took over command of the law enforcement activity. As at Ruby Ridge the previous year, the FBI's elite Hostage Response Team (HRT) came to Waco. For the next 51 days, law enforcement camped out around the Branch Davidian compound, negotiating with Koresh and pressuring the group to surrender. Government officials felt an increasing need to end the siege, and on April 19 the FBI began action to do just that. Using military vehicles to punch holes in the walls of the compound, law enforcement filled the Branch Davidian buildings with tear

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[319] For an excellent introduction to the Branch Davidians and the standoff at their Waco compound, including criticism of the FBI's actions, see Tabor and Gallagher, "What Might Have Been." See also Barkun, "Millenarian Groups and Law Enforcement Agencies"; Barkun, "Appropriated Martyrs"; Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 14–16.

gas, attempting to drive the group's members out. Few people left the compound despite the gas. After several hours of this, fires broke out throughout the compound; investigators later concluded that the Branch Davidians started the fires, but some people believe that the FBI was to blame for the conflagration. Even with the fire, few people attempted to surrender, and in the end more than 70 Branch Davidians – including around 20 children –died on April 19.

Both Ruby Ridge and Waco have become metonyms for violent government abuse among anti-government extremists: the names of these places where Americans and law enforcement exchanged gunfire in 1992 and 1993 are now shorthand among large parts the far right for the evils of government.[320] These events went on to inspire the largest act of terrorism in America prior to 9/11: Timothy McVeigh would later claim that the government's actions in Waco were one of the motivations for his bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, an attack which McVeigh carried out on April 19, 1995, two years to the day after the end of the Waco siege.[321] Ruby Ridge and Waco are often mentioned in the same breath, frequently in the context of arguments by anti-government extremists that the government regularly violates 1st Amendment rights to religious freedom and 2nd Amendment rights to possess firearms. For some groups, though, Waco is more important and is mentioned more often (perhaps because of the associations of Ruby Ridge with overt white supremacy, or perhaps because of the larger scale of the violence at Waco).

At the same time, both of these events are widely understood as debacles – not just by the patriot/militia movement. Waco in particular demonstrates the potential negative consequences of police militarization and of law enforcement not accounting for the worldview of those they interact

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[320] Barkun, "Appropriated Martyrs"; Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 14–16; Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant's Face*, 231–33.
[321] Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing*, 164.

with. But while many observers see Waco and Ruby Ridge as disastrous law enforcement activity born of hubris – mistakes that law enforcement has learned from – the patriot/militia movement understands these events as illustrating government's worst inclinations towards violence and tyranny. In other words, the movement is not surprised by how the FBI acted in Texas and Idaho; these events fit perfectly with the movement's understanding of how the federal government acts.

"No More Free Wacos"

OK is certainly among those who hold this interpretation of Waco (and, to a much lesser extent, Ruby Ridge).[322] This interpretation conforms to its belief that the government is ready, willing, and able to use violence against Americans who are simply exercising their rights that are granted by God and protected by the Constitution.

In part, the story of Waco helps the Oath Keepers to illustrate this understanding of government: as the group says, this moment of conflict is "an undying testament to the inherent abusive nature of government."[323] The group argues that it also exemplifies the self-fulfilling prophecy of the militarization of police. Agencies like the ATF conduct militarized law enforcement action – sometimes with the explicit help of the military – in part to demonstrate that these agencies need to increase their militarized capabilities, which they hope will lead to increased appropriations to support increased militarization, which in turn allows them to conduct more

[322] The group only mentions Ruby Ridge alongside Waco, never on its own. Most invocations of Waco do not also mention Ruby Ridge. OK does not address why Ruby Ridge seems to be less important for the group, but it could be that the group does not want to draw too many parallels between itself and the Weaver family, given the family's ties to white supremacy.
[323] OathKeepers.org, "WACO: A NEW REVELATION."

militarized operations, which further demonstrate the need for increased capabilities, in an unending cycle that leads to more abuse of Americans by their government.[324]

OK (along with others in the patriot/militia movement) anticipates that the events of Waco are likely to repeat themselves. But the group does not intend to allow the ATF and the FBI to repeat their actions unchallenged. In 2009, Michael Vanderboegh, a long-time movement leader and founder of the Three Percenter movement, wrote an open letter to Eric Holder (who was then the U.S. Attorney General) titled "No More Free Wacos", warning him that gun owners would not sit by and allow the ATF to disarm them, given the ATF's involvement in violence.[325]

Since then, as the phrase has been picked up by others in the patriot/militia movement, it has come to mean something more specific: actors like the Oath Keepers will not allow the federal government to engage in violence against Americans without facing vigorous resistance. For the Oath Keepers and other like-minded Americans, "Waco" is now synonymous with murder by government agents, and OK pledges to do everything it can to prevent the government from "murdering" more Americans.[326] In fact, "Waco" has become a verb for the group. OK urged its members to travel to the Bundy Ranch standoff in 2014 "specifically to prevent them [the Bundy Family] from being 'Waco'd' after we saw clear preparation and intent by the Feds to use military trained snipers and Special Forces veteran mercenaries against cowboys and their families."[327]

As this statement shows, the Oath Keepers makes sense of new threats that it perceives through its understanding of the government's actions in Waco. In the days after the Bureau of

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[324] OathKeepers.org.
[325] Vanderboegh, "Sipsey Street Irregulars."
[326] OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keeper In Delaware Arrested For Selling Guns"; OathKeepers.org, "Liberty Brothers Radio at Sugar Pine Mine in Oregon."
[327] OathKeepers.org, "The Hammond Family Does NOT Want an Armed Stand Off, and Nobody Has a Right to Force One On Them"; OathKeepers.org, "URGENT Warning on OR Standoff: Military Special OP Assets Have Been Assigned for Standoff. Keep Women and Children Out of There."

Land Management stopped its operation to round up Cliven Bundy's cattle, the group described the events at the Bundy Ranch as "part of a land grab dispute that threatened to escalate into a Waco-style confrontation."[328] The group argues that the government "brought in special forces veterans, they hired mercenaries, they brought in snipers."[329] The response by OK and others to step up and defend the Bundy family in response to this threat made that operation "very righteous," according to Stewart Rhodes.[330]

Waco would also help guide the Oath Keepers response to the 2016 Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Occupation and the protests that led up to that occupation. Through the end of 2015, Ammon Bundy began urging those who had supported his family in 2014 to support the Hammond family in rural southeast Oregon. As discussed in the last chapter, Bundy argued that Dwight and Steven Hammond were the victims of a tyrannical government who deserved to be defended just as his family were. Bundy declared that supporters of the Hammonds were taking steps to peacefully stop the government from harming the family, but that they were prepared to take "a physical stand" if necessary.[331]

Though the group supported Cliven Bundy and the security operation at the Bundy ranch in 2014, the Oath Keepers argued that this operation in Oregon was inappropriate. First, the Hammond family explicitly stated that they did not want armed supporters to prevent Dwight and Steven from returning to jail; no one had any right to put the family in a more serious situation without the family's buy-in. Second, there was no evidence that the Hammonds faced a threat of violence similar to that faced by the Bundys in 2014. OK explained that, in 2014, "All indicators

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[328] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "Historic! Feds Forced to Surrender to American Citizens."
[329] OathKeepersOK, *Stewart on Hammond Family Situation in Oregon.*
[330] OathKeepersOK.
[331] OathKeepers.org, "The Hammond Family Does NOT Want an Armed Stand Off, and Nobody Has a Right to Force One On Them."

were that the Bundy's were at risk of being killed in a Ruby Ridge or Waco type incident. And that is why we went...." But "In the Hammond case, there is no clear and present danger of the family being mass murdered...."[332] In several responses to this situation, OK indicated that it did not see a reason to believe that the events of Waco would be repeated in Oregon (perhaps because the Hammonds had already agreed to surrender to the government by reporting to federal prison). For this reason, the group did not support any type of armed intervention in support of the family.

