



Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE PATRIOT/MILITIA MOVEMENT

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## About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

## About the Author

Sam Jackson is a PhD candidate in the Social Science Doctoral Program at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. He studies the contemporary patriot/militia movement in the US. He is working on a book-length study of the Oath Keepers, which investigates the group's use of American history and political ideas. More generally, he studies the ideas that domestic extremists use to justify breaking the law and the public communication strategies they use to portray themselves as part of the American political mainstream.

*The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.*

## Introduction

“If we do not stop Jade Helm 15 there may be no future for our children.” This is the title of a video posted to the YouTube channel of the patriot/militia movement Internet radio show known as “The Liberty Brothers Show” in May 2015.<sup>1</sup> It suggests a common line of thought in the patriot/militia movement: the federal government is actively conspiring to steal the liberty—even the lives—of Americans, and patriots must act now to defend themselves.

This paper provides a primer on conspiracy theories in the patriot/militia movement. After introducing the movement, it describes the basic features of conspiracy theories. It then walks through several prominent and pervasive anti-government conspiracy theories, including those focusing on gun control, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the United Nations as key components of the threat posed to the lives and liberty of Americans by the federal government. It does not cover racist conspiracy theories (for example, those positing that Jews control the federal government, referred to as ZOG [Zionist Occupied Government or Zionist Occupation Government]) or the more bizarre ones (for example, those positing that the world is controlled by a race of subterranean reptilians who sometimes take human form).<sup>2</sup> In closing, it offers some thoughts on why conspiracism plays an important role in the patriot/militia movement.

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<sup>1</sup> The Liberty Brothers Radio Show, *If We Do Not Stop Jade Helm 15 There May Be No Future for Our Children!*

<sup>2</sup> These conspiracies and more are discussed at length in Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.

## The Patriot/Militia Movement

The patriot/militia movement is diverse, encompassing a wide range of groups and actors motivated by diverse political goals.<sup>3</sup> However, those in the movement share several common features. The most important is the perception that America is turning its back on the vision of those who founded the nation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and that the federal government is becoming increasingly tyrannical, threatening the rights and liberties of everyday Americans. Members of the movement therefore declare that they intend to defend the nation from “enemies foreign and domestic.” Other important features include self-description as patriots and a conviction that the answers to contemporary political problems can be found in the thoughts and writings of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans. For example, those in the patriot/militia movement frequently refer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, arguing that this sentence proves beyond question that those who wrote the Bill of Rights believed that the people should be armed with weapons equivalent to those used by the military, as an armed citizenry is the best defense against a tyrannical government.

For many, the obligation to defend the nation entails preparing for a future conflict: training with a local group in a wide range of paramilitary or survivalist skills (primarily firearms training, but also emergency medical skills, alternative communications techniques like ham radio, and other useful skills if modern American society

<sup>3</sup> For more on the patriot/militia movement, see Mulloy, *American Extremism*; Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant’s Face*.

collapses); stockpiling supplies (especially ammunition and food); and remaining vigilant in identifying allies and enemies for that future conflict. For others, this obligation to defend the nation demands that they be more proactive, preemptively taking the fight to the federal government rather than waiting for the federal government to bring the fight to them.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether defense only requires preparation at this point or demands more proactive steps, it follows from the common identification of threats by those in the patriot/militia movement. Often, the description of these threats constitutes a conspiracy theory.

## Basic Features of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain events by identifying a group of actors working in secret to benefit themselves at the expense of others.<sup>5</sup> These theories often describe the activities of this secret group as an existential threat. They differ from other explanations of threats in that they identify a malevolent actor (unlike non-conspiracist theories, which warned of unintentional Y2K dangers). Generally, theories about malevolent actors working in secret develop out of a default position of distrust. No matter the theories' content, they start from a general predisposition to be suspicious of what official or

authoritative sources say about the world, and operate under the assumption that these sources are lying, or else hiding important details.

Conspiracy theories rely on three basic premises: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.<sup>6</sup> The first premise asserts that every bad outcome is the result of an intentional decision by an evil actor. For example, the federal government didn't botch its response to Hurricane Katrina. Instead, the federal government's response reveals that it either wanted to see people suffer, wanted to practice for the future imposition of martial law, or wanted to create background conditions that would justify an expansion of governmental bureaucracy that it could later use to oppress and control Americans.

