

5 Settling for Nostalgia

How Nostalgia and a Rural Mentality Shape the Militia Movement

In his 1999 interview with Robert Churchill, Michigan militia founder Norm Olson opined, using his pastor's cadence, about the movement he helped start, saying:

It's a rural movement because it's connected to the land. This is important. I believe truly that Americans are unique in all the world. People didn't come to America for religious freedom. They came here for political freedom. They came here so that they could own the land. . . . People came here so they could pick up the dirt and say 'it's mine'. . . . [R]ural people by their very nature are independent, suffer a lot, they do things for themselves. So when the Government starts to intrude, they feel that.

Others who have researched and written about the movement have likewise attributed rurality to the movement's essence. Some rely on contrasts between stereotypes of backwards or ignorant rural people relative to supposedly more sophisticated city dwellers to explain why people might be fearful of cultural change and join a nostalgic group as an expression of this fear. Others have referenced how open farmland has declined and imply that militia members are more likely to be farmers (or at least very closely connected to them) such that perceived threats to domestic farming trigger economic and cultural anxieties, thus explaining militia engagement.

A Rural Mentality

In my observations, however, the truth is much more nuanced. The vast majority of militia members I have spoken with are not rural dwellers, but rather suburbanites. The largest militia units with loyal, regular members tend to train and gather just outside of cities, and none of my 40 formal interviewees relied on farming for income, although three kept animals for their personal egg or milk production. Militia participation seems to be driven by how a *suburban* identity created a desire to be more in touch with nature

and to pursue more traditionally masculine activities than their lifestyles otherwise incorporate. David, a 52-year-old who worked in the auto industry before retiring early, for example, recounted his last militia excursion saying:

It's nice to get out in the woods and sleep. I sleep better out there. You know, I've got a back injury that's bothered me for 5 years, and I'll go out and sleep in a tent on the ground, find just the right ground, and my back feels great. . . . [Last time] we went out, it was ten degrees. I had snow [half a foot] deep on my sleeping bag . . . I felt great! Fresh air! I mean I was curled up in a bag, I was underneath pine boughs, I just felt like 'Wow!' It's nicer out here, nobody's bothering us, we're out here in this wilderness. I really enjoy it, doin' that kind of stuff.

Some people do feel rejuvenated from sleeping in nature, but as I watched David massage his lower back even as he praised the merits of roughing it, I couldn't help but think it was a Shakespearean "he doth protest too much," trying too hard to convince me of his comfort. If this remark did reflect the near euphoria he describes, it is because of the sharp contrast it provides to his usual life. If, as is more likely, this was an overly favorable representation of his emotions waking in the elements, it indicates an even stronger effort to symbolically distance himself from his suburban identity.

Rurality's allure is neither new nor unique. Many organizations have openly encouraged men to remove themselves from cities and from the feminizing effects of women—the "sissification of society," as one of my militia contacts terms it. Organizations like this claim that men need to reinvigorate themselves and recapture a masculine ideal that becomes lost or at least muted when away from nature for too long. Some scholars think nature is less a source of power in this framework than it is something coded feminine (i.e., mother nature) and thus something to either be conquered or cared for in ways that rely on tropes of traditional masculinity (Belmont & Stroud, 2020). The Mythopoetic Movement is perhaps best known for this model. It encouraged men to seek personal growth through participating in appropriated Indigenous rituals, a practice that has been copied to some extent by neo-Nazis, mass shooters, and survivalists in recent years (Bounds, 2020; Miller-Idriss, 2020). Scholars Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes (2019) call this "racialized cross-dressing that selectively incorporate[s] characteristics attributed to Indigenous people, such as incorruptibility, aversion to foreign rule, autonomy, ferocity, and a tie to the natural world," while others note that such practices have a long history, going back to the Boston Tea Party and other settler-era gatherings, and started, in part, as a way to distinguish emerging American masculinity from a supposedly softer British masculinity (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Other organized efforts to reconnect men to nature have included the Promise Keepers, which asserts that Christian men must forcefully reclaim

their proper place as heads of the household, and even the Boy Scouts before its substantial modernization in recent years. The Scouts' founder touted the explicit goal of "fostering manly strength [while countering] corrupting and debilitating effects of urbanization and social change" (MacLeod, 1982, p. 3). Remasculinization through ruralization has operated within larger ebbs and flows of "back to the land" rhetoric, which became commonplace and seemingly permanent after recurrent shortages of fuel and other goods in the 1970s (Brown, 2011). Some men today may similarly have difficulties identifying with a "soft" masculinity that is associated with an increasing number of jobs whose exertions have been made easier and whose dangers have been at least partially mitigated through technology, relative to the physical labor captured in the myth and perhaps still required of their fathers and grandfathers (Du Mez, 2020).

