

Montana Mean Time

Max Baucus

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Since the Oklahoma City bombing, public attention has focused on private militias. I claim no great expertise on the movement as a whole, but I have watched it grow in my state. And as an example of the national phenomenon, the Montana militias deserve a close look.

We Montanans take pride in our low crime rate, and believe honest people can disagree without being disagreeable. Maybe extremist groups believe they can find a home in Montana because of our easygoing ways. The so-called Militia of Montana is one such group. At least one of its founders is associated with the neo-Nazi Aryan Nations. It says it exists so that “if the Government uses its force against the citizens, the people can respond with a superior amount of arms.”

The Militia of Montana frequently uses anti-Semitic code words like “shadow government” and “banking elites.” Its director, Bob Fletcher, defends this rhetoric this way: “If the bulk of the banking elite are Jewish, is that anti-Semitic? The people who are doing this are the international banking elite, and if they are all Jews, so be it, but that’s not the case. I don’t care if they’re Arabs or monkeys.”

Associated with the Militia of Montana is the more extreme Freeman movement. The Militia warns of tyranny to come; the Freeman say it exists today. A Freeman leader offers the following “proof”: “A Social Security card/number, marriage licenses, driver’s licenses, insurance, vehicle registration, welfare from the corporations, electrical inspections, permits to build your private home, income taxes, property taxes.”

Look at the Freeman’s racial theories. The same fellow who says marriage licenses are tyranny believes people who are not white are “beasts.” Only whites go to heaven; Jews are children of Satan.

The rhetoric of these groups embraces a range of enemies, from the Federal Government to “the New World Order.” Their real target, however, is local law enforcement. Nick Murnion, the Garfield County Attorney, recalls threats the Freeman made against him last year. “They told me they weren’t going to bother building a gallows. They were just going to let me swing from the bridge,” he says.

A month ago, armed members of yet a third group, the North American Volunteer Militia, threatened the marshal in the town of Darby. He had pulled over a car whose license plates expired in 1992, and later described what followed: “They had weapons and they were shaking them at us and yelling that they were going to kill us. We backed off a little bit and then left because we could see that it could turn into a bloodbath.”

The good news is that ringleaders of the hate groups are few. Nick Murnion believes there are no more than 30 around Montana. Most refuse to pay taxes and obey the laws. They should be arrested, tried and jailed. Otherwise, the situation may worsen. As one prosecutor, County Attorney John Bohlman, says: “The more the Federal and local law enforcement agencies behave with a hands-off attitude, the more bold and daring these groups become.”

But law enforcement is only part of it. Casual adherents of militias statewide are not criminals. And a united community can deal with them by taking a stand against hate.

Americans have the right to say what they believe. But with that right comes the responsibility to respect our neighbors, respect law enforcement and obey the laws.

In November 1993, a group of skinheads threw a bottle through the glass door of a Jewish family's in Billings. A few days later, they put a brick through a window of another Jewish household; a 5-year-old boy was in the room at the time.

In response, Billings rallied behind the Jewish community. The Billings Gazette printed a full-page drawing of a menorah, and people all over town pasted them in their windows. We held our biggest Martin Luther King Day march ever in February. And the skinheads fled.

The same treatment will work this time. Americans everywhere must speak out. We all must make hatemongers unwelcome in our towns and communities. And we must stand by the heroes in this struggle, the police and county prosecutors who stand up to the extremists.

It is that simple. And after Oklahoma City, it is about time.

The Ted K Archive

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The New York Times, May 1, 1995, Section A, Page 17.
<www.nytimes.com/1995/05/01/opinion/montana-mean-time.html>

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