The second premise—nothing is as it seems—explains why the conspiracy theory is not common knowledge: the conspirators hide their actions from the masses. They fabricate evidence to distract observers from the truth, as identified by those promoting the conspiracy theory. The conspirators trick unsuspecting people into helping with the conspiracy, so that many of those involved don't even realize that they are part of the conspiracy. Thus, for those who believe the conspiracy theory, any evidence that the conspiracy *isn't* true is actually evidence that the conspiracy *is* true: disconfirming evidence must

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<sup>4</sup> The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon in early 2016 is an example of how those in the movement might be proactive. The leader of the group that took over the refuge, Ammon Bundy, repeatedly remarked that “it was time to make a hard stand” to push back against a federal government threatening the rights of Americans. Hersher, “It

Was Time To Make A Hard Stand”; Closing Arguments Completed In Malheur Trial”; Wilson, “Ammon Bundy Contradicts Previous Testimony On Refuge Takeover.”

<sup>5</sup> Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3–4.

have been fabricated by those who don't want the conspiracy to come to light.<sup>7</sup> For example, after then-President Barack Obama released his long-form birth certificate in 2011, conspiracy theories that argued that he was not a U.S. citizen added the new detail that this document must be fraudulent, claims that resurfaced in 2016 with a press conference held by Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Arizona.<sup>8</sup>

This treatment of evidence means that conspiracy theories are non-falsifiable. Though they claim to be “testable by the accumulation of evidence about the observable world...belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof.”<sup>9</sup> Those promoting conspiracy theories argue that nothing is as it seems to discredit authoritative stories about the events they describe, suggesting that they have exclusive access to special information that allows them to see past the lies told by the conspirators.<sup>10</sup> In arguing for the conspiracy theory, conspiracists ask those listening to take it on faith that they have access to a hidden truth about the conspiracy. Building from the general predisposition to distrust authoritative sources, conspiracists encourage others to ‘wake up’ and see that the government, scientists, and the media are lying to them. While suggesting that these traditional authoritative sources are lying to the

public, those who promote conspiracy theories offer themselves as more accurate, honest, and authoritative sources of information—not based on formal qualifications or training, but on their self-described ability to see through the disinformation spread by the conspirators.

The third premise—everything is connected—is more apparent in expansive conspiracy theories than in those more narrowly focused. These theories tie together a wide range of events, suggesting that seemingly unrelated occurrences are all part of a larger plot. The most expansive conspiracy theories suggest that events around the globe are orchestrated by a small group of individuals (perhaps the Illuminati, perhaps the Council on Foreign Relations, perhaps the Rothschild family) for their personal gain. Richard Hofstadter noted the prominence of this feature of conspiracism in American politics: in “the paranoid style,” “a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy [is] *the motive force* in historical events.”<sup>11</sup> Conspiracy theories in the patriot/militia movement include both smaller scale conspiracies that focus on corrupt individuals within government and larger scale conspiracies that depict government itself as corrupt.

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<sup>7</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule refer to this as the “self-sealing quality” of conspiracy theories. “Conspiracy Theories,” 204.

<sup>8</sup> Infowars Nightly News, “Case Closed! Trump Was Right, Obama’s Birth Certificate A Fake.”

<sup>9</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> This feature of conspiracy theories feeds off and further encourages anti-elitism, anti-expertise, and anti-intellectualism. As Barkun says, “If no one can be

trusted (except, presumably, others in the truth-seeking cadre), a society becomes divided between believers in received ideas about what counts as knowledge and a no-longer-hidden minority of challengers.” *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>11</sup> Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 29.

## Prominent Anti-government Conspiracies

### *Gun Confiscation*

Some of the most durable conspiracy theories in the patriot/militia movement assert that the federal government is preparing to confiscate privately owned firearms.<sup>12</sup> This branch of conspiracism reaches back decades, but it exploded in the 1990s after the passage of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act in 1993 and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 1994.

Two ideas are central to this line of thought. First, there are malevolent actors within the government who want to confiscate firearms because they believe that widespread gun ownership prevents them from seizing more power.<sup>13</sup> Second, any act that *could* facilitate confiscation *will* facilitate confiscation. Thus, those worried about federal gun control warn that the government intends to use any sort of gun owner registration (for example, lists of those who have concealed carry permits) to ensure it knows who it must confiscate guns from in the future.

A recurrent feature in these conspiracy theories is Form 4473, a document that prospective gun buyers fill out as part of the background check process. Federal law prohibits the government from keeping records on gun ownership, but licensed firearms dealers are required to keep

each completed Form 4473 for 20 years.<sup>14</sup> Despite this limitation, some conspiracy theories point to the form as the means by which the government will confiscate weapons. For example, Michael Vanderboegh, a prominent patriot/militia movement blogger who founded the Three Percenter movement, wrote a short story in 1996 in which concerned gun owners (the heroes of the story) broke into local gun shops and stole or destroyed records including Form 4473 as “an effective tactic in blunting federal registration/confiscation schemes.”<sup>15</sup>

Expectations that Form 4473 will be used as a means for firearms confiscation began before the 1990s, and they extend far into mainstream culture. Amidst references to other conspiracy theories, the 1984 Hollywood action film *Red Dawn* briefly mentions the form. After invading a town in Colorado, the Cuban Colonel Bella orders a Russian KGB agent to “go to the sporting goods store [and] from the files, obtain form 4473. These will contain descriptions of weapons and lists of private ownership.”<sup>16</sup> With these few words, the film taps into this conspiracy theory that Form 4473 is a threat to gun owners.