The situation in Oregon changed within days. Despite the Oath Keepers making its position clear, Ammon Bundy led a group of armed individuals to occupy the Malheur Refuge on January 2, 2016. Though the group did not support the occupation and urged Bundy and the other occupiers to reconsider their action, OK also clearly stated that it would try to prevent any violence between the government and the occupiers. In several articles on its website, the group even noted with some frustration that it might be forced to respond to government violence "with equal f*cking [sic] measure," because the conscience of members of the group "simply will not allow the rationalization of the deaths of liberty minded people even if their stupidity brought about the circumstances."[333]

It did not take long for that abstract concern to become more concrete. On January 5, the group issued an "urgent warning" that "Military Special OP Assets" were being sent to the occupation.[334] Fearing that violence was imminent, OK quickly endorsed a plan by the Pacific Patriots Network (PPN) to act as a "neutral buffer" to separate those occupying the Refuge from

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[332] OathKeepers.org.
[333] OathKeepers.org, "Oregon Standoff A Terrible Plan That We Might Be Stuck With."
[334] OathKeepers.org, "URGENT Warning on OR Standoff: Military Special OP Assets Have Been Assigned for Standoff. Keep Women and Children Out of There."

law enforcement.[335] Though the PPN claimed its intention was to mediate discussions between the occupiers and law enforcement and to prevent violence, the group came heavily armed.

By January 15, OK was warning the military and law enforcement: don't Waco the occupiers or "you risk pushing this nation over the edge into a civil war, because there are 'no more free Wacos.'"[336] The same day, retired Sergeant Major Joseph Santoro, a member of the OK Board of Directors and the group's National Operations Non-Commissioned Officer, told media near the Refuge that OK's "greatest concern is that the federal government Wacos the people right down that hill. It is our opinion as men and women and free Americans, patriots, that if they do that, they will start a conflagration so great. Nobody wants it, nobody needs it. But I think it will grow out of hand exactly like the American Revolution."[337]

Clearly, Waco serves as an important event from recent American history that helps the Oath Keepers understand things that happen in America today. It also guides their responses to the crises they perceive: they see a situation that happened in the past, and they have committed to preventing a similar situation from unfolding again in the same way. OK argues repeatedly that it wants to prevent violence between Americans and the government; but the group also makes it clear that, if the government does engage in violence against Americans, violating their rights, the Oath Keepers will respond in kind. The government will not be able to get away with murdering Americans again; there will be no more free Wacos. The government should know that any such action will lead to another American Revolution, and Americans should recognize that they may be forced to take up arms against the government.

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[335] OathKeepersOK, *Friday Jan 9th Morning Press Briefing with III%, CFCF and PPN from the Oregon Refuge Center*; OathKeepers.org, "Historic 'Militia' Moment: Pacific Patriot Network (Including Oath Keepers) Calls On FBI."
[336] OathKeepers.org, "Warning to U.S. Military and Federal LEOs."
[337] Ruptly, *USA*.

Hurricane Katrina: 2005

Waco was a conflict that (according to the interpretation put forward by OK) was very clearly caused by an over-zealous, violent government hell-bent on violating the rights of Americans. Not all the crises that help the Oath Keepers make sense of contemporary America are so explicitly manufactured by the government, though. Some of these crises develop out of the government's response to natural disasters.

In August 2005, a massive storm approached the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi. Though it weakened shortly before making landfall on August 29, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the surrounding area with winds topping 120 mph, a storm surge as high as 12 feet, and rainfall reaching as much as 12 inches.[338] The damage increased when levees meant to protect New Orleans from floods failed. An enormous number of people evacuated the city – around 400,000 out of 500,000 residents – and the surrounding areas, but many people were trapped in New Orleans, forced to ride out the storm.[339] More than 10,000 people eventually sought shelter in the city's Superdome, a large indoor football stadium home to the New Orleans Saints. Thousands more attempted to stay in their homes, but many were forced to sit on their roofs and await rescue. In total, more than 1800 people died in the storm, which also caused more than $100 billion in damage.

After the storm, the city was plagued by flooding, shortages of basic necessities, and crime and rumors of crime. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) response to the disaster was woefully inadequate. FEMA's slow response contributed to widespread looting, which

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[338] National Weather Service, "Hurricane Katrina - August 2005"; CNN, "Hurricane Katrina Statistics Fast Facts."
[339] Horne, "Five Myths about Hurricane Katrina."

led to rumors of widespread lawlessness. In fact, some members of the New Orleans Police Department report being given orders to shoot looters on sight.[340] Later, journalists found that reports of crime were overblown: most looters took food, clothing, and other basics, a far cry from the media focus on individuals stealing DVDs, TVs, and other high price goods; rumors of rampant murder at the Superdome were shown to be false when authorities who were expecting to recover hundreds of bodies at the makeshift shelter only found six.[341]

In the confusion of the storm and its aftermath, reports also began to emerge alleging that, not only was the government failing to respond adequately to the disaster, some governmental agencies were actually making things worse. Police officers from Gretna, a suburb of New Orleans, refused to let evacuees cross the bridge leading from New Orleans into their town, with Gretna officials later arguing that the city had to take care of its own residents rather than caring for others.[342] There were reports of blanket firearms bans and widespread gun confiscation in the city, as some city officials declared that "Only law enforcement are allowed to have weapons."[343] Four New Orleans police officers shot and killed two unarmed civilians, wounding four more; the officers later falsely claimed that they shot these individuals after being shot at themselves.[344] These actions by government officials compounded the crisis caused by the storm itself.

In the following years, the government's response to Hurricane Katrina has become notorious for its shortcomings. FEMA in particular has been widely criticized for poor preparation

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[340] Shankman et al., "After Katrina, New Orleans Cops Were Told They Could Shoot Looters."
[341] Guarino, "Misleading Reports of Lawlessness after Katrina Worsened Crisis, Officials Say"; Thevenot and Russell, "Rape. Murder. Gunfights."
[342] Kopp, "The Bridge To Gretna."
[343] Berenson and Broder, "Police Begin Seizing Guns of Civilians"; Weinstein, "The NRA Twisted a Tiny Part of the Katrina Disaster to Fit Its Bigger Agenda."
[344] Times-Picayune Staff, "Danziger Bridge Guilty Verdicts Are Another Strike against New Orleans Police"; Daley and Lane, "Danziger Bridge Officers Sentenced."

and inadequate action. Generally, this criticism depicts the government's response as resulting from mismanagement, incompetence, and inattention.

For some, though, the response to Hurricane Katrina depicts the government's readiness to use any justification to violate the rights of Americans. The NRA has pushed a narrative about disarmament after the storm that exaggerates the problem.[345] Groups like the Oath Keepers have taken this narrative further, arguing that the gun confiscation that took place prevented residents of the city and surrounding areas from defending themselves and their property from organized crime; further, it amounted to an orchestrated attempt by the government to disarm a large group of Americans. For the NRA, this was not an isolated incident born out of the panicked response to a natural disaster that overwhelmed authorities, but a widespread practice that law-abiding gun owners needed to be prepared for and ready to resist. As I show in the next section, for OK, this was not a spontaneous, bungled response to an emergency, but yet another episode in a long line of the government eagerly conspiring to disarm Americans and see them suffer.