Rural spaces and their seduction of self-sufficiency can be a temptation to large segments of the population, however, and not only to the white men who have comprised the majority of those attracted to organizations promoting the restoration of rural virility. Historian Dona Brown's examination of the back to the land movement's history says that second-wave feminists encouraged women to move to rural environments to be self-sufficient away from oppressive men, inverting the appeals more typically directed toward men. Brown also recounts how others in her field have argued that people, especially Black folks, moving to the suburbs in the early 1900s were not only seeking more affordable housing and property ownership, but also food security that was at least potentially more accessible on one's own land than in rapidly growing cities (2011). Anthropologist Anna Maria Bounds' (2020) ethnography with New York preppers shows how, a century later, continuing distrust regarding the government's ability to care for its citizens during emergencies is still a major factor that incentivizes participating in urban prepping for preppers of color. Olson's quote from the last chapter also reflects this idea when he asserts that city dwellers will flee from violence and chaos surrounding their homes when the federal government eventually and inevitably fails to manage some large-scale emergency. But he says it will already be too late for them to be saved alluding to the Biblical apocalypse of Revelations. Instead of finding refuge, he says, those who flee will find only more hardship as they are confronted by people who had the foresight to prepare a safehold in the country well before disaster struck.

Brown suggests that very real experiences with the government's inability to manage crises undergird contemporary efforts to reduce food insecurity through the locavore movement and community gardens in cities like Detroit (2011).¹ When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020 and the virus negatively impacted global shipping chains and affordable food, some Americans fancied themselves Victory Gardeners and kept busy during lockdowns by planting small vegetable gardens, acting in the lineage of forebearers who bolstered morale and food supplies during earlier national crises (Mayer,

2020). These recent examples of people embracing at least some aspects of a back to the land approach are a reminder that there are rational, practical reasons to engage in some behaviors for which militias advocate. Even the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has, for more than a decade, recommended that everyone have an emergency kit that includes several days' worth of food and water and hard copies of local maps in case some disaster forces people to search for security outside their homes. Framing "getting back to the land" exclusively as an extremist impulse, or exclusively as a uniformly white and male endeavor, risks overlooking how Americans across the political spectrum share some interests and even actions with nostalgic groups. It also risks falsely excluding the possibility of women and men of color being "red-pilled" or radicalized into extremism, including exclusionary and potentially violent nationalism, which is a growing problem.

Even so, sociologist Allison Ford argues that preppers in her sample (not all of whom were white or rural) still "rely on qualities of hegemonic whiteness" (2021, p. 471), in part because appeals to the value of rurality and learning to subsist on the land are created in contrast to perceptions of urbanity. A city's visibly modernized and industrialized environment may alone foster nostalgia for open spaces and tradition (Boym, 2002), but as Katherine Cramer writes in her apposite *Politics of Resentment*, allusions to cities or to urban environments are very often stand-ins for people who are not white. While these perceptions are not necessarily about race alone because of how class, politics, values, and other identity characteristics are coded into racial stereotypes, Cramer writes, "these conversations are about race even when race is not mentioned" (2016, p. 86). Perceptions of the city and its inhabitants are suffused with ideas of threats caused by population density including potential scarcity, crime, and a habituated reliance on convenience or on a government that makes people less self-sufficient and dulls their instincts. Stereotypes about Black people intersect with these threats in inseparable ways, such that racism is a subcurrent of the contempt for urban environments even for people for whom race is not consciously strongly salient.

John, a white-collar worker in his forties, for example, recounted his time in the Navy as an eye-opening experience that allowed him to see truly destitute parts of the world and appreciate how he "had the same opportunity as anyone else" by virtue of being born in the US. He said he was quite pleased with his life, but seemed to sense that I was about to ask about the visible and well-known racial and economic disparities in his hometown of Detroit as he continued:

I've grown up in Detroit, I've grown up in Michigan, I went in one direction and other people went in another direction, and I'm asking, 'Why?' Why should these guys who are here with the same opportunity as me, we work together, why would they go in another direction? They're no different than me. They're no better than me. They're no worse than me. Why? And the only thing I can figure is that it's something to do

with cities. What is it that cities breed? Cities around the world. Cities breed a certain . . . subculture? If you can call it that. It's not something that was around with our grandparents or great grandparents. It's something that just . . . evolved. It developed from, I guess you could say, unions making sure that everything was taken care of. . . . So, they want to rely on something like that—a service to take care of them.

John is very plainly referencing a perceived “softening” effect developed from living in cities that results in a sense of entitlement to being promised job security and other things, he thinks, rather than earning everything through individual hard work. He implies that all city dwellers are susceptible to this “subculture,” as he called it, and that he only escaped it because his military service broadened his perspective. However, his characterizations are, whether he acknowledges them or not, inextricably tied to racist stereotypes of Black workers, specifically: their supposed entitlement, laziness, and reliance on unions, which are a conceptual stand-in for Democrats and other social welfare policies that many conservatives believe discourage honest labor. Although John attributes the same attitude to cities around the world, these stereotypes are even more evident as he references majority-Black Detroit.