Conspiracy theories about gun control often present so-called “citizen disarmament” of any kind as a compounding problem. The concern that animates these theories is that the government will confiscate firearms to make it easier to steal

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<sup>12</sup> Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant's Face*, 4. Gun confiscation is also prominent in white supremacist writing. Berger, “The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism’s Deadly Bible.”

<sup>13</sup> Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 114–32. This argument is prominent in writing from the Oath

Keepers, one of the most visible groups in the patriot/militia movement.

<sup>14</sup> See 18 USC § 926 (2012)

<sup>15</sup> Vanderboegh, “Once Upon a Tea Party.”

Vanderboegh died in August 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Milius, *Red Dawn*.

Americans' freedom. The Oath Keepers, a prominent group in the patriot/militia movement whose members participated in the armed standoff with federal agents at the Bundy Ranch in 2014, provides an example. An article on the group's website says of a California gun control law that it "has nothing to do with safety, and everything to do with conditioning the public into accepting citizen disarmament as a solution to violence. Of course it's about control."<sup>17</sup> Matthew Bracken's *Enemies Foreign and Domestic* trilogy of novels provides another example. J.M. Berger has noted that dystopian fiction can serve as propaganda for extremists, motivating some readers to anticipate a novel's events happening in the real world, and perhaps even taking action to ensure that they do.<sup>18</sup> Bracken's writing includes this dystopian trilogy, and has also appeared on prominent patriot/militia movement blogs like Western Rifle Shooters Association<sup>19</sup> and other far-right websites such as Gates of Vienna,<sup>20</sup> as well as more widely known online outlets like Infowars and PJ Media. In *Enemies Foreign and Domestic*, political turmoil ensues when a rogue, power-hungry ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives) agent orchestrates a mass shooting at a football stadium so that he can lead a special task force that confiscates firearms.<sup>21</sup> What begins in the first novel as government action to restrict gun ownership leads to, in later novels, a war with Hispanic separatists in the American Southwest,

the use of soldiers on horseback from Kazakhstan as peacekeepers in the American South, and widespread resistance to FEMA programs that purport to help Americans displaced by nationwide conflicts and natural disasters.

### *FEMA Camps*

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is another frequent subject of conspiracy theories. Many conspiracy-mongers argue that, under the auspices of FEMA, the federal government has plans to intern large numbers of Americans in detention camps. Typically, these conspiracy theories warn that plans for such camps claim to be humanitarian preparation for future disasters, but that these humanitarian plans belie a more nefarious purpose. Stewart Rhodes, president of the Oath Keepers, warns "there's always a dual use excuse. It's going to be difficult to find a smoking gun that says this camp is for internment of dissidents."<sup>22</sup> Keeping this in mind, the patriot/militia community is told to be wary of government plans to help people, as they may be a cover for plans to violate the liberty of Americans.

Alex Jones, the country's most prominent promoter of conspiracy theories, has repeatedly posted documents to his Infowars website that he claims prove that the government is building FEMA

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<sup>17</sup> Codrea, "California Gun Seizure Edict a Naked Power Grab That Ignores True Danger."

<sup>18</sup> Berger, "The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism's Deadly Bible."

<sup>19</sup> <https://westernrifleshooters.wordpress.com/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://gatesofvienna.net/>

<sup>21</sup> Bracken, *Enemies, Foreign and Domestic*; Bracken, *Domestic Enemies*; Bracken, *Foreign Enemies And Traitors*. See also Berger, "The Patriot Movement's New Bestseller Tests Their Anti-Racism."