"They Disarmed Americans over Bad Weather"

As we have seen, the Oath Keepers is quick to identify instances of government acting badly, often asserting evil motives that drove the government action the group opposes. For example, one of the early videos that the group uploaded to its YouTube channel was about its "Declaration of 10 Orders We Will Not Obey." As discussed in the previous chapter, the text version of this document begins with an invocation of the Revolutionary War. In this video version, though, OK prefaces the list of orders with a reference to Hurricane Katrina. After telling viewers that "Oath Keepers is an association of active-duty military, veterans and peace officers

[345] Weinstein, "The NRA Twisted a Tiny Part of the Katrina Disaster to Fit Its Bigger Agenda."

who will honor the oath we swore…[sic] to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic so help us God!" the video cuts to a clip of a Marine Public Affairs Officer. The officer says, "Would we take away people's guns? Frankly, I don't see that happening." Then, the video cuts to a clip of a New Orleans Police Department official saying "No one will be able to be armed. We're gonna take all weapons." The Public Affairs Officer comes back to the screen, saying that "Marines obey orders." A caption appears, asking "And if that order is an 'unlawful order?'" The Public Affairs Officer then says, "Marines have the right to refuse an unlawful order." Then Stewart Rhodes declares that service members have an obligation, not a right, to refuse an unlawful order.[346]

As in the text version of the list of orders the Oath Keepers urges its member not to obey, the video version sets the stage for why this sort of list is appropriate – even important – by describing a moment of crisis from American history. In this case, that moment is more recent, and it provides an example of a situation where, had all the members of the military and first responders involved in the situation honored their oaths to the Constitution, the crisis would have been substantially reduced.

For the most part, this video contains a brief version of the list of orders OK will not obey. Unlike the text version, the video does not explain why each order is included. The first five orders pass fairly quickly, listed as captions over an image of a waiving flag with martial music in the background:

> 1. We will NOT obey orders to disarm the American people. 2. We will NOT obey orders to conduct warrantless searches of the American people. 3. We will NOT obey orders to detain American citizens as "unlawful enemy combatants." 4. We will

[346] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Declaration of Orders We Will NOT Obey.*

NOT obey orders to impose martial law or a "state of emergency" on any state. 5. We will NOT obey orders to invade or subjugate any state that asserts its sovereignty.

Then, order number 6: "We will NOT obey orders to blockade American cities, thus turning them into giant concentration camps." This is the only order in the video that is followed by commentary. After stating this order, the video cuts to a clip of Fox News's Geraldo Rivera reporting in New Orleans after the storm, asking why people are still taking shelter in a convention center rather than walking down a freeway away from the devastation.

The video then switches to a clip of Shepard Smith, another reporter for Fox News, who says that the government has "locked" people in the convention center and the Superdome, promising locals that they would receive help at these locations but not fulfilling that promise. Smith, becoming more intense, says that the government set up a checkpoint at the bridge connecting New Orleans to Gretna: "It's the only way out... They set up a checkpoint, and anyone who walks up out of that city now is turned around, you are not allowed to go to Gretna.... Over there [in Gretna], there's hope. Over there, there's electricity. Over there, there's food and water. But you cannot go from [New Orleans] to [Gretna]. The government will not allow you to do it."

With these clips, this Oath Keepers video conjures a scene where "government" (implicitly depicted as a unitary actor) was actively hurting Americans by refusing to let them leave the devastation of New Orleans. At this point in the video, government has been described as a bad actor who made the situation after Hurricane Katrina worse.

The video then provides more detail about how the government made the situation worse. The next clip shows Aaron Broussard, president of Jefferson Parish (which neighbors New Orleans), describing specific things FEMA did to make the situation in his parish worse:

> We had Wal-Mart deliver three trucks of water, trailer trucks of water. FEMA turned them back. They said we didn't need them. This was a week ago. FEMA –we had 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel on a Coast Guard vessel docked in my parish. The Coast Guard said, "Come get the fuel right away." When we got there with our trucks, they got a word. "FEMA says don't give you the fuel." Yesterday – yesterday – FEMA comes in and cuts all of our emergency communication lines. They cut them without notice. Our sheriff, Harry Lee, goes back in, he reconnects the line. He posts armed guards on our line and says, "No one is getting near these lines."[347]

By including this clip, this OK video depicts FEMA as an agency plainly taking action that prevent Americans from receiving help. This organization that is tasked with helping Americans to prepare for and recover from emergencies seems malicious, as if it intentionally wants to harm Americans rather than help them.

At this point, this relatively short video (9 minutes and 11 seconds long) has spent 2 minutes providing descriptions of the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina just after declaring that the group will not obey orders to blockade cities. Through the clips from Rivera, Smith, and Broussard, the Oath Keepers implicitly makes the argument that New Orleans and the surrounding region was effectively blockaded by the federal government; it was turned into a concentration camp from which the residents of New Orleans could not leave, where they suffered and died because of action undertaken by the government.[348]

But the Oath Keepers is not done describing the government's response to the hurricane in this video. Next, the video pivots to discuss the issue that is the focus for OK when it talks about

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[347] This clip originally came from an episode of *Meet the Press*. NBC News, "Transcript for September 4."
[348] Elsewhere, the group states even more directly that the government "corrall[ed] people into camps where death was rampant...." OathKeepers.org, "Take These Steps Today To Survive An International Crisis."

Hurricane Katrina: gun control. Immediately after the clip of Aaron Broussard, the video cuts to news footage of heavily armed individuals in military and police uniforms banging on doors and entering homes. Next, a clip from Fox News shows a woman standing in her kitchen with a small revolver in her hand: rather than holding the butt of the gun against her palm, she has her fingers wrapped around the cylinder and the barrel, clearly not holding the weapon as if she is prepared to use it. The video cuts again, then shows a police officer tackling this woman. Behind these images, Stewart Rhodes says "That's why we issued our declaration of 10 orders that we will not obey. What those are designed to do is to get the troops thinking ahead of time about where their line in the sand is in advance." After this, the video quickly moves through the remaining four orders that OK urges people to not obey without explanation.[349] In this presentation of the core document for the group, the Oath Keepers chooses to focus on Hurricane Katrina rather than the Revolutionary War.