Likewise, members' stated reasons for militia participation are not necessarily clearly rooted in overt, conscious racism, or even in an open desire to leave the city. Rurality is nonetheless almost fetishized for many of them. Only a relative handful of members whom I have encountered homestead or own property in remote locations that they use for personal retreat (or, sometimes, for their unit's training activities). And yet, most fantasize about living this way, reliant on few people but themselves, while expressing envy for those who do own rural property or talking about how such ownership, “is the dream. Assuming I'm ever able to retire,” as Phil, a 48-year-old construction worker wistfully admitted to me while gazing at an open soybean field that served as his unit's regular training site. Many Michigan members specifically fantasize about escaping to the state's Upper Peninsula, a place whose landscape and presumed culture form a frequent conversational contrast to the reality of members' suburban surroundings. At the first training I attended with a unit located in the southeast part of the state, for example, some members were talking about their experiences in the peninsula. One mentioned he had once been stationed at a military base there and had been talked into shooting icicles (which can grow to more than 20 feet long and end in a deadly point)² off a large waterfall during his downtime. He recalled questioning the legality of this unique target practice but said his companion had merely responded with a shrug, asking, “who's going to catch us?” reflecting both the remote environment and a culture of independence away from usual authority structures.

Rather than being rural dwellers, it is more appropriate to think of the militia movement as having what might be called a rural *mentality*, an

aspiration for a lifestyle and an identity that the rural represents to them. This means that the movement does indeed have a connection to the land and to ideas of land ownership, as Olson claimed, but this relationship is much more symbolic than it is reality. What we sometimes neglect in our analyses of a “symbolic consumption of the rural,” as other scholars have termed similar practices (Campbell et al., 2006, p. 15), is that militia-style excursions into nature are not merely passive consumptive practices that occur in rural spaces. They are also *performative* practices where their peers, families, and, to some extent, the government are audience members. Wearing camouflage, camping in the elements, target shooting, and practicing survivalist tactics are physical embodiments of traditional masculine tropes of independence, self-sufficiency, and self-defense. Sometimes the audience may even include the actor, the militia member himself. Mark, a member without military experience in his early thirties told me, “I kinda just wanted to see if I could do it,” during an annual training dubbed Snow Dawg that occurs in Michigan’s frigid February temperatures. He and many other members who have echoed similar ideas to me are testing their own mettle to tolerate nature in one of its more hostile forms, in part to evaluate their own ability to do so during a true emergency that forces them from the safety of their homes.



Figure 5.1 Two members at a winter training called Snow Dawg. One takes aim at a distant paper target, and the other watches as he waits his turn.

Source: Photo by the author.

The curtain does not close on these performances once members leave those rural spaces, either. While training, members continue to learn presentations of self (Bounds, 2020; Goffman, 1959), including supplies and techniques that are both practical and rhetorical, that enhance their abilities to convey the image of a “real” militia member and a “real” man. New members, for example, may first attend with the limited gear they have on hand or that they can immediately afford to purchase but, if planning long-term membership, quickly adopt weapons, tactical vests, and other equipment that their unit considers to be ideal, sometimes for aesthetic reasons as much as practical ones. Adoption of various techniques encourages further investment in a member’s militia identity and facilitates the costuming, both literal and metaphorical, of performances that some engage in during open carry rallies, protests, or other events where they aim to overlay their idealized rural mentality onto the suburban and urban spaces where they reside, work, and vote. Most want their collective actions to instill change that is not merely symbolic, as with any protest, and the symbolic aspects of their performances become a guiding light for their lives well beyond militia training grounds.

Nostalgic Nationalism

Nostalgia ideologically supports the symbolic appeals of rurality and untamed land for militia members while forming the shared metaphorical soil that fosters connections with people outside the movement. Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym wrote that nostalgia could be thought of as a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (2002, p. xiii). That sense of longing includes a wistfulness and feelings of loss or irretrievability alongside positive recollections of the past. Psychologists who have studied nostalgia believe it is a sensation that is fundamental to the human experience, that we all may feel it around certain elements of our own biographies, and that it, overall, serves positive functions for identity exploration and self-esteem (Batch, 2020; Sedikides et al., 2004). Boym says this kind of nostalgia allows for reflection of past events that may be culturally instructive and may help affirm one’s sense of belonging and place in society.

But people can also feel nostalgia outside their own biographies for a time or place they have never personally experienced, and even a time and place that perhaps no one has experienced. Nostalgia can be “a preference for things as they are believed to have been” (Dudden, 1961, p. 517), for “a story that feels as if it were true” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 16) even if it is incompatible with both past and present realities. Militias and other nostalgic groups, as historian Darren Mulloy says, long for the mythologized history of the nation’s founding because “of the purposes to which it can be put. [They] use the past to bolster their sense of identity, to confer significance on their activities, and to legitimate their concerns” (2008, p. 62). Political scientist Andrew Murphy argues this kind of concrete nostalgic reference point

creates a “politics of constraint” (2009, p. 131) that draws boundaries on the present based on the collectively imagined past. These limits may include ideas about the direction of the country, about the content of its culture, and about which groups are allowed to succeed, and which are allowed to fail. White men, whose political and economic paths should statistically be easier than other groups because they have not been limited by centuries of racism and sexism, may feel especially aggrieved when they are nonetheless unable to achieve the American Dream—their birthright, as Murphy calls it (*ibid.* 134), alluding to ideas of land ownership and other visible signs of economic achievement being missing from their portfolios.