<sup>22</sup> OathKeepersOK, *Stewart Rhodes on the "Baldy & the Blonde Radio Show" discussing Senate Bill 1867*.

camps to intern Americans.<sup>23</sup> A 2011 article connected alleged contracts held by KBR (a Halliburton subsidiary) to build FEMA camps with the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that included language allowing the government to indefinitely detain “unlawful enemy combatants.” The article also connected these FEMA camps to:

“National emergency centers” to be located on military installations for the purpose of providing “temporary housing, medical, and humanitarian assistance to individuals and families dislocated due to an emergency or major disaster,” according to the bill. In addition to emergencies, the legislation is designed to “meet other appropriate needs, as determined by the Secretary of Homeland Security,” an open ended mandate which many fear could mean the **forced detention of American citizens** in the event of widespread rioting after a national emergency or total economic collapse... [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to overstate Alex Jones’s role in spreading anti-government conspiracy theories. In 2011, a *Rolling Stone* article stated that “Jones draws a bigger audience online than Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck combined.” In 2016, the *Washington Post* reported that Jones claimed 5 million daily listeners. His YouTube channel (The Alex Jones Channel) has 56 videos with more than 1 million views each. Zaitchik, “Meet Alex Jones.” Roig-Franzia, “How Alex Jones,

As mentioned previously, fiction popular in the patriot/militia movement also features FEMA camps, where Americans are interned against their will and forced to surrender their weapons.<sup>25</sup> Some in the patriot/militia movement who worry about FEMA point to the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina as evidence that the government will use emergency response to implement tyranny.<sup>26</sup> A 1994 book written by Jim Keith, a leading conspiracy theorist, contains multiple maps alleging to show the location of FEMA detention camps (Figure 1 illustrates an example).<sup>27</sup> According Keith’s narrative, it is not only the federal government that threatens to intern Americans, though. Foreign actors may be involved as well.

Conspiracy Theorist Extraordinaire, Got Donald Trump’s Ear.”

<sup>24</sup> Nimmo and Jones, “Exclusive.”

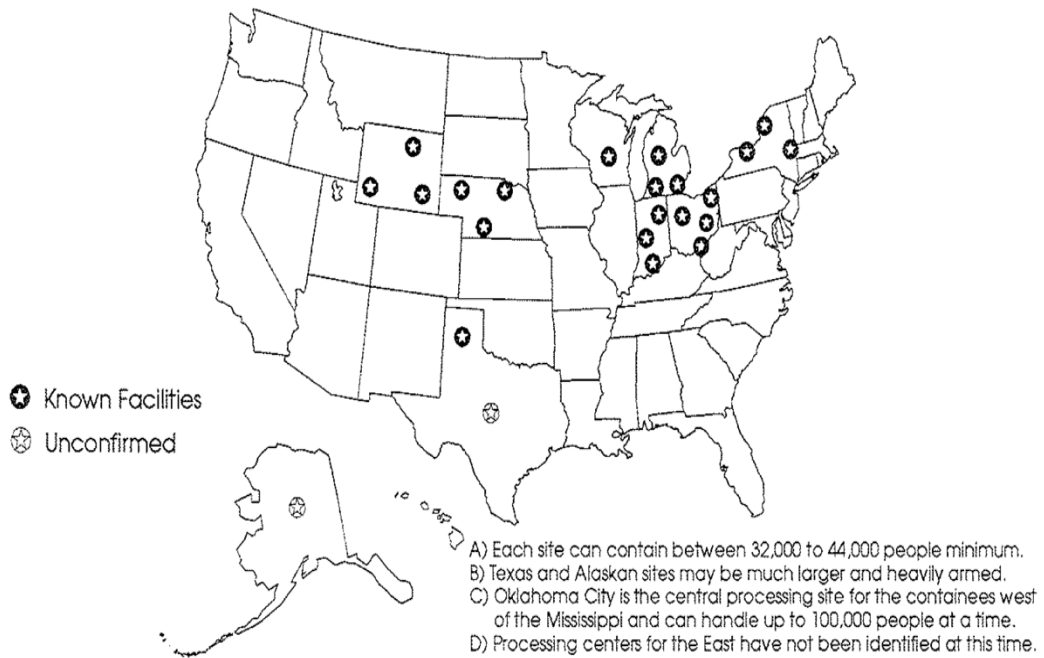
<sup>25</sup> Bracken, *Foreign Enemies And Traitors*.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, “Take These Steps Today To Survive An International Crisis.”

<sup>27</sup> Keith, *Black Helicopters over America: Strikeforce for the New World Order*.



DETENTION FACILITIES AUTHORIZED THROUGH FEMA AND AUGMENTED  
BY DOD BUDGET AMENDMENT PASSED WITH 1991 FISCAL BUDGET



*Figure 1: Jim Keith's map of alleged "FEMA detention camps"*

## *The United Nations*

The United Nations (UN) is a common enemy in patriot/militia movement conspiracy theories. Most often, the UN is depicted as the instrument that a malevolent cabal will use to erode American national sovereignty and crush Americans' individual liberties. Some of these conspiracy theories assert that decisions made in the UN will erode American sovereignty by creating international laws that overrule the U.S. Constitution. A common variant here is the idea that Agenda 21, a non-binding resolution encouraging nations to "take a balanced and integrated approach to environment and development questions," is actually a plot to restrict the property rights of American citizens.<sup>28</sup> A testimonial that appears on the website of the Oath Keepers provides a typical example of suspicion of the United Nations:

"Our Forefathers didn't fight and die for more than 200 years... just so we could hand our Right of Self-determination over... to a bunch of foreign agents at the United Nations, letting them dictate to us, as they do, what our domestic policies will be (see UN Agenda 21 and UN Small Arms Treaty), or what wars we'll fight

in (see Libya). Those issues are all for the American People to decide on our own, without any foreign influence, whatsoever."<sup>29</sup>

These conspiracy theories often argue that American government officials are colluding with United Nations officials to take away Americans' rights.