In other documents, when the Oath Keepers talks about Hurricane Katrina, it is typically in the context of discussions of gun confiscation. For example, in 2009 the group posted two speeches on its blog that it encouraged individuals to use at Tea Party events held on July 4th. One of the speeches spends time talking about ongoing events "that aren't receiving coverage… things we the people need to be aware of." The first of these is a discussion of the illegal and unconstitutional actions taken by the government in the response to Katrina. First, the group describes the use of the U.S. military and "armed government contractors" as "a direct violation" of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 that severely restricts the ability of the federal government to use "Big Army" (as opposed to the Army National Guard and state guard units) and the other

[349] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Declaration of Orders We Will NOT Obey*.

branches of the military for domestic purposes.[350] More specifically, OK objected to the military in particular taking part in "mass gun confiscations, including door to door searches for weapons in parts of the city that were not flooded. A natural disaster is NOT a legal reason to deny citizens of their 2nd Amendment Rights."[351]

In 2010, Bill O'Reilly interviewed Stewart Rhodes, OK's founder and president, on his show on Fox News. O'Reilly quickly demonstrated his lack of respect for OK, derisively asking Rhodes "Who's gonna try to disarm people and place them under martial law? Why would that even be something you would be discussing?" Rhodes responded that "It happened as recently as Katrina. You've probably seen the videos there of an old lady being tackled in her kitchen and disarmed of her revolver. And there were house to house searches for firearms. You had the police chief declare that no one would be allowed to have weapons, we're gonna take all the guns. And they did. So they disarmed Americans over bad weather, as though the bad weather suspended the 2nd Amendment." When O'Reilly countered that it was a state of emergency that demanded a response, Rhodes retorted "Where does it say in the Constitution that bad weather suspends the Constitution?"[352] Here, the group's leader argued that the government unjustly, unconstitutionally confiscated weapons in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; that demonstrates that the government could carry out a systematic attempt to disarm the American people again.

As mentioned before, the group held its first public event on the Lexington Green on April 19, 2009. OK posted a series of videos of the speeches delivered at that event on YouTube. In one

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[350] The Posse Comitatus Act prohibits the use of "any part of the Army or the Air Force as a posse comitatus or otherwise to execute the laws." This language does not prohibit the use of the military on U.S. soil for non-law enforcement purposes, though it is often portrayed that way. Larson and Peters, "Appendix D: Overview of the Posse Comitatus Act."

[351] Oath Keepers Blogspot, "OFFICIAL OATH KEEPERS SPEECHES THAT JULY 4 TEA PARTY EVENTS CAN USE." Emphasis in original.

[352] OathKeepersOK, *Bill O'Reilly Interviews Oath Keepers Founder Stewart Rhodes - 02-18-10*.

of the speeches, Stewart Rhodes provided yet another perspective on the orders the group will not obey. After declaring that its members "will not obey orders to conduct warrantless searches of the American people," Rhodes offered the same explanation provided in the text version of the declaration of orders found on the group's website: one of the causes of the American Revolution was the use of writs of assistance by the British, "which were essentially warrantless searches because there was no requirement of a showing of probable cause to a judge...."[353] Then Rhodes said that contemporary Americans have experienced similar things, "whether it's the NSA or whether it's through national security letters or whatever other mechanism is used." He pointed to one primary example of this: "In Katrina, we saw house to house searches without warrant, and we saw disarmament of people. And the two go together. How do you think they're going to do it if they want to take your guns away from you? They're gonna go get a warrant for your house in particular with probable cause? No! It will be by general sweeps through your homes or roadblocks and sweeps through your cars." Here, Rhodes invoked the government's response to Hurricane Katrina to provide an example of how the government violates certain rights (in this case, the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures) in the process of violating other rights (in this case, the right to keep and bear arms).[354] And in this speech, Rhodes implicitly argues that Hurricane Katrina and the Revolutionary War share common features: government violating privacy rights in order to confiscate weapons.

Repeatedly, the Oath Keepers has invoked the government's response to Hurricane Katrina as an example of government hurting Americans, particularly through the widespread confiscation of firearms. In this way, talking about the storm can remind Americans of the dangers

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[353] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."
[354] OathKeepersOK, *Oath Keepers Muster on Lexington Green 4/19/2009 4 of 10.*

posed by their government – not an abstract danger or one experienced centuries ago, but one that happened within recent memory.

But the group also finds hope in the aftermath of the storm. In May 2010, OK posted a series of videos in which they "PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA" (emphasis in original).[355] In these videos, Stewart Rhodes talked with Joshua May, a sergeant in the Utah National Guard who was deployed to New Orleans after the storm. May told the story of his unit hearing rumors that other units were being ordered to confiscate firearms. Some of the members of his unit got together and "came to the consensus that no, we will not be taking firearms." May proactively explained to their commander that "there's a group of us who won't do that."[356] Across five videos in this series, Rhodes and May spoke for nearly an hour about May's experiences around New Orleans: when his unit proactively declared their intention to not engage in gun confiscation; when they interacted with locals who worried that May and his unit would confiscate their guns; and when they witnessed armed locals forming security teams to protect their neighborhoods more effectively than the government could. For the Oath Keepers, Sgt. May's actions when deployed in response to Hurricane Katrina provide a model for how Americans in the military and law enforcement should act: if faced with a situation where they might be ordered to violate Americans' rights, they should proactively affirm their commitment to protect those rights, to refuse to comply with orders to violate them.

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[355] OathKeepersOK, *OATH KEEPERS PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA 1 of 5*; OathKeepersOK, *OATH KEEPERS PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA 2 of 5*; OathKeepersOK, *OATH KEEPERS PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA 3 of 5*; OathKeepersOK, *OATH KEEPERS PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA 4 of 5*; OathKeepersOK, *OATH KEEPERS PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA 5 of 5.*

[356] OathKeepersOK, *OATH KEEPERS PROVE SOME TROOPS REFUSED TO CONFISCATE GUNS DURING KATRINA 1 of 5.*

Thus, Hurricane Katrina serves two purposes for the Oath Keepers. It provides an example of a recent event during which the government acted to harm Americans, violating their rights and causing them to suffer not providing aid and even by interfering with other efforts to help Americans in need. It also provides an example of how Americans can resist tyranny, refusing to comply with unconstitutional government action.

Different Events for Different Purposes and Different Audiences

The most important moment of conflict and crisis that the Oath Keepers can use to make sense of contemporary America and guide their behavior while also gaining support from the American public at large is certainly the Revolutionary War. That event holds more tacit moral authority and political legitimacy than any other event in American history. But the group can also use other moments of crisis to make sense of ongoing events, to provide models of appropriate (or even righteous) behavior, and to gain support. Using more recent events can illustrate that the threats OK is concerned about are not remote, abstract, or hypothetical; the group can point to events like the Waco siege or the response to Hurricane Katrina to convey the message that, even today, Americans should be wary of the government, which is always on the verge of harming Americans and violating their rights.

These three different events also serve different purposes. Talking about the Revolutionary War can provide support for the Oath Keepers's argument that sometimes revolution is warranted and that Americans have examples for how to respond to tyranny. Talking about Waco can provide support for OK's argument that the government is willing – or perhaps even eager – to use violence against Americans, especially Americans who hold beliefs that the government deems unacceptable. Talking about Hurricane Katrina can provide support for the group's argument that

the government will use any excuse it can to violate Americans' core rights, especially their 2nd Amendment rights.

More importantly, OK might talk about these different events to communicate to different audiences. The group may talk about the American Revolution to speak to the American public at large, given widespread (if shallow) familiarity with and approval of that event. Talking about Katrina might help the group speak to a subset of the American public who might be receptive to OK ideas if they believed that the threats were real. And invocations of Waco may be more narrowly targeted at the far right and at federal law enforcement, two groups for whom the Waco siege is a familiar event.

