

governmental power. Conspiracy theories abound in antigovernment circles. Some people believe the U.S. government is in league with a secret organization of Jews and bankers. Others claim the United Nations is attempting to take over the United States and that American military forces are allied with UN troops. These groups sometimes embrace racism, but often they do not.

Antigovernment Extremism

On the morning of April 19, 1995, special news reports on television and radio indicated that some type of explosion had occurred in Oklahoma City in or near the federal building. These reports were quickly amended, and reports of the size and extent of damage increased moment by moment. By noon, it was apparent that the United States had suffered a devastating terrorist attack. As scenes of the injured and dead, including children, and smoldering wreckage dominated the nation's television screens, attention turned toward the Middle East. Conventional wisdom placed blame for the incident on a yet to be identified militant Islamic sect. Many Arab Americans were harassed, and some were openly attacked. The country was shocked when a young white man with a crew cut was arrested for the bombing. It was hard to believe that the United States had produced terrorists in its own heartland.

Sovereign Citizens

The **sovereign citizen** movement is not new, and it is not limited to any racial group or political orientation. The movement has traditionally been linked to white supremacists. It was also related to the militia movement of the 1980s, though issues have changed since then. African American groups such as the **Moorish Nation** can be classified as part of the sovereign citizen movement, as can some Hispanic groups. One Native American group has claimed autonomy from the United States. The Great Recession of 2008 caused a number of people to begin declaring themselves sovereign citizens. Crimes like mortgage fraud and other swindles began to grow. Violent encounters with law enforcement officers also increased (BJA/SLATT, 2010).

Although there they have no centralized structure or organization, sovereign citizens tend to hold some common beliefs. First, they believe that they can declare themselves free of American citizenship as well as U.S. laws and taxes. This transformation can develop in a variety of ways. For example, some people believe that using an odd signature declares that they are free citizens. Others write letters to government officials declaring that they are no longer citizens of the United States. One popular belief is that the United States did not have citizens after the American Revolution, but constitutional amendments added after the Civil War tricked free citizens into accepting American citizenship. If you are aware of that fact, they say, you can simply opt out of the government. Still another group believes there is a missing Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution that allows them to declare themselves free of citizenship.

The Anti-Defamation League (2010) says that sovereign citizens also tend to believe that there are two governments in the United States. One is legitimate and devoid of regulation except for English common law. The illegitimate government includes all established federal and state governments. Like most right-wing groups, sovereign citizens believe taxes, traffic fines, and other government actions result from a conspiracy of evil.

Sovereign citizens have had violent confrontations with police officers and other government officials, but their most common activity is **paper terrorism**. They file false liens, tying up the property of people who have irritated them. They also write bogus

Sovereign Citizens: People who believe that they are not subject to the laws and regulations of the United States. They self-declare that they are individually free of driver's licenses, car registrations, and tax laws. They frequently hold their own legal proceedings and issue orders that have no binding legal authority.

Moorish Nation: An African American group that does not recognize the validity of the U.S. government.

paper terrorism: Uses false documents to clog legal, financial, or bureaucratic processes.

checks or sight drafts against nonexistent accounts. Some sovereigns, like the two who murdered West Memphis police officers, defraud people by conducting seminars to tell participants how they can fill out special forms and renounce their American citizenship. They charge hefty attendance fees. Others carry so-called constitutional driver's licenses and vehicle registrations (ADL, 2010; BJA, 2010).

This is not to suggest that sovereign citizens are a docile group. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2015), more than 30 police officers have been killed in confrontations with sovereign citizens. In addition, they have staged well-publicized armed standoffs with law enforcement officers. They have also made violent threats against government officials.

Sovereign citizens represent one other aspect of antigovernment criminal extremism. They tend to merge into other forms of extremism. For example, some sovereigns belong to racist organizations. Others follow a particular religion. Some may be survivalists, while others live in urban environments. There are sovereign citizen compounds where armed militias patrol in fear of government invasion, and there are seemingly normal citizens who hold jobs and refuse to pay their taxes. There is no single sovereign citizen ideology.

Contemporary Right-Wing Behavior, Beliefs, and Tactics

Modern right-wing extremism came to fruition around 1984 and has remained active since that time. According to this author's research (J. White, 1997, 2000, 2002), several issues hold the movement together. First, the right wing tends to follow one of the forms of extremist religion. The name of God is universally invoked, even by leaders who disavow theism (a belief in God). Second, the movement is dominated by a belief in international conspiracy and other conspiracy theories. Followers feel that sinister forces are conspiring to take away their economic status and swindle them out of the American dream. The primary conspiratorial force was Communism, but after the fall of the Soviet Union, it became the United Nations. The extremist right believes that a conspiracy of Jewish bankers is working with the United Nations to create a New World Order in which Jews will control the international monetary system. Finally, right-wing extremists continue to embrace patriotism and guns. They want to arm themselves for a holy war (see Barkun, 1997b; Berlet and Lyons, 2000, pp. 345–352).

New World Order: A phrase used by President George H. W. Bush to describe the world after the fall of the Soviet Union. Conspiracy theorists use the phrase to describe what they believe to be Jewish attempts to gain control of the international monetary system and, subsequently, to take over the U.S. government.

In his popular historical work *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War*, Robert K. Massie (1991) points to the hysteria in Great Britain and Germany during the naval race before World War I. Both the British and the Germans demonized one another, and their national rivalries often gave way to irrational fears. In one of the more notable British reactions, the fear of German naval power gave rise to a particular genre of popular literature. These stories had a similar theme. Secret German agents would land in the United Kingdom and destroy the British Empire through some type of subversive plot. Whether they were poisoning the water supply, destroying the schools, or infiltrating the economic system, the fictional Germans never attacked directly. They were mysterious, secretive, and everywhere. The actions of right-wing extremists fit Massie's description of the hysterical fears in Britain. Extremists believe that alien forces are conspiring to destroy the United States.

Groups grew in the 1980s and 1990s but waned after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Violent members of the right-wing movement melted away from large organizations and began to congregate in small groups. Following the pattern of international terrorist groups, they organized chains or hubs, that is, small groups that operate autonomously. The days of large meetings seemed to fade as well. One Montana