Nostalgic groups almost feel a kind of diaspora for the mythological past that they believe represents the birth of the Dream and the peak of American freedom and independence (Gibson, 1994). The more jarring reality, however, is that many members think that most any point in our history is somehow superior to the present time. The mythologized heroism of World War II, the supposedly tranquil and economically stable 1950s, and the ostensible morality of Ronald Reagan’s Presidential administration are all mentioned as specific examples that members believe are emblematic of Golden Ages within US history.³ Members still value the Revolutionary War and its actors above all other symbolic reference points, but these alternatives are second-best options that still capture the nostalgia of a past that is supposedly better than the present. Militia members I have spoken with have often gone on diatribes filled with longing for simpler times, lamenting increasing specialization and the loss of broader skills in modern society. Josh, a 27-year-old customer service representative, flatly told me in the middle of such a speech,



Figure 5.2 Two men practicing field sutures on cattle tongues during a multi-unit even intended to bolster emergency medicine skills.

Source: Photo by the author.

“I grew up in the wrong decade. I should have been born in like the ‘40s or the ‘50s.”

When members give specific examples of the skills people need to reclaim, they are almost always traditionally male-coded activities like automotive or plumbing repair, not cooking from scratch or mending clothing. There was one partial exception I witnessed that occurred during a combat medicine seminar in which members from multiple units participated. A 14-year-old boy attended with his father and balked at the portion of the training where people in attendance practiced doing sutures on beef tongues that the organizer had picked up from a local butcher and then sliced deeply with his pocketknife. Rather than openly acknowledging his son’s obvious queasiness at the prospect of touching raw animal anatomy, the father showily told him that sewing, “Isn’t just for women! It’s a life skill. And it will be really helpful when you’re older and your wife or your girlfriend is mad at you and doesn’t want to sew up a hole in your pants!” Sewing may be a life skill, but one that men should be able to do only when women are not willing or available for the task.

Nostalgia can feel therapeutic and may reaffirm interest in traditions and rituals of the past when social or cultural change triggers a sense of threat or alienation (Sedikides et al., 2004). When such change feels like it is happening very quickly, nostalgia may also serve to mentally slow down time, to allow one to maintain a sense of identity and avoid *anomie* (a sense of being without social norms). It may also build imagined communities around the shared myths at its heart while strengthening connections to others within the same imagined community (Anderson, 2016; Boym, 2002; Marks, 1974; Murphy, 2009; Sedikides et al., 2004). This leads to a self-reinforcing cycle: as people experience threat, they turn to nostalgia for comfort; but their nostalgia-shaped vision then enhances the contrast between their idealized past and their supposedly degraded and inferior present; their feelings of threat grow, as does their desire to do something to manage those threats and attempt a return to the mythologized past.

Weaponizing Nostalgia

Politicians like Donald Trump who politically weaponize nostalgia take this cycle a step further. By imploring his base to make America great *again*, as it once was but is no longer, eager listeners are more likely to believe in a common interest that bridges other points of disagreement and to blame an outgroup for the purported decline of the nation (Berger, 2018). Outgroups are people we believe to be dissimilar to ourselves and our interests; in contrast, our in-groups are those people with whom we believe we have much in common and with whom we believe we would likely have positive interactions. We tend to make harsher judgments about outgroup members, especially when we assume someone’s outgroup status based on easily noticeable visual features. Skin color, clothing, and general self-presentation are among the

signals that can make us assume someone's race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status in a way that influences whether we start with a negative or positive assessment of them relative to our own experiences and values. People like Trump can amplify the outgroup salience of immigrants, people of color, or even Democrats among his supporters.

Disparate groups can most easily coalesce into active, organized, and possibly even violent conglomerations to achieve a shared end when they perceive a common enemy, especially one who has been openly labeled as a threat. Trump's appeal to a nostalgic vision of a once-great country capitalized on long-standing anxieties about cultural change that white men in particular can find threatening because of their historical monopoly on social, political, and economic power that is memorialized in the myth of our founding.⁴ Nostalgia feels comforting when looking inward to one's in-group that is presumed to share one's interests and perspective, and, in cases like this, embracing nostalgia can make someone feel like they have found like-minded advocates for their desired society. As one of sociologist Johnathan Metzger's participants told him during his investigation of white identity's influence on health care, "Trump has given white men their voice back" (2019, p. 264).

Outgroups who are supposedly responsible for devolving the national culture are, within this particular nostalgic vision, blamed for in-group members' inability to achieve the American Dream. Their failure, in other words, is not due to some personal dereliction, nor any failure of our capitalist nation, which, in this framing, is also victimized by nefarious outgroup forces. Few militia members I encountered during my field work directly named immigrants for personal failures or missed job opportunities, though this rhetoric has become much more common and overt in their online communities in recent years after Trump's influence. Instead, they would more typically make false or at least questionable statements about the government extending undocumented migrants "more rights and more privileges than the citizens of this country" as 47-year-old civil designer Ralph insisted. Many claimed that completely free health care was a benefit that undocumented immigrants receive but citizens do not. Simon expressed this by telling me about a friend who had to spend \$1500 out of pocket for each of six cancer treatments, but said:

If it were some illegal [*sic*] though, they would get it for free, and they'd [the government] make sure their family was taken care of, too. I don't have anything against them, I feel sorry for them in some ways, but I just think you should take care of your own first.