The Importance of the Oath Keepers

In this concluding chapter, I draw together the arguments from the previous three chapters about how the Oath Keepers draws on core political ideas and history to make sense of their context of contemporary America, guide their behavior in this context, and (potentially) gain support for their cause and their action. Linking these chapters, I argue that the group lays a foundation for its legitimacy by invoking the core concept of "natural rights," using strategic ambiguity to maximize the reach of this motivating frame; building on this foundation, the group talks about the Revolutionary War, drawing parallels between the crisis out of which the nation was born and 21st century America to legitimate the group's radical dissent; finally, the group talks about other moments of conflict and crisis from America's history to reach different audiences and to make more specific arguments about the threats that Americans face and the behavior they should undertake in response to those threats. Next, I argue that the Oath Keepers (along with other similar groups) is problematic in two ways: first, it is a threat to physical security when it is involved in armed conflicts with law enforcement; second, it poses a less direct threat by (potentially) shifting the bounds of acceptable political discourse and action. Then, I make the case for why this study is important for law enforcement and policy makers in particular – in short, awareness of the group's worldview can help the government interact with the group in ways less likely to feed into that worldview and encourage violence. Finally, I describe significant changes that have taken place within the group since late 2016, and I lay out two possible paths for the group's future.

In the previous chapters, I have argued that the Oath Keepers – a group that exemplifies many of the characteristics of the patriot/militia movement and anti-government extremism more broadly – talks about core American political ideas and pivotal moments from American history for three purposes. First, these rhetorical frames help the group to make sense of the contemporary political situation it finds itself in, in particular by helping its members make sense of the threats they perceive by talking about historical threats that Americans have faced. Second, these frames provide the group with models for how its members should respond to ongoing threats by retelling the stories of how American heroes have responded to the threats they faced. Third, these frames might help the group gain support from different groups of Americans, to the extent that the group is able to convincingly draw parallels between the contemporary situation in America and historical situations, between the Oath Keepers and American heroes from historical conflicts.

Core political ideas like natural rights are important rhetorical devices in American politics. They function as ideographs: abstract ideas that carry stable moral value but are only vaguely defined.[357] For example, "natural rights" (or the related idea of human rights) has consistent – nearly universal – moral weight in America. No one is against natural rights; no one favors their restriction or violation. But this consensus hides the fact that the *contents* of natural rights are unclear. In other words, Americans might agree that natural rights should be protected, but they do not agree on what are natural rights and thus deserve protection. Is the right to keep and bear arms truly a right that belongs to all people simply because they are people, or is it a right that develops out of a particular political context and is contingent on how people understand it in a particular moment? Is the right to privacy truly a natural right; and if it is, what does it mean?

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[357] McGee, "The 'Ideograph.'"

OK benefits from the abstract nature of natural rights (and other ideographs it references, like "republic," "tyranny," and "fascism"). Americans will respond to "natural rights" in a consistent manner, as long as the concept is left abstract. Only if Americans are confronted with an example of a natural right that they think is *not* a natural right will they object. The Oath Keepers engages in strategic ambiguity in its discussion of these core political values, declining to provide specifics and thus potentially gaining more support from individuals with whom this rhetorical frame resonates but who might disagree with OK about what these values mean in a concrete way.

Some events from American history function in a very similar way. For example, few Americans question the legitimacy of the Revolutionary War, but this is less often a carefully thought-out position than one reached by default, perhaps with little knowledge of the actual details of the conditions that led to the War or circumstances of how the War was carried out. Americans "know" that Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, and Thomas Paine were right when they identified conditions that justified rebellion against the British Crown, even if Americans *don't* know anything about life under the Crown and haven't thought carefully about whether the conditions of that life justified violence. This is not to suggest that the American Revolution was not justified; rather, I am suggesting that the conflict out of which the nation was born holds moral and political authority in spite of (or perhaps because of) Americans' lack of detailed engagement with the history of that event. To the extent that the Oath Keepers can convincingly tie itself to the Patriots in the Revolution, the group gains some of the tacit moral and political authority attached to these actors and this event.

Other events from American history serve different purposes for the Oath Keepers. As I argued in chapter 7, Waco and Hurricane Katrina are recent moments of crisis that demonstrate that Americans still face threats from government. Invocations of the American Revolution

demonstrate that government can be tyrannical and that armed resistance can be righteous and justified; invocations of Waco demonstrate that government is eager to use violence against Americans, especially when it thinks it can get away with that violence by targeting fringe groups; invocations of Hurricane Katrina demonstrate that government will use natural disasters and other emergencies as cover to put into motion long-standing plans to violate Americans' rights. The American Revolution might be the best example of tyranny and the appropriate responses to tyranny; but OK benefits from having more recent events that it can point to, sending the message that tyranny isn't something confined to the 18th century but still exists and still threatens America.

The Oath Keepers use these different rhetorical strategies for different target audiences. Ideographs like natural rights and events like the Revolutionary War are widely familiar (in a general way) and held in esteem by Americans; the group talks about these ideas and events in part to convince the wider American public that OK's cause is legitimate and its resistance is justified.

Events like Hurricane Katrina are widely familiar as well, but OK talks about them in uncommon ways. Those who might be led to support the group based on OK's invocation of Hurricane Katrina are those who already worry about government infringing rights in a general sense but who may have previously thought that those threats posed by government are remote or unlikely; the way that the Oath Keepers talk about the storm might convince these individuals that the threat is still very real, even in 21st century America.

Events like Waco are much less widely known – many people have heard of Waco, and those who watched television news at the time were inundated with coverage while the standoff was happening, but few Americans today likely know much of anything about it. As I mentioned in chapter 7, OK talks about Waco with two potential audiences in mind: far-right extremists who are familiar with the event and government officials who are (or should be) familiar with the event. For

potential supporters, Waco demonstrates the worst-case scenario of government action if Americans aren't vigilant in resisting it. For the government, Waco is a reminder that Americans won't allow government to harm its citizens without repercussion.

Each of these rhetorical strategies simultaneous serves three purposes: first, they help OK to make sense of the contemporary political situation. Members of the group perceive threats in a general sense, but they may have difficulty identifying these threats. By looking to historical moments of conflict and crisis (or the ideas that motivate those moments), the group can find examples of political threats that the nation has experienced before, and the group can develop arguments about how the current moment is like those moments. The clearest example of OK doing this is in its list of 10 orders their members will not obey, discussed throughout the previous chapters.[358]

Second, these rhetorical strategies help members of the group identify models of the appropriate responses to the ongoing threats they perceive. If the contemporary situation is like the Revolutionary War, then patriotic Americans should be ready to fight the strongest army in the world (that is, the U.S. Army), just like the patriots who fought the 18th century's strongest army. If the government is going to use disasters like Hurricane Katrina to violate Americans' rights, then patriotic Americans should proactively refuse to take part in those plans, just like the patriots who proactively refused to disarm Americans in and around New Orleans in 2005. If ongoing interactions between Americans and the government threaten to turn into situations like the Waco siege with militarized law enforcement murdering Americans, then patriotic Americans must not allow that event to repeat itself without grave cost to the government.

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[358] OathKeepers.org, "Declaration Of Orders We Will Not Obey."

Third, these rhetorical strategies help the Oath Keepers to gain support for its cause. Some of these strategies help the group to depict its cause as part of a long history of Americans standing up for political values, even to the point of using weapons to protect those values. If the threats that contemporary America faces really are like those that the colonists faced under British rule, then surely resistance today is just as warranted and justified as resistance 250 years ago. Some of them remind other extremists of events they care about (like Waco) and send the message that OK will not allow those catastrophes to repeat themselves. And other strategies stir Americans to reinterpret crises they may have lived through (like Hurricane Katrina) as being exacerbated by a tyrannical government.

Who Cares about the Oath Keepers?