Some conspiracy theories about the United Nations assume more direct malevolence, arguing that the international organization is part of a plot that will bring foreign troops to American soil in order to replace American democracy with globalist tyranny. Jim Keith, who provided a map of FEMA camp locations, also provided a map of UN "concentration camps" (Figure 2).<sup>30</sup>

These UN conspiracy theories have influenced extreme action by American militias. In 1995, for example, members of the Michigan Militia Corps plotted to attack a U.S. military base after hearing reports of foreign military equipment being shipped across the country on trains.<sup>31</sup> Some people, including supporters of the patriot/militia movement, had taken this as evidence that supported "a conspiracy theory popular among far-right groups: that foreign troops under United Nations command are massing to take over the country."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> United Nations, "United Nations Conference on Environment & Development: AGENDA 21," 21.

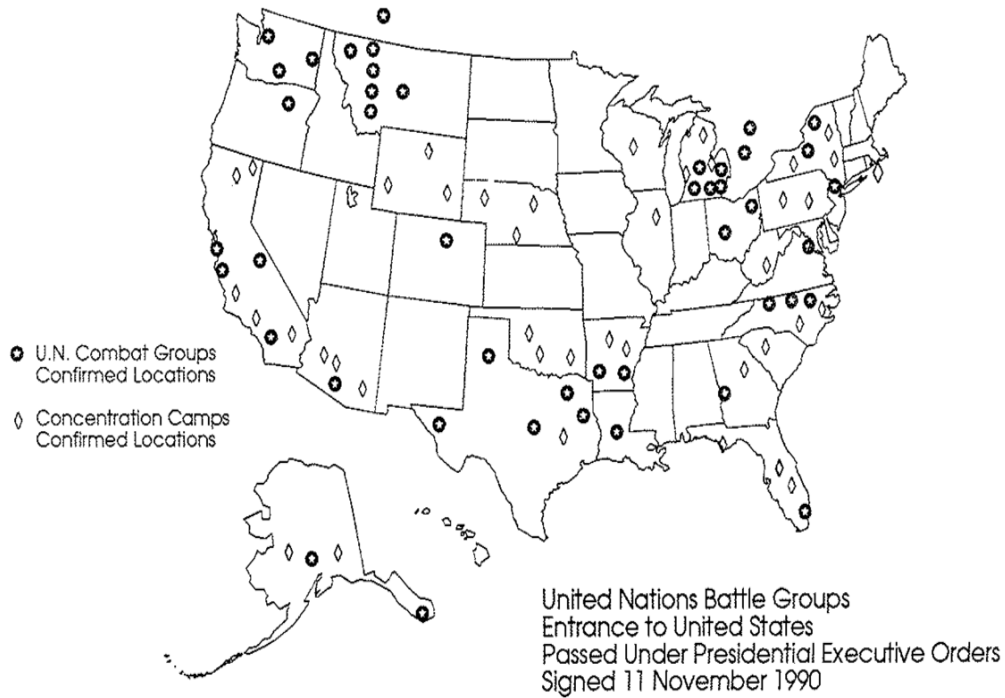
<sup>29</sup> "Testimonial - Mike Baker." Another post on the Oath Keepers website describes Agenda 21 as "the UN plan to depopulate the rural areas of America." Krause, "Wilderness Corridors."

<sup>30</sup> Keith, *Black Helicopters over America: Strikeforce for the New World Order*.

<sup>31</sup> Janofsky, "'Militia' Man Tells of Plot To Attack Military Base."