Stories like this are meant to convey that we are nationally choosing to prioritize limited resources on out-groups at the expense of citizens who, by virtue of an imagined birthright, are more deserving. These members, some of whom have spouses or other close connections who were once themselves migrants, believe that the government shares at least equal blame with

immigrant out-groups for supposedly threatening citizen's collective financial security. In their understanding, these attributions are not, however, about race, but are rather about culture, limited resources, and fairness. Militia members are not, in other words, simply employing a white supremacist's frame because they also oppose white and European migrants receiving such benefits.

Racial Threat

Much of the research on out-groups' perceived threats has nonetheless focused specifically on racial threat—the idea that white people use governmental mechanisms to try to maintain control when they feel their social, political, and economic power is weakened when non-white groups' power in those realms grows (Blalock, 1973; Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1999; Metzl, 2019; Olzak et al., 1994). Racial threat has traditionally been studied for its influence on white people's political behavior, including voting patterns and gerrymandering that work to limit Black citizens' civic participation, and it is not a response that is limited to any political fringe (Bafumi & Herron, 2009; Behrens et al., 2003). Other work considers racial threat's deleterious influence on the criminal justice and educational systems (Drakulich & Crutchfield, 2013; Goyette et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2005; Novak & Chamlin, 2012; Olzak et al., 1994). Criminologists Kelly Welch and Allison Payne (2010), for example, find that school discipline becomes more punitive and more likely to include zero tolerance policies as the percentage of Black students rises.

Some scholars originally defined racial threat strictly in terms of white people observing a numerical increase in Black populations and tended to focus exclusively on white peoples' sensations of political and economic threat. However, others have observed the impact of perceived racial threat from immigrant groups of other races (Newman et al., 2012), and real population increases are not always necessary to produce threat. White people's anticipation or perceptions of change can be enough to provoke a threat response, and threat can include feelings of infringement on cultural or status markers, not only political and economic ones (Goyette et al., 2012; Pettigrew, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Lucas, a retiree in his sixties, for example, expressed a common theme among some of the older militia members I encountered when he said, "the Muslim religion and our Constitution and our way of life cannot co-exist. They can't do it," rather succinctly capturing these men's fear that Muslims would enforce a version of sharia law that trampled the individual rights fundamental to national identity.

White perceptions are highly susceptible to non-white groups' salience, not only their objective size, such that concerns like this about the Muslim population have unsurprisingly been very responsive to news stories covering histrionic claims about President Obama's supposed Islamic beliefs or other stories of foiled terror attacks that had been planned by people the media

identified as Muslims. Racialized media representations of crime may especially enhance the importance of national stories in the formation of threat well beyond any local reality (Baybeck, 2006; Gallagher, 2003; Hopkins, 2010; Rocha & Espino, 2009; Taylor, 1998). A model of racial threat that is based on group position, rather than objective group size, is analytically advantageous because it explains why threat can grow even in the absence of population increases or other realistic group conflicts over economic or political resources (Cooter, 2012).

There are other threats that are largely driven by perceptions rather than reality yet contribute to white men's desire to prevent further cultural change. Chief among them are changes to women's roles in our society and especially in our economy. Some scholars understand emerging restrictions on abortion and other women's health care to be a kind of backlash toward women's growing autonomy, including their increasing presence in higher education, politics, and in various workplaces that previously over-represented men (Faludi, 2000; Flood et al., 2021; Green & Shorrocks, 2023). It is challenging to argue with that interpretation when states are considering legislation like that proposed in Idaho in March 2023 that is intended to criminalize inter-state travel for some women's abortion access (Durkee, 2023). Not all politicians or activists involved in such legislation are white or male, but white men comprise a disproportionate share of legislators who are proposing and voting for these regulations regardless of their constituents' wishes (Inglis, 2022).

General economic uncertainty also poses a threat to men's ability to adequately fulfill the role of family provider that is encapsulated in a nostalgia-informed ideal masculinity. The first generation of Americans who are not expected to economically surpass their parents are struggling to afford the fundamental markers of the American Dream (Dodge, 2022; Lubby, 2020; Rodriguez, 2022). Homes and college educations both require substantially more capital than used to be true, outpacing inflation, and this economic environment may increase threat among older generations who may have greater difficulty affording a comfortable retirement than they had anticipated and cannot subsidize their offspring's upward mobility.

The COVID-19 pandemic created another kind of threat not only because of its real impact on health and longevity (Greenhalgh & Simmons-Duffin, 2022), but also because of how it exacerbated preexisting economic and other insecurities. Many people, especially those in already-vulnerable economic conditions, lost their jobs early in the pandemic, and some struggled to provide basic sustenance for their families as prices for basic goods soared (Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships, 2022). Many people, especially those connected to the militia milieu, resented and feared government efforts to control the pandemic's spread through policies like mask mandates and temporary lockdowns. These people denied the seriousness of the disease and collectively believed that the

threat of government tyranny was worse than the threat of COVID's potentially debilitating effects. They were concerned, they said, that such mandates constituted a slippery slope because citizens could become complacent and blindly "follow orders" in a way that would threaten both gun rights and basic civil liberties. These fears fomented plots against several states' Democratic governors, most notably the elaborate plan to kidnap and try Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer for treason (discussed in more detail in the next chapter), which resulted in the federal and state prosecutions of several individuals. For men who invest in traditional notions of masculinity and resent feeling controlled or being told what to do by powerful women, Governor Whitmer's efforts to intervene in COVID's spread likely felt substantially more threatening than similar efforts from other states' male governors' (Cooter, 2022).

