**Militias at the Millennium: A Test of Smelser's Theory of Collective Behavior**

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**Summary**

The purpose of the study is to test Neil Smelser’s theory of collective behavior, specifically, his idea that people join radical social movements because they experience strain. Using a series of six research questions, the authors start a discussion aimed towards understanding how social movement and militia presence arises from activity on the internet to reassure participants that action is being conducted to remedy strain. The article stands out from previous research because it was the first sociological study of militias with an Internet presence as well as one of the first to study militias in all regions of the United States. It provides a conceptual and operational definition of a citizen militia, and the primary data collected aids in understanding how radical movements are formed and maintained.

**Methods**

The data used for this study stemmed from a subject sample of 171 men and women who belonged to 28 different U.S. militias. To test the thesis, the authors analyzed the content of the subjects’ Internet traffic, including militia websites and messages posted to Usenet, a discussion board utilized by many militia members. The data were collected from September 1, 1998 to August 22, 2001, and included 1, 249 messages that were relevant to answer the following research questions:

* Did militiamen/women experience strain prior to or during their tenure in the militia? Before or after joining the militia, were militiamen or women introduced to the idea of the New World Order, and did they accept it?
* Were the events at Ruby Ridge or Waco, together with the passage of gun control legislation, important reasons for participants to join the militia?
* Did the internet play a more important role than the media in helping to mobilize the movement?
* Following the Oklahoma City Bombing, did social control influence movement participants to use the Internet less and “underground” kinds of communication more often?
* What is the primary orientation of the movement, constitutionalist or Christian Identity?

**Results**

The results of the study indicated that there were multiple strains that pushed average U.S. citizens to join a militia or maintain militia membership status. Nine strains were identified to be essential to militia membership, with the most important one being the fear of the United States federal government (63 percent of the messages). Additionally, 30% feared that federal and/or international police forces were growing in power, 20% mentioned general fear of the government, and 13% felt the federal government was adopting harsh and repressive policies similar to the former Soviet Union.

**Implications**

The findings from the study suggest collective behavior theory adequately explains the emergence and maintenance of militia movements. Using Smelser’s model, social scientists and law enforcement officials could have the ability to predict waves of militia activity and identify future potential members. The study argues, if there is strain, generalized beliefs, precipitating events, and mobilization for action, there will be continued militia activity that could result in further, future violence. Additionally, Internet data can be a viable source of information regarding militias, so by enacting considerable future research through the Internet, social scientists and law enforcement could advance an understanding towards the frame analysis and political processes of militias.

Weeber, S. C., & Rodeheaver, D. G. (2003). Militias at the millennium: A test of Smelser’s theory of collective behavior. *The Sociological*

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