

Stern, Kenneth S. *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.

The more obvious characteristics of the American Patriot Militia movement are widely known: racist politics, paranoia and conspiracy-myth addiction, and a lurking fear of the impending millennium. The Militia movement has spread to Australia and Canada, and has some influence in Europe. Plainly, it merits closer study. However, armed bodies based on racist or exclusionary politics have made earlier appearances in the history of the English speaking peoples. Widespread paranoia is also no stranger in history, nor is millennialism. Are today's Patriot Militias a new problem, or an old one returned in new guise? Moreover, small groups of armed extremists are often not so much of a problem in themselves, but rather they may be a symptom of a larger problem set. Is this true of the Patriot Militias?

Kenneth Stern answers neither question. Stern is very expert on American hate groups, being the American Jewish Committee's specialist on the subject. He has produced a very useful book on the Patriot Militias, by combining his talents as a lawyer, an activist and a reporter but the book is largely limited by his narrow approach.

Stern points out that America has often had private armed militias animated by race or hate. He sees the Patriot Militias largely as a continuation of a tradition that stretches back to the Ku Klux Klan of the 1870s. Indeed, the KKK was revived in the 1920s, and again (albeit highly fragmented) in the 1960s. Early Militia celebrities like Randy Weaver, "Bo" Gritz and John Trechmann had direct links with post-Klan groups like the Aryan Nations and Christian Identity movements during the 1980s.

But today's Patriot Militias are not entirely based on hate. Although he mentions their anti-Semitic and paranoiac natures, Stern only gives a passing review to groups like the John Birch Society and the Minutemen. These and the Cold War survivalist culture may have contributed far more to the Patriot Militias than the Posse Comitatus or the Aryan Nations ever did. America's "Know Nothings" and armed religious cults also have a history that predates the KKK. Stern has caught the right scents, but may be barking up the wrong tree.

Indeed, in the Canadian and Michigan Militia Groups that the reviewer is familiar with, issues of race and hate run a distant second to fear and uncertainty. There is a powerful sense of dislocation and isolation in the Militias, a sense that they no longer recognize their own nation and culture anymore. This sense (or instinct) is strongest in rural and suburban areas and conspiracy theory, like Marxism, has an answer for everything.

It is hard to explain the growth and transformation of ordinary citizens into armed groups which (for example) believe highway signs are secretly coded to show Hong Kong Police where to establish concentration camps for American Baptists when the One World Government is established. To attempt the explanation, Stern often resorts to a model from Ken Toole of the Montana Human Rights Network. Toole likens the evolution of militia thinking to a funnel in space that sweeps in lots of people on general issues. Those

who adopt most of the spectrum of truly strange notions emerge at the rear ready to defraud banks, harass public officials, and casually violate hundreds of state and federal laws. In only a single case were any of them ready to bomb public buildings.

The Militias are irritating and some of them appear dangerous, particularly as they have felt free to openly intimidate civil servants and police officers. However, aside from the Oklahoma bombing, the loss of life caused by the Militias has been very limited. Indeed, the armed radicals of the late 1960s were far more energetic, and the Militias seem modest in tone (and sophistication) when compared to the SDS or the Black Panthers. Yet what is so disturbing about the Militias are their numbers, their arsenals, and their widespread presence. For these reasons, it might be better to look at the wide end of the funnel before the spout. The Patriot Militias may be eclipsing a more fundamental problem.

John Thompson

Mackenzie Institute