<sup>32</sup> An Army spokesperson confirmed the reports, noting that "captured foreign military equipment" is

## Alleged U.N. Bases and Concentration Camps in America



*Figure 2: Jim Keith's map of alleged UN military bases and concentration camps in the United States*

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used to train American soldiers, and “always travel[s] on open, uncovered flatcars” to avoid concerns that the equipment was part of a secret plot. The

spokesperson also mentioned that the name of the program is “Chicken Little.” *Ibid.*

## *False Flags*

An increasingly common type of conspiracy theory identifies incidents of mass killings, including acts of terrorism, as attacks orchestrated by the government to justify encroachments on civil liberties. Conspiracy theorists refer to these as false flag attacks.<sup>33</sup> In the large universe of conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks, some describe those events as a false flag orchestrated by the government. For example, during his September 11, 2001 broadcast, Alex Jones declared, “those were controlled demolitions. You just watched the government blow up the World Trade Center.”<sup>34</sup> Later, conspiracy theorists described the reports written by the 9/11 Commission and the National Institute of Standards and Technology as elaborate attempts by the government to hide the truth of what happened on that day.<sup>35</sup>

Supporters of the patriot/militia movement saw two recent events as false flags. In the first hours after the bombing of the Boston Marathon in April 2013, conspiracy theorists began to suggest that the government either faked the bombing and hired actors to play victims, or directed the Tsarnaev brothers to carry it out.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most prominent false flag conspiracy theory about the bombing came from Infowars’ Alex Jones, who released a video on April 17, 2013 allegedly proving that the bombing was a “staged terror

attack.” He argued that the Tsarnaev brothers were “patsies” and the real culprits were Navy Seals, identified by their off-duty uniforms of black shirts, black jackets, khakis, and combat boots. During a press conference in Boston days after the attack, an Infowars reporter asked Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, “Is this another false flag staged attack to take our civil liberties and put more Homeland Security, while sticking their hands down our pants, on the streets?”<sup>37</sup>

Similar theories emerged about the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, when Adam Lanza killed 27 people, 20 of whom were schoolchildren. As with false flag conspiracy theories about the Boston Marathon bombing, some people (including Alex Jones) believed that the government hired actors to play the wounded and dead children. Some Sandy Hook “truthers” harassed the families of victims, challenging parents to prove that their children really were killed. One conspiracy theorist told Lenny Pozner, whose son Noah was killed, that he should “exhume Noah’s body and prove to the world you lost your son.”<sup>38</sup> While some conspiracy theories question the real story of the Sandy Hook shooting without making accusations about a malevolent actor allegedly behind the events, those who do identify a motive for the hoax they describe argue that the government orchestrated the event to provide cover for plans to encroach

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<sup>33</sup> Mele, “After Orlando Shooting, ‘False Flag’ and ‘Crisis Actor’ Conspiracy Theories Surface.”

<sup>34</sup> Zaitchik, “Meet Alex Jones.”

<sup>35</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 172–73. Barkun devotes two chapters of this book to conspiracy theories about 9/11.

<sup>36</sup> Beckhusen, “False Flags, Fake Blood, and Michelle Obama.”

<sup>37</sup> The Alex Jones Channel, *PROOF! Boston Marathon Bombing Is Staged Terror Attack*.

<sup>38</sup> Spies, “What Kind of Person Calls a Mass Shooting a Hoax?”

on civil liberties, with a particular focus on expanded gun ownership regulations.<sup>39</sup>

The common thread in false flag conspiracy theories is that many events that garner wide public attention are not what they seem. A tragedy like the shooting at Sandy Hook might have been faked, or it might have happened. False flag conspiracists suggest that, either way, the government is promoting a false narrative about the events it intends to use to justify crackdowns on civil liberties. Those promoting the conspiracy theory claim that only they have access to the truth behind these government lies. They have ‘opened their eyes’ and are spreading the truth to stop the government’s plan.

### *Jade Helm 15*

Some conspiracists weave multiple conspiracy theories together, creating a more encompassing story about the evil plot to steal the freedom of Americans. Jade Helm 15 was a large scale United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) training exercise that took place in several states in the Southwest between July 15 and September 15, 2015.<sup>40</sup> A host of conspiracy theories about this exercise developed in the months prior, some

of which became prominent enough to warrant coverage in news outlets like *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, as well as by fact-checking organizations like Politifact.<sup>41</sup>

Dave Hodges, who hosts a patriot/militia Internet radio show called “The Common Sense Show,” outlined a conspiracy theory about FEMA camps, Jade Helm 15, foreign troops, and false flags to describe the contemporary situation in America.<sup>42</sup> In a conversation with Jason Van Tatenhove, the National Media Director for the Oath Keepers and co-host of “The Liberty Brothers”, Hodges described alleged government plans to use NSA threat-matrix scores to decide whether to execute American citizens with government death squads, presumably starting with supporters of the patriot/militia movement.<sup>43</sup> He further asserted that those planning the operation were keeping the details compartmentalized, in hopes of having the U.S. military cooperate as long as possible before foreign troops would be brought in to finish the job of imposing tyranny.