Much of the research on perceived threats that trigger backlashes from powerful groups rightfully examines the aggregate impact that such attitudes have—how voting patterns are influenced by white fear or how women are statistically disadvantaged in certain workplaces because of men's resentment, for example. My focus on various perceived threats is more at the level of shared perceptions and how white people can contribute to systems of white supremacy even while thinking of themselves as non-racist, or how men can reinforce misogyny even while believing they are egalitarians.

Racism or Cultural Exclusion: A False Dichotomy

In earlier work (Cooter, 2012, 2013), I argued that at the experiential level, racial threat that militia members experience centers on *cultural* change rather than overt racism. They, for example, do not oppose immigration that follows legal policies, but believe that those who come here from any country without following procedures are signaling their premeditation to break other laws and pose risks to law-abiding citizens. Peter, in his late forties, expressed it this way:

I have current family members who I am assisting to immigrate to this country. Do you realize the hoops my family and myself have had to jump through to come to this country? Many. . . . I do not fear Mexican immigration, I do not fear the 'browning of America' as some say, I have contributed to it. But open border immigration is a free ride. No hoops to jump through and no reason to adapt to a new culture or a desire to. [It's supposed to be] 'Out of many one,' not 'out of one many.' This adds to divisions and ultimately conflict. All immigrants have to earn citizenship! Or it has no value.

Many of the militia members I encountered are genuinely oblivious to the hurdles most people would face to legally immigrate and ignorant of

how those procedures are even more complicated for people seeking asylum or refugee status (Amnesty International, n.d.). Many members are equally oblivious to much of our national history of racism and how both historical and ongoing racism continues to impair non-whites' ability to achieve the American Dream beyond what white people of similar economic and educational circumstances experience. Such a claim may seem inconceivable to some readers and certainly has been to some of my colleagues who grew up in diverse, liberal, academic circles. But this process is something I have personally witnessed. My rural hometown, according to Census data, is 90% white still today. When I was growing up there, confederate flags were almost as pervasive on flagpoles, clothing, and vehicles as kudzu was on the roadside. White people proudly displayed the flag as a symbol of individualism and rebellion against authority, and many of them genuinely did not know about the flag's racist meaning. They were never taught an accurate version of the Civil War, slavery, or the continuing legacy of racism in school, in the same way that my AP US history teacher vehemently denied the war was about slavery. There were very few Black people, who often have little choice except to remember and pass down more accurate histories of exclusion and racism (Nelson et al., 2013), in the town who could have informally corrected those lessons, and even fewer who would have felt safe or comfortable doing so.

An iteration of this same underlying problem of ignorance results in militia members who view their opposition to immigration and most social welfare policies as opposition rooted purely in cultural change without understanding the racial and racist implications of such attitudes, meaning their nostalgia can, even unintentionally, be weaponized against people who are not white men and thus help perpetuate white supremacy as a systematic force. Members' distinction between cultural and racial motivations is nonetheless important because possible routes for intervention are different for people who are overtly and knowingly racist relative to people who do not know basic facts about our social structures. At the same time, it is important to remember that such ignorance is socially constructed and, as sociologist Jennifer Mueller observes, "often claimed or projected in ways that exculpate one's responsibility to act" (2018, p. 9). That is, mass societal ignorance serves as a form of white indifference, as a convenient excuse to avoid dealing with systematic racism, and serves to perpetuate white supremacy as a taken-for-granted system.

White supremacy is most powerful when it is invisible to its beneficiaries because it gives the illusion of being normal and natural rather than an unequal barrier to fulfilling the Dream's promise. Mass ignorance is an ingredient in invisibility and is actively cultivated through boundary work and "conceptual obfuscation" (*ibid.*) that occurs, for example, through the intentional exclusion of certain topics from school curricula, or through making some religions' holidays into national holidays while completely ignoring others'. Boundary work of this nature is an act of forgetting as much as it

is remembrance, so much that Boym referred to the volume of what must be forgotten to create nostalgic mythologies as an “abyss” (2002, p. 16). Collectively, we instrumentally forget those whose stories are left untold, whose voices are silenced, whose lives were snuffed out in the creation of our origin story. As sociologist James Aho writes, Americans are too often “blind to the despoliations, enslavements, rapes, and murders of the past that have provided them with the rights and privileges they enjoy today” (2015, pp. 44–45). Complicity in this process of forgetting occurs even when some individuals are unaware of what is being forgotten. That is, it is not necessarily some individual militia members’ conscious choice to ignore certain elements of history that is at issue, but rather a systematic forgetting that is encoded in the myths we collectively teach white people. This kind of collective forgetting is a choice, an action, an activism that perpetuates white supremacist structures in its failure to interrogate ongoing oppressions.⁵ White supremacy as a system and as a cultural force exists not only because of overt white supremacists but also because other white people (including, in some cases, those who consider themselves allies or even anti-racists) participate in social structures that were historically designed to racially discriminate; they often “forget” in this way the power they have to challenge those exclusionary structures and push us closer to a truly accessible version of the Dream.

