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978-0-521-87264-5 - Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing

Stuart A. Wright

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## *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing*

This book explores new ground in social movements by analyzing an escalating spiral of tension between the Patriot movement and the state centered on the mutual framing of conflict as “warfare.” By examining the social construction of “warfare” as a principal script or frame defining the movement-state dynamic, Stuart A. Wright explains how this highly charged confluence of a war narrative engendered a kind of symbiosis leading to the escalation of a mutual threat that culminated in the Oklahoma City bombing. Wright offers a unique perspective on the events leading up to the bombing because he served as a consultant to Timothy McVeigh’s defense team and draws on primary data based on face-to-face interviews with McVeigh. The book contends that McVeigh was firmly entrenched in the Patriot movement and was part of a network of “warrior cells” that planned and implemented the bombing. As such, the bombing must be viewed through the lens of a social movement framework in order to fully understand the incident and the role played by McVeigh.

Stuart A. Wright is professor of sociology and Assistant Director for the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Lamar University (Beaumont, TX). Dr. Wright received his Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in 1983. He is the author of *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection* and editor of *Armageddon in Waco*. He has published more than thirty articles or book chapters in scholarly venues and has become a widely recognized expert and legal consultant. Dr. Wright worked with U.S. congressional subcommittees in 1995 investigating the government’s role in the Waco siege and testified in House hearings. Following the highly publicized hearings, he was retained as a consultant by defense attorneys in the Oklahoma City bombing trial of Timothy McVeigh. Dr. Wright has received numerous grants and research awards.

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*Dedicated to the loving memory of Jenna Wright, 1976–2006*

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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

As this book entered the copyediting stage, the November 2006 mid-term elections saw Democrats take back both houses of Congress. Opposition to the war in Iraq was thought to have been the swing issue for voters. The Bush administration's misguided "war on terror" mired in the military occupation of Iraq has created a number of critical problems for the nation that will likely reverberate for years to come, including the staggering economic costs of the war, the incitement of new waves of anti-Americanism generating more recruits to groups like al Qaeda, the alarming assault on civil liberties at home, and the damage done to U.S. relations among allies abroad. Opinion polls now show that a majority of Americans oppose the war in Iraq. The Bush administration is facing deepening divisions in its own party over the war and Democrats have seized the opportunity to push for change. The oversight responsibility of the new Congress, through hearings and investigations, should shed more light on some of the ill-effects of the war just mentioned. However, even as policy analysts turn toward the future and sort through the myriad problems, one concern likely to be overlooked is the potential impact on domestic terrorism.

After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the threat of a new external enemy quelled much of the antigovernment activity among far-right movement organizations and actors. But a recent report released by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Holthouse, 2006) reveals that Patriot warriors have been strategically preparing for the next insurgent episode, exploiting the state's surge in militarism. Capitalizing on opportunities afforded them by the war in Iraq, large numbers of white supremacists and far-right militants have enlisted in the armed services, giving them access to sophisticated weaponry, explosives, combat tactics, and training, as well as contact with other military personnel. A Department of



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Defense investigator told the Southern Poverty Law Center that Aryan soldiers stretched across all branches of service. The investigator reportedly found evidence on 320 extremists at the Fort Lewis, Washington, military base alone. According to the DOD source, the numbers of far-right extremists in the Army are well into the thousands.

In 2005, the military failed to meet its recruiting goals for the war and was forced to widen the net. The Pentagon has been under increasing pressure to maintain enlistment numbers, resulting in a lowering of standards. One investigative report by the *Chicago Sun-Times* cited in the SPLC study found that the percentage of recruits granted “moral waivers” for previously committed crimes had more than doubled since 2001. Recruiters are consciously permitting neo-Nazis and white supremacists to enlist. Far-right activists, keenly aware of recruiting shortages in the military, have promoted enlistment as a means to become battle-ready for future violent conflicts. One National Alliance leader explicitly encouraged racist skinheads to enlist in the infantry because light infantry operations, such as patrolling, ambush, raids, cordon and search, and search and destroy, would be invaluable training for “the coming race war” (Holthouse, 2006).

The growth of state militarism, the power grab by the executive branch claiming wartime powers, and the disturbing erosion of civil liberties under the Bush administration’s war on terror, fostered by the Patriot Act, may well spawn new threats and opportunities for mobilization of a nascent network of movement actors on the far-right. Specifically, a number of provisions of the Patriot Act expand powers of the state that far-right movement actors and organizations already perceived as threatening. Should the United States withdraw from Iraq and work with the international community to stabilize the threat of global terrorism, it may well find that it faces a growing problem of antigovernment sentiment at home. This is more likely to be the case if the state demonstrates reticence to relinquish these expanded powers acquired under wartime conditions. If Patriot movement actors were threatened by the perception that the U.S. government was “at war” with them before 9/11, the prospect for another round of movement-state contention, given these contingencies, is a real possibility to consider.