A series of articles posted on the Oath Keepers website also expressed concerns about Jade Helm 15. One article stated it could be a:

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<sup>39</sup> Baddour and Selby, “Hillary Clinton Right about Alex Jones Naysaying Sandy Hook.” Some conspiracy theorists who identify the shooting of the Pulse Nightclub in June 2016 similarly identify “tighter gun restrictions” as the motive for the government to orchestrate the attack. Mele, “After Orlando Shooting, ‘False Flag’ and ‘Crisis Actor’ Conspiracy Theories Surface.”

<sup>40</sup> Belanger, “What Is Jade Helm 15.”

<sup>41</sup> Fernandez, “Conspiracy Theories Over Jade Helm Training Exercise Get Some Traction in Texas”;

Stanglin and Jahner, “Controversial Jade Helm Military Exercise Opens in Texas”; Belanger, “What Is Jade Helm 15.”

<sup>42</sup> Hodges, “World War III, Walmart, FEMA Camps, Jade Helm.”

<sup>43</sup> The Liberty Brothers Radio Show, *If We Do Not Stop Jade Helm 15 There May Be No Future for Our Children!*

“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.”<sup>44</sup>

Stewart Rhodes instead suggested that Jade Helm was primarily a chance for the federal government to see which parts of the military would go along with domestic deployments. It was also meant to condition the parts of the American public who weren’t aware of governmental plans to take away Americans’ liberty to accept the presence of troops on American streets. The exercise was also an opportunity to intimidate members of the public who are ‘awake,’ threatening them with a U.S. military response if they continue to publicly oppose the government.<sup>45</sup>

Some Jade Helm 15 conspiracy theories suggested more features in the conspiracy: closed Walmart locations were in fact stations for underground tunnels built by the military or detention centers for Americans who would be rounded up during the

exercise, and Blue Bell ice cream trucks would be “mobile morgues” used to collect the bodies of American citizens killed during the operation. Some citizens formed a group they called “Counter Jade Helm” to monitor the exercise, while others purchased extra ammunition or hid weapons “just in case.”<sup>46</sup>

As with all conspiracy theories, the theories surrounding Jade Helm asserted that the official story was a lie. After some individuals began expressing concern over leaked details about the operation, the military sent officers to talk with residents in communities that would host part of the operation. In Bastrop, Texas, a lieutenant colonel attempted to reassure the community that there was nothing nefarious about Jade Helm, but one man in the audience expressed the distrust that underlies this conspiracy: “I didn’t believe a single thing he just said.”<sup>47</sup> In keeping with other conspiracy theories, those who believed the worst about Jade Helm 15 argued that they had access to the secret truth about the government’s plan, and evidence that discounted their theory was in fact nothing more than evidence of a cover-up.

## Conspiracy Theories and the Patriot/Militia Movement

None of these theories are supported by direct evidence. At best, they are possibilities supported by the weakest of circumstantial evidence, and they ignore stronger evidence that would refute

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<sup>44</sup> Alias, “JADE HELM 2015.”

<sup>45</sup> The Liberty Brothers Radio Show, *Stewart Rhodes on Jade Helm 15 on The Liberty Brothers*.

<sup>46</sup> Fernandez, “Conspiracy Theories Over Jade Helm Training Exercise Get Some Traction in Texas”;

Belanger, “What Is Jade Helm 15”; Stanglin and Jahner, “Controversial Jade Helm Military Exercise Opens in Texas”; Viser, “Jade Helm.”

<sup>47</sup> Viser, “Jade Helm.”

the conspiracy theories. Why, then, are they so common in the patriot/militia movement?<sup>48</sup>

Political extremists of all types are motivated in part by the perception of a crisis that demands action, and they use this to whip up fear and recruit more members.<sup>49</sup> Such a crisis may be readily apparent to everyone, rooted in public action rather than the scheming of a cabal acting behind closed doors. But there may not be such an obvious crisis that is easily recognized by large segments of the public. Rarely does public action by the government pose an obvious and immediate threat to the basic liberties of everyday Americans.

Yet such threats are always on the minds of supporters of the patriot/militia movement. Convinced that those in government must be pursuing personal power or wealth at the expense of Americans' civil liberties, the movement provides explanations of how those in government are doing this. If there is no direct evidence for this, that lack of evidence is itself interpreted as evidence of a cover-up.

The default assumption is that the government must be planning to restrict liberty, an assumption that leads supporters of the movement to assume the worst of each government policy or military exercise, and to elaborate on why the assumption

is reasonable. It is not that supporters of the patriot/militia movement go searching for conspiracy theories to justify their political views. Instead, their worldview predisposes them to quickly see threats, even where others see innocuous—or even beneficial—action.