Why should anyone care that the Oath Keepers uses these rhetorical strategies to make sense of the contemporary political situation in America, to guide its behavior in that situation, and to gain support for its cause and behavior? In short, OK (and the patriot/militia movement more generally) poses two threats to contemporary America, both of which are directly shaped by the group's understanding of America and feed off its ability to gain supporters.

First, the group poses a physical security threat. To be clear, OK does not explicitly encourage the proactive use of violence. Every time the group talks about violence in its conflicts with the government, that violence is depicted as defensive and as the last resort, when all other means of resistance fail. Yet, as I have argued, OK's rhetorical strategies clearly make violence more likely: if natural rights are currently being threatened, if 21st century America faces a crisis like the American Revolution, if the government is eager to murder Americans and use emergencies as cover to violate Americans' rights, then clearly patriotic Americans must be ready to fight the

government. More concretely, the group repeatedly describes the armed standoff at Bundy Ranch in 2014 as a justifiable, righteous response to government.[359] It praised its members who, as part of the Pacific Patriots Network, acted as a heavily-armed "security buffer" outside of the Malheur Refuge occupation in 2016. It has been involved in other so-called "security operations," for example at the Sugar Pine Mine in Oregon and the White Hope Mine in Montana, where its members brought military-style weapons in preparation for a shooting war with the government.

These conflicts where heavily armed members of OK put themselves in situations where they might shoot at law enforcement have not been one-offs; the group has a pattern of engaging in them. And the group's understanding of American history and the threats posed by the American government means that its members are always looking for potential violations of rights and uses of violence by the government. They anticipate that the nation might soon face a second American revolution; they anticipate that the events of Waco might repeat any time law enforcement engages in a protracted enforcement action.

The government should (and does) respond to these security operations. Sometimes, its response should be like the response to the Sugar Pine Mine security operation: the Oath Keepers declared that it would continue the operation until the miners were able to appeal a decision by the Bureau of Land Management, and the government declared it had no intention of taking any action until the legal process was finished. But some of these situations (like the Bundy Ranch standoff and the Malheur Refuge occupation) require a more active law enforcement response to criminal behavior. And given that OK's members and others in the patriot/militia movement are

[359] For example, OathKeepersOK, *Stewart on Hammond Family Situation in Oregon*; OathKeepersOK, *Stewart Rhodes Responds to the Hammond Family Situation*.

often heavily armed, it is entirely appropriate that law enforcement should also be armed in these situations.

But a heavily militarized police response to situations involving armed members of the group makes violence more likely in these situations. The Oath Keepers understands government to be an inherently violent actor, willing to use force to violate basic rights; when law enforcement shows up dressed in uniforms that look like fatigues, sporting beards that conform to stereotypes about Special Forces Operators, with long rifles, body armor, and armored vehicles, this response feeds into the Oath Keepers's understanding of government.

By better understanding how the group makes sense of contemporary America through reference to these core political ideas and historical moments, law enforcement and policy makers can make better, more informed decisions about how to respond when members of OK engage in armed criminal behavior. The general principle of using the least violence necessary is appropriate, but law enforcement can further help themselves achieve their mission if they specifically adopt tactics that do not resemble the tactics used by the ATF and FBI in Waco and Ruby Ridge, for example. Again, it is not always possible for law enforcement to carry out enforcement activity through everyday police action; sometimes SWAT teams or the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team are appropriate responders. But law enforcement should be aware of how the Oath Keepers will perceive the police response and should design that response to not feed into the group's understandings of government and violence. A better understanding of the Oath Keepers can help the FBI not repeat the mistakes it made in Waco, where a lack of understanding about the Branch Davidian's worldview led the FBI to fill the apocalyptic role the Branch Davidians expected of it.[360]

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[360] Tabor and Gallagher, "What Might Have Been," 9.

This physical threat that OK poses is not where the group's biggest influence lies, however. Security operations may occur regularly, but there are substantial gaps between them. All the time, though, the Oath Keepers contributes to a broader discourse in American politics that pits the people against the government and that views violence as a legitimate form of resistance to government – this is the group's RTI (reach, teach, and inspire) mission. The group may discourage proactive, aggressive acts of violence, but it shifts political culture in a way that makes attacks like that of Jerad and Amanda Miller (who killed two police officers and a civilian in Nevada in June 2014, weeks after spending time at the Bundy Ranch standoff) more frequent.

In this way, OK shifts the Overton Window, or the limits of acceptable political discourse.[361] Often the Overton Window is a concept used in reference to particular issues (for example, education policy and school choice; or, more recently, race), but it applies equally to broader political discourse around values, norms, and behavior.[362] Whether the Oath Keepers actually intends to do this or not, its attacks on the government – shrouded in the mantle of patriotism, wrapped in the legitimacy of the Revolution – shift the normal range of Americans' understanding of government. As Ruth Braunstein finds, Tea Party-affiliated actors tend to have a conflictual understanding of the relationship between citizens and politicians, whereas actors affiliated with Interfaith (an umbrella organization of progressive faith-based groups) tend to have a cooperative understanding of that relationship.[363] The Oath Keepers promotes a more extreme version of the Tea Party's conflictual understanding, arguing that government is a nefarious actor, hell-bent on violating Americans' rights.

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[361] Russell, "An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibilities"; Robertson, "How an Obscure Conservative Theory Became the Trump Era's Go-to Nerd Phrase."
[362] Russell, "An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibilities"; Atkinson, "Charlottesville and the Alt-Right."
[363] Braunstein, *Prophets and Patriots*.

Similarly, OK shifts the normal understandings of appropriate political behavior. The group argues that electoral politics are broken, that voting might not be a worthwhile form of political engagement.[364] It suggests that Americans should act as vigilantes – whether by monitoring polling places for voter fraud or by volunteering with civilian paramilitary groups on the U.S.-Mexico border.[365] The group also takes the implications of the conflictual understanding of the Tea Party and makes them more extreme, suggesting that not only do politicians (and by extension, government itself) need to be watched to make sure they don't abuse their power, but Americans must actually be ready to use violence in their role as government watchdogs – for example, by offering Kim Davis armed protection to keep federal law enforcement from returning her to jail, had she continued to obstruct the provision of marriage licenses to LGBT couples in Kentucky.[366]

For those who view violence as an unacceptable form of political behavior, for those who value norms of peaceful deliberative democracy, for those who do not see government as an existential threat, the Oath Keepers is a worrisome force in American politics. It is certainly true that dissent is protected by the 1st Amendment. It is also true that vigorous dissent has been a positive thing in American history (for example, with the Civil Rights movement). The type of dissent that the Oath Keepers advocates for is not inherently criminal, but the group's values represent a shift of American political culture that would make conflict more vociferous – perhaps even more violent. For this reason above all, the group should be understood so that we can minimize its harmful impacts.

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[364] Oath Keepers, *Webinar - March 4, 2016*; OathKeepers.org, "Obama Suggests Mandatory Voting For U.S. Citizens"; OathKeepers.org, "The Elections Are Over!!!!"

[365] OathKeepersOK, *Border Rancher Overrun by Men With Gang Tattoos, Not "Children."*; OathKeepersOK, *Border Rancher Warns of Cartel Border Takeover on U.S. Soil*; OathKeepersOK, *True Grit - An Interview with Tim "Nailer" Foley of AZBR*; OathKeepers.org, "Oath Keepers - A Sabot in the Machine to Stop Voter Fraud & Intimidation."