The far-right has demonstrated enough of an historical resilience in this country so that one would expect it to find new threats and opportunities to exploit in the future. Indeed, the increased public concerns over illegal immigration and undocumented workers seem well-suited to far-right threat attribution and claims making. Controversial debates over gay marriage and equal rights for gay families also play to deep social divisions

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and reactionary elements. Perhaps these issues or others will provide far-right actors with the opportunities to manufacture new enemies, fuel public apprehensions and fears, and broker new ties to like-minded groups. Should legislators or the courts play an aggressive role in safeguarding the rights of undocumented residents or gay families, far-right movement entrepreneurs may well be able to capitalize on new grievances toward government, construct new frames, and mobilize for a new round of collective action. As with the Patriot movement, the new frames will have to mask the racism and bigotry that impel movement leaders in order to appeal to a wider public and build a broad base of support. Scholars of social movements will be challenged to locate and explore new forms of contention arising on the far-right as movement actors look to reinvent themselves and the issues in a shifting political climate.

When I set out to write this book I never imagined it would take me eight years to complete. For a number of reasons, both good and bad, the project seemed to grow and take on a life of its own. There were countless times I had to resist the temptation to set this manuscript aside and move on to other projects. A critical turning point for me was the Rockefeller Scholar-in-Residence grant I received in the fall of 2005. My brief residency at the Bellagio center in northern Italy provided me with uninterrupted time to write, and I was very fortunate to have this opportunity. I want to express my deepest gratitude to the Rockefeller Foundation for its recognition of my work and the extraordinary program that it has created in Bellagio. I was inspired by the breathtaking beauty of Lake Como and encouraged by the collegiality I found among the other scholars at the center. I was able to rediscover the passion and vision I had initially for the book, which made its completion a deeply gratifying experience.

Of course, the book would never have gotten off the ground had I not been approached to be a consultant in *United States of America v. Timothy James McVeigh*. The telephone call I received in August 1995 from Stephen Jones, the lead defense attorney in the Oklahoma City bombing case, provided an extraordinary window into the world of Tim McVeigh and the invaluable resources made available to the defense. I am most appreciative to Jones for the opportunity to work on this historic legal case and for the access to McVeigh. I am confident I helped the defense team better comprehend McVeigh's rage over the Waco debacle and the emergent ideology of the Patriot movement. Curiously, when some of the attorneys in the case were made aware that I planned to write this book, they pressed Jones to

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remove me from the case. Jones resisted the pressure and defended me in this regard. Since I was bound by a confidentiality agreement, he said, the book would not violate the client's rights. Ironically, McVeigh expressed no objections about my book and even seemed to take an interest. During the trial in Denver in 1997, McVeigh asked to speak to me over a lunch recess. I was taken to his holding cell above the courtroom and we talked about the book. He was aware of the grumbling by some of the attorneys and dismissed it. He said he wanted to make it clear to me he had no qualms about my intentions to write the book. Indeed, three years later he would give a full account of his involvement in the bombing to two Buffalo news journalists. Obviously, McVeigh knew something the attorneys didn't.

In between McVeigh's execution in 2001 and my Rockefeller grant in 2005, a number of new facts surfaced about McVeigh and the bombing (these are discussed in Chapter 8). As this information came to light, a more complete picture of the bombing plan began to congeal. This information, together with my own research, shows that McVeigh was part of a network of Patriot insurgents who planned and carried out the bombing. The lone-wolf theory posited by the government has steadily disintegrated with each new revelation. As fate would have it, my protracted project turned into a distinct advantage because I was able to include the new data and assess the goodness of fit with the theoretical models. I hope anyone who continues to think McVeigh acted alone will read this book. The evidence against such an argument is compelling, and the degree to which McVeigh and the Patriot insurgency network overlapped in the months leading up to the bombing is disturbing and inescapable. Nonetheless, the reader can decide if I have made my case in convincing fashion.

I would like to thank my institution for its support in allowing me the time away from my duties at Lamar. At the time of my residency in Bellagio, I was Assistant Dean in the College of Graduate Studies and Research. Several individuals were willing to step into the breach and keep my office operating efficiently. I want to especially thank Dean Jerry Bradley, Carmen Breaux, and Jim Westgate for their assistance and support. The Provost, Steve Doblin, provided travel funds from his office, as did the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Brenda Nichols, and my department chair, Li-Chen Ma. I received some additional travel support from the Jack Shand fund through the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. It goes without saying that the book would not have been completed without this generous support.

I am also indebted to the assistance of graduate students who helped make contacts with militia and Patriot groups, attended gun shows and Patriot

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I received very constructive criticism and suggestions from the anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press. I found their comments extremely helpful, and I am most appreciative of the careful reading they gave to earlier versions of the manuscript. I also want to thank Lew Bateman, the senior editor at Cambridge. Lew recognized the potential of the first draft and gave me the chance to make the manuscript much stronger. He was encouraging in the early stages when it was most important. My production editor, Louise Calabro, and my copy editor, Stephen Calvert, gave the manuscript a meticulous reading and exhibited impeccable professionalism.

Finally, I am saddened that my oldest daughter Jenna is not here to read this book and give me her thoughtful and insightful comments. Jenna died suddenly and unexpectedly in February 2006. I am going to miss having that conversation with her and all the other discussions we would have had in the future about politics and culture. This work is dedicated to her memory.