Settler Colonialism

The lens of settler colonialism can help more clearly reveal what is forgotten and what is included in our shared stories. Settler colonialism is a kind of colonialism “in which the colonizers never left” (Carey & Silverstein, 2020, p. 5), where they instead maintain a permanent occupation and irrevocably influence the resulting culture (Gahman, 2020). A settler colonist’s goal is not to pilfer resources for the benefit of a homeland, but rather to claim a new homeland, a process that entails conquest and theft of the physical land.

Settler colonialism is not a singular or concluded event, but rather an “ongoing structure” (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 4; Wolfe, 1999) that patterns power structures between the conquerors and the conquered in a way that is resistant to change and becomes self-reinforcing.⁶ Power maintenance relies on white supremacy’s lies that have been justified in part through ideas like Manifest Destiny, which asserted a Christian God’s approval of the violence and erasure that settlement enforced in the name of claiming the frontier to establish God’s kingdom on Earth. Puritan leaders framed conflicts against Indigenous populations as holy wars that would achieve this end and hasten Christ’s return (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Halvorson & Reno, 2022). Presenting America as a nation righteously devoted to this apocalyptic outcome has ensured that threads of Christianity are embedded in the mythos today (such as ideas that America is a proverbial “city on a hill,” meaning the obvious global moral and economic leader) (Braunstein, 2021). Scholars have

argued that the religious connections are so evident within the myth that both “Christian” and “American” have become largely synonymous with “whiteness” in our collective imagination and, following Trump’s influence, increasingly synonymous with “Republican” (Butler, 2021; Gorski & Perry, 2022). It is likewise no coincidence that Du Mez’s captivating *Jesus and John Wayne* (2020) spends so many pages analyzing white evangelical Christians’ investment in masculinity, traditional gender roles, and firearms as key pillars to their religious and personal identities. I witnessed this play out in my hometown evangelical community where, for example, some people would buy their eight- and nine-year-old male children BB guns, explicitly citing evangelical influencer James Dobson. Dobson insisted that boys are biologically driven to like guns and that denying those opportunities is a concerted attempt from “radical feminists” to “feminize boys” (*Kids*, 2010) and make them vulnerable to homosexuality, which he called “*the* greatest threat to your children” (Dobson, 2018, p. 127) (emphasis in original).

Selections from Norm Olson in the previous chapters show religion’s influence on the militia’s understanding of the nation’s founding myth. Religious framings were explicitly embedded in the militia from its origins. They remain salient even for individuals who do not consider themselves part of that religious tradition due to their deep investment with the myth that is entangled with these religious ideas. Nelson, a militia member in his early twenties, for example, told me that he disagreed with claims that the US is a Christian nation or that the Founding Fathers were all Christians. When I asked him what he believed was the biggest issue facing the country, however, he responded:

We’ve gone from being a Christian culture, or at least a culture that has accepted that there is a God, that there are certain moral principles we live by and things like the Ten Commandments or other things like that. We’ve stopped following those, so all of these other problems we are having whether it be greed, or taking on too much debt, or abortion or, anything else, it plays out of that. That’s the base issue: it’s the heart⁷ of America is wrong.

Other members may not directly reference Christianity or “the heart” of America, but still long for the never-nation in their imagination while bemoaning how the national “character” or “mission” has drifted from its intended state in a way that alludes to some holy plan having been violated.

Trump has openly and successfully appealed to white evangelical congregations by utilizing the Christian themes of the myth (Gorski & Perry, 2022). At the launch of his “Evangelicals for Trump Coalition” on the campaign trail in January 2020, for example, he repeatedly referenced the idea that the country’s founders had intentionally constructed a Christian nation and that religion is “under siege” in the US. He claimed that another electoral win would also be a win for God (Jenkins, 2020). Listeners who affirm the myth’s

Christian origins can also easily hear appeals to those religious themes in Trump's other speeches even if they do not explicitly mention God or religion. One example was when Trump asserted "The only crime I've committed is to fearlessly defend our nation from those who seek to destroy it"⁸ during his press conference following his arraignment for 34 counts of felony business fraud in April 2023. With this and related claims, Trump is trying to activate some of his evangelical base by implying that further legal action against him is an attempt to undermine God's will; it is not only a personal problem for him but also a celestial one that should motivate them into action.

Nostalgic Memories

The myth of America's founding relies on a nostalgia for an archetypal settler while simultaneously trying to forget the white supremacy of settler colonial reality. That imagined settler is a lone white man who, through the fruits of his own labor, carved out a unique democracy that is morally superior to any other nation in the world (Gibson, 1994; Grandin, 2019). Masculinity is important here. The archetypal settler is male even though the ultimately dominant pattern of British settler colonialism included women and children, in practice facilitating faster growth of the white population and settler values alike. Ideas of masculinity were already strongly connected during the settler era to notions of men (but not women) protecting the land and their families. Men, once more in contrast to women, were depicted as possessing necessary physical strength and acumen for farming even though many settler women were also involved in these tasks. Scholar Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues this male-specific connection to the settler concept was strengthened by how white settler women were legally "merged" (2015, p. 58) with their husbands and lost property and labor rights they may have possessed before crossing the Atlantic.