[366] Oath Keepers National, *Oath Keepers Offer of Protection for Embattled Clerk Kim Davis.*

The Future of the Oath Keepers

This dissertation has focused on the activity of the Oath Keepers from its founding in 2009 through February 2016. In the past two years, the group has undergone some important changes which are the result of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election. When Trump (whom the members of the Oath Keepers overwhelmingly supported, along with others in the patriot/militia movement) won, the group quickly changed its understanding of the most critical threat that Americans face. Until November 9, 2016, OK consistently viewed the federal government as the source of the gravest threats facing Americans. Certainly, the group also worried about the threats posed by progressives writ-large, Islam, and immigrants; but these threats were secondary to that of a tyrannical government.

This changed with Trump's election. On November 9, OK rapidly pivoted its focus, asserting instead that the greatest threat facing Americans was no longer the government but was Americans who opposed Donald Trump. Its leaders anticipated large-scale violence, orchestrated by leftists in response to Trump's victory. They organized an informal security force to attend Trump's inauguration, anticipating more violence from Trump protestors. They have become a frequent participant in clashes with Antifa activists opposing the Trump administration. No longer, it seems, does OK believe that dissent is the appropriate political attitude in America; now, dissent is seen as treasonous, as an incipient attempt to overthrow the government and replace it with collectivist authoritarianism. In many ways, the Oath Keepers has become the mirror image of itself prior to the 2016 election.

But not in every way. The group still worries about progressives, Muslims, and immigrants. It still advocates for the possible use of violence (but targeted against these newly elevated threats

rather than the government). It still vehemently opposes any efforts at gun control, and gun control advocates remain prominent actors in the conspiracy theories that the group promotes.

Only time will tell whether these are lasting changes. This new focus on threats outside of government is likely to continue as long as Donald Trump or other similar figures in the GOP retain political power. If the Democrats gain control of Congress or win the presidency in the future, if Trump is forced to resign or is impeached, or if the moderate or neo-conservative segments of the GOP reclaim leading roles in the party, the group may well reorient itself, once again focusing on government as the primary threat.

As long as Trump remains in power, OK faces a challenge of retaining supporters. For now, potential supporters have their man in the Oval Office. The threats long described by the group are less salient than they had been under an Obama presidency. While this remains true, OK will likely continue to identify new threats outside of government, like Antifa and the gun control movement that has emerged after the Parkland, Florida school shooting in 2018.

If the Oath Keepers is able to survive as a group, it will likely find better conditions for recruitment if American politics swings away from the values epitomized by Trump. If the Democrats retake political power, the group is likely to have more grievances to talk about that will resonate with a larger audience.

Even if the group does not survive, though, the patriot/militia movement is unlikely to go anywhere. If movements like the Three Percenters are able to take root in Canada (which doesn't have the national history to support the Threepers ideology), then it is likely to be able to weather the quiet seas of Republican ascendancy.[367]

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[367] Lamoureux, "Inside Canada's Armed, Anti-Islamic 'Patriot' Group."

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PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Articles

Accepted	Jeff Hemsley and **Sam Jackson**. "Political Issues that Spread: Understanding Retweet Behavior During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." In *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Social Media & Society*.
Forthcoming	**Sam Jackson**. "Non-Normative Political Extremism: Reclaiming a Concept's Analytical Utility." *Terrorism and Political Violence*. <link>
2018	Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson**, Jeff Hemsley, and Sikana Tanupabrungsun. "Automated Diffusion? Bots and Their Influence During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." In *Proceedings of the 2018 iConference*. Springer Lecture Notes in Computer Science. <link>

2017 **Sam Jackson**, Feifei Zhang, Olga Boichak, Lauren Bryant, Yingya Li, Jeff Hemsley, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Bryan Semaan, and Nancy McCracken. "Identifying Political Topics in Social Media Messages: A Lexicon-Based Approach." In *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Social Media & Society*. Toronto: ACM, 2017. <link>

Reports and Reviews

2017 **Sam Jackson.** "Conspiracy Theories in the Patriot/Militia Movement." Commissioned report for George Washington University's Program on Extremism. <link>

2016 **Sam Jackson.** Review of James Aho, *Far-Right Fantasy: A Sociology of American Religion and Politics* in *Conflict and Society. Vol. 2*. <link>

2012 **Sam Jackson** and Charlie Pemberton. "Patriotism? A Set of Questions." *ANVIL* 28, no. 1. Conference report.

Public Writing

2017 **Sam Jackson**. "Don't assume the militias at the Charlottesville rally were white supremacists. This is what they believe now." *The Washington Post's* Monkey Cage. <link>

2016 **Sam Jackson.** "Follow the Leaders? Jill Stein and Gary Johnson's Twitter and Facebook Activity." Illuminating 2016 Project blog. <link>

– Also appeared on the blog for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. <link>

PROJECTS IN PROGRESS

Sam Jackson, Jeff Hemsley, and Jennifer Stromer-Galley. "Do Candidates Encourage Selective Exposure? Social Media Hyperlinking Practices in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." (Full draft)

Jeff Hemsley and **Sam Jackson**. "Political Issues that Spread: Understanding Retweet Behavior During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." (Working draft)

Sam Jackson. "The Double-Edged Sword of Banning Extremists from Social Media." (Working draft)

Sam Jackson, Lauren Bryant, Yingya Li, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Bryan Semaan, and Nancy McCracken. "Comparing Methods for Identifying Political Topics in Social Media Messages." (Working draft)

Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson**, Jeff Hemsley, Rebekah Tromble, and Sikana Tanupabrungsun. "Comparing Bots: Automated Actors and their Repertoires across Election Campaigns on Twitter." (Early working draft)

Sam Jackson. "Towards a Theory of Dog Whistles." (Early working draft)

Sam Jackson, Jeff Hemsley, and Jennifer Stromer-Galley. "Within-Party Echo Chambers? Presidential Candidate Hyperlinking Practices." (Early working draft)

Sam Jackson and Jeff Hemsley. "Mapping the Patriot/Militia Movement Blogosphere." (Data collection in progress)

Sam Jackson and Jeff Hemsley. "Discourses of Firearms Activism on Twitter." (Data collection in progress)

Sam Jackson and Bart Bonikowki. "American National Identity and Political Protest in 2017." (Data collection in progress)

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

Papers

2018 **Sam Jackson.** "The Double-Edged Sword of Banning Extremists from Social Media." Association of Internet Researchers Annual Conference, October 10-13

Sam Jackson. "The Oath Keepers, the Revolutionary War, and Preparations for Rebellion." American Sociological Association Annual Conference, August 11-14

Olga Boichak and **Sam Jackson***. "Collective Identity and Its Boundaries: From 'Cloud Protesting' to State Legitimacy." American Sociological Association Annual Conference, August 11-14

Jeff Hemsley and **Sam Jackson***. "Political Issues that Spread: Understanding Retweet Behavior During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." International Conference on Social Media & Society, July 18-20

Olga Boichak and **Sam Jackson***. "'Mariupol is Ukraine': Constructing Legitimacy through Digitally Networked Action." International Studies Association Annual Conference, April 4-7

Sam Jackson. "'We Are Patriots': Uses of National History in Legitimizing Extremism." Council for European Studies Annual Conference, March 28-30

Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson***, Jeff Hemsley, and Sikana Tanupabrungsun. "Automated Diffusion? Bots and Their Influence During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." iConference. March 25-28