Once a person accepts the premise that there are conspirators who work to hide their actions, even to the extent of creating false evidence to mislead those who might otherwise oppose them, an important barrier to accepting conspiracy theories has been removed.<sup>50</sup> Believing that it is common practice for those in government to scheme about how to benefit themselves by harming American citizens leads to a search for other ways that they might be doing so. Quickly, any government program seems like tyranny, and if tyranny is not obvious, it must imply there is a cover-up.

This conspiracism feeds off widespread distrust of government, and the government's past actions have encouraged this distrust. Kathryn Olmsted argues that real government conspiracies, like MKUltra and COINTELPRO, provide the impetus for Americans to develop and support a range of conspiracy theories about the government.<sup>51</sup> For the patriot/militia movement, this distrust of government develops into the assumption that government is malevolent.

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<sup>48</sup> Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 165–74. Conspiracy theories certainly aren't limited to the patriot/militia movement. Scholars have noted their surprising prevalence among all Americans. Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson, "Non-Normative Political Extremism." See also Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity: How

Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics."

<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Swami and colleagues find that "the strongest predictor of whether or not an individual will ultimately accept a conspiracy theory is the presence of earlier conspiracy ideation." Swami et al., "Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria," 459.

<sup>51</sup> Olmsted, *Real Enemies*.

The most problematic conspiracy theories are not the most fantastic, which most people reject. Few people believe that closed Walmarts throughout the Southwest were stations for underground railroads that would be used to transport foreign troops during Jade Helm 15. The most problematic conspiracy theories incrementally encourage people to assume the worst of the government. When individuals see tyranny or martial law behind every policy, they stop viewing the government as a means for American citizens to come together to solve public problems. Instead, they see it as an evil actor that must be resisted at every turn. This breed of conspiracism leads to armed standoffs between citizens and government employees, and in extreme cases, leads unstable individuals to try to start a revolution by killing law enforcement or even civilians.<sup>52</sup>

Recent events have demonstrated that conspiracy theories—including some of those promoted by the patriot/militia movement—continue to have outsized impact on public life in America. Alex Jones was one of many commentators who promoted the conspiracy theory about democrats, child trafficking, and the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C. Edgar Welch took it upon himself to investigate these claims, visiting the restaurant on December 4, 2016, bringing an AR-15 rifle and a .38 caliber revolver into the store in

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<sup>52</sup> Blasky et al., “Shooters Carried Arsenal, Supplies into Sunday Rampage”; Blasky, Botkin, and Lochhead, “Rejected by the Revolution, Jerad and Amanda Miller Decided to Start Their Own.”

<sup>53</sup> Hsu, “Comet Pizza Gunman Pleads Guilty to Federal and Local Charges.”

<sup>54</sup> Barkun points out the increasing ability of conspiracy theorists to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, spreading their theories directly with

anticipation of a violent conflict with child abusers.<sup>53</sup> Conspiracy theories are not just idle distractions that entertain middle-aged men with too much time on their hands. They often have real impacts on public life.

In part, this impact is due to the growing prominence of social media. While conspiracists have always found ways to disseminate their theories through mail-order videos, home-printed pamphlets, or late night talk radio, the advents of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter provide easy, accessible platforms that those promoting conspiracy theories can use to churn out a large volume of material.<sup>54</sup> They can even create pseudo-citation and -sourcing standards like those used by academics and journalists; through a process of layering, one person posts a conspiracy theory, another person links to it, and a network builds of people who support each other’s theories.<sup>55</sup> Eventually, the first person that posted about a theory can point to the many others discussing it as confirmation of their idea: surely, they reason, this many people would only be talking about it if it were true.

The patriot/militia movement has grown—in size and prominence—over the past decade.<sup>56</sup> There are many reasons for this, but one reason is that supporters of the movement see their country

the public. Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge.” See Berlet on older alternative information networks. “Who Is Mediating the Storm? Right-Wing Alternative Information Networks.”

<sup>55</sup> Barkun develops this argument further in “Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge.”

<sup>56</sup> Potok, “The Year in Hate and Extremism.”



headed in the wrong direction politically, economically, and morally. Some experience hardship directly, but all hear stories of friends, neighbors, or fellow patriots who have had some bad experience for which they blame the government. This growth in the movement, in combination with supporters' readiness to identify conspiracy theories describing the government as a nefarious actor and a conviction that Americans must be ready to take up arms to defend themselves, contributes to an environment in which future hostile interactions between law enforcement and those in the patriot/militia movement seem likely. If those in the movement had experienced hardship and were convinced that they needed to be ready for violent conflict, but did not presume that the federal government is a malevolent actor trying to hurt them, these conflicts might be less likely. Instead, these armed Americans have identified their primary enemy, and they have complex arguments to describe its actions. Conspiracy theories in the patriot/militia movement therefore foster antagonism and make violence between Americans and their government more likely.

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