2017 Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson***, Jeff Hemsley, and Sikana Tanupabrungsun. "Not All Bots Are Created Equal: Automated Sociality and the Spread of Political Information in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections." European Symposium Series on Societal Challenges in Computational Social Science. November 15-17

Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson***, Sikana Tanupabrungsun, Daniela Fernandez Espinosa, and Jeff Hemsley**.** "Automated Diffusion? Bots and Their Influence During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." Association of Internet Researchers Annual Conference, October 18-21

Sam Jackson. "'We Are Patriots': Uses of National History in Legitimizing Extremism." European Consortium for Political Research General Conference, September 6-9

Olga Boichak and **Sam Jackson***. "'Mariupol is Ukraine': Constructing Legitimacy through Digitally Networked Action." European Consortium for Political Research General Conference, September 6-9

Sam Jackson, Feifei Zhang, Olga Boichak, Lauren Bryant, Yingya Li, Jeff Hemsley, Bryan Semaan, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, and Nancy McCracken. "A Method for

Computational Topic Identification in Social Media Messages." American Political Science Association Annual Conference, August 31-September 3

Sam Jackson. "Principled Law Breaking in America: Nullification and Civil Disobedience." American Sociological Association Annual Conference, August 12-15

Sam Jackson, Feifei Zhang, Olga Boichak, Lauren Bryant, Yingya Li, Jeff Hemsley, Bryan Semaan, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, and Nancy McCracken. "Identifying Political Topics in Social Media Messages: A Lexicon-Based Approach." International Conference on Social Media & Society, July 28-30

Patricia Rossini, **Sam Jackson***, Feifei Zhang, Lauren Bryant, Kate Kenski, and Jennifer Stromer-Galley. "Disrupting Controlled Interactivity? An Analysis of Public Comments on Facebook in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign." International Communication Association, May 25-29

Sam Jackson. "The Oath Keepers: Patriotism, Dissent, and the Edge of Violence." Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference, April 6-9

Sam Jackson. "The Oath Keepers: Patriotism, Dissent, and the Edge of Violence." 14th Annual Conference of the Center for the Study of Citizenship, Wayne State University, March 30-April 1

2016 **Sam Jackson.** "The American Revolution Redux: The Oath Keepers and the Ongoing Struggle over Natural Rights." Social Science History Association Annual Conference, November 17-20

Sam Jackson. "Pragmatics, Dog Whistles, and Extremist Texts." Council for European Studies Annual Conference, April 14-16

2015 **Sam Jackson.** "Nullification and Civil Disobedience: What Makes for 'Good' Law Breaking?" Social Science History Association Annual Conference, November 12-15

Sam Jackson. "Collecting and Storing Qualitative Data Using Online Sources." Graduate Student Forum on Research Methodologies, Syracuse University, November 13

Sam Jackson. "Political Extremism: A Non-Normative, Comparative Definition." Council for European Studies Annual Conference, July 8-10

2014 **Sam Jackson.** "A New Manifest Destiny: A Calling to Lead the World." Social Science History Association Annual Conference, November 6-9

*Non-presenting co-author

Posters

2018 Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson**, Jeff Hemsley, Rebekah Tromble, and Sikana Tanupabrungsun. "Identifying Patterns of Bot Interference across Election Campaigns on Twitter" International Conference on Social Media & Society, July 18-20

Jeff Hemsley, **Sam Jackson**, Jiyoung Lee, and Daniela Fernandez Espinosa**.** "The Viral Diffusion of Campaign Messages About Political Issues During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." iConference, March 25-28

2017 Olga Boichak, **Sam Jackson,** Sikana Tanupabrungsun, Jeff Hemsley, Daniela Fernandez Espinosa. "Automated Diffusion? Bots and Their Influence During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." International Conference on Social Media & Society, July 28-30

INVITED TALKS

2017 **Sam Jackson.** Invited speaker. "Conspiracy Theories in the Patriot/Militia Movement." New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness 2nd Annual Domestic Terrorism Conference. May 15

Sam Jackson. Invited speaker. Panel on domestic extremism. New York City Police Department Cyber and Counterterrorism Conference. February 1

GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2013- University Fellowship, Syracuse University

2017 American Political Science Association Travel Grant

2017 Syracuse University Graduate Student Organization Travel Grant (x4)

2017 Syracuse University Social Science Doctoral Program Travel Grant (x9)

2016 Olympia Summer Academy Scholarship

AWARDS

2016 Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, Syracuse University

MEDIA COVERAGE

2017 Research profiled in Mack Lamoureux. "The Integral Role Conspiracies Play in Far-Right Violence." *Vice*. <link>

Quoted in Stephen Montemayor. "Minnesota group targeted in FBI counterterrorism probe." *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. <link>

Featured in episode of "Intelligence. Unclassified." Podcast from the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness. "Domestic Terrorism Conference Series: Patriotism, Dissent, and the Edge of Violence with Sam Jackson." <link>

Quoted in Bill Morlin. "ACT's Anti-Muslim Message Fertile Ground for Oath Keepers." Southern Poverty Law Center's *Hatewatch*. <link>

2016 Quoted in Jennifer Williams. "The Oath Keepers, the far-right group answering Trump's call to watch the polls, explained." *Vox*. <link>

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2016- Research Assistant, Illuminating 2016, Center for Computational and Data Sciences (CCDS), Syracuse University

2015, 2014	Research Assistant, Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism (INSCT), Syracuse University
2015	Research Assistant, Prof. David H. Bennett, Syracuse University
2014	Program Assistant, SU ADVANCE, Syracuse University

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant – Section Instructor

Political Science	American National Government and Politics, Prof. Gavan Duffy (Spring 2016)
History	American History to 1865, Prof. Mark Schmeller (Fall 2015)

Teaching Assistant - Grader

Political Science	The Politics of Populism and Conspiracy Culture, Prof. Mark Rupert (Spring 2015)
Political Science	Marxist Theory, Prof. Mark Rupert (Fall 2014)

SERVICE

Conferences

2018	Panel organizer, "Countermeasures and Responses to Misinformation and Manipulation Online." Association of Internet Researchers Annual Conference
2016	Session Chair, "Responding to Radicalism 2." Council for European Studies Annual Conference
2011-2012	MA Religions and Theology Student Faculty Liaison, Department of Religions and Theology, University of Manchester
2011-2012	"Patriotism?" Conference Planning Team, Lincoln Theological Institute, University of Manchester

Reviewing

Social Media + Society

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

2017	Propaganda and Media Manipulation Workshop, Data & Society (New York, New York)
2016	Certificate in University Teaching, Syracuse University
2016	Olympia Summer Academy on Conflict and Political Violence (Nafplio, Greece) Topics: Civil War; Terrorism; Coups; Intercommunal Violence; Legacies of Conflict; Post-Conflict Violence
2016	Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (Syracuse, New York)

Modules: Discourse Analysis; Causal Mechanisms, Process Tracing, and Counterfactuals; Process Tracing; Qualitative Data Management; Computer Assisted Text Analysis; Interpretation and History

2014-2016 Syracuse University Future Professoriate Program

SOFTWARE

ATLAS.ti
Python
R
SQL
MongoDB

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Sociological Association
Association of Internet Researchers
Council for European Studies (Radicalism and Violence Research Network)
European Consortium for Political Research (Extremism and Democracy Standing Group)
International Studies Association