This strong connection between masculinity and settler imagery that is replicated in militia behavior today may help explain why only approximately 10% of militia members are women; since women are largely excluded from our collective imagining of settlers, they may also see themselves less as inheritors and reenactors of the mythologized founders. At the same time, women who become "one of the guys," as one of my female interviewees told me, by fully participating in militia trainings or similar behaviors and who opt into the settler persona receive enormous respect and admiration from men who invest in the founding myth.⁹ Outside of militia ranks, other women may experience similar boosts to their status through this kind of persona adoption. Sarah Palin's popularity as a Vice Presidential candidate in 2008, for example, was facilitated by what we might call her settler femininity—a stereotypically feminine self-presentation alongside hunting and other skills connected to the myth.

Land during settlement was not, as the myth suggests, merely open and free for the taking when settlers arrived. They of course encountered Indigenous populations who were already occupying and using the land in a much more

fluid manner than the European model of land use. Indigenous populations often moved with seasons and rotated crops to maximize resources instead of remaining stationary and attached to a single plot of land. Settlers were dismissive of the Indigenous approach, viewing it as an inferior use of resources and purported it reflected a laziness, an unwillingness to master the land (Nakano Glenn, 2015). Displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples¹⁰ in the interest of claiming land and establishing permanent settlements thus made land ownership a marker of Americanness, masculinity, and whiteness that was contrasted to Europeanness, femininity, and Indigeneity. Connections between Americanness, masculinity, whiteness, and land remain at the heart of our national myth (Inwood & Bonds, 2017). Open and tranquil rural spaces represent “natural purity, calm family life, idyllic safe communities, as well as a place where . . . good hard-working salt of the earth folks make honest livings” (Gahman, 2020, pp. 74–75). The frontier especially embodies this perspective. It is a space, almost an entity, that must still be conquered, and that represents and allows for personal freedom and exploration while maintaining an element of risk and a temptation to conquer that risk.

The Legacy of the Frontier

Frederick J. Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” (1893) was among the first considerations of the frontier’s dual practical and symbolic nature and spurred a host of other frontier studies. Building on this legacy, historian Greg Grandin (2019) says the imagery of the frontier and the idea of productive expansion was easily transposed onto other realms (i.e., culture, technology, and politics) once the frontier itself was effectively closed to further exploration. Pursuit of these expanding realms, he says, constituted “a constant fleeing forward [that] allowed the United States to avoid a true reckoning with its social problems” (*ibid.* p. 4). The frontier, he says, is thus “a state of mind” (*ibid.* p. 116) that, in other words, facilitates the Dream’s illusion that progress is limited only by individual ambition.

Anthropologists Britt Halvorson and Joshua Reno note that “the pastoral imagery of the Midwest is . . . a key symbolic ingredient of American nationalism” (2022, p. 61). It is a symbol used by nostalgic fiction writers like Rose Wilder Lane and politicians like Trump alike. It is memorialized in paintings and film to normalize the ostensibly virtuous aspects of settler nostalgia (Grandin, 2019; Halvorson & Reno, 2022) and shape the public imagination of what the nation and its government supposedly should be. The strength of this symbolism linking the Midwest to the American ethos, to whiteness, and to masculinity has led sociologist Scott Melzer to use the term frontier masculinity to describe the ideal manhood that results from the myth (2012). For militia members and others with affinities for nostalgic groups, I suggest that *settler masculinity* may be a more accurate term. It captures nostalgia for the frontier and the skills the frontier’s taming requires, but also encapsulates two more elements that are crucial for understanding how masculinity

operates in these circles. First, it includes an orientation of rebellion toward the government that is central to members' identity. Second, it more clearly captures how oppression and exclusion happen (even, sometimes, unintentionally) through acts of nostalgic recreation; that is, how white supremacy is perpetuated through nostalgic group actions.

The strength of the interconnected symbolism of masculinity and Americanness may also help explain why we have traditionally seen militia groups be more active in Midwestern states compared to others. The allure of activity that harkens the settler era may be stronger when surrounded by the region's physical landscape and symbolism alike.¹¹ Even Norm Olson acknowledged the layered symbolic potential of this area in his statement immediately following Timothy McVeigh's terror attack, saying:

The savage act of terrorism in Oklahoma City evidences the willingness and ability of America's enemies to strike the very heartland of our dear country. . . . It has been correctly noted that Oklahoma City is the 'Heartland' city of America. It also symbolizes the strength of America's Biblical and Spiritual roots. The beasts responsible for this tragedy are attempting to make a clear statement that neither our country, nor our common faith, nor our government are safe.

Nostalgia's cultivation also shapes what we collectively forget from the settler mythos. Identifying Oklahoma City as the heartland, as the epitome of the frontier and of Americanness, may have amplified the emotional impact of McVeigh's 1995 bombing there, as Olson suggests, when its devastation was ubiquitously labeled the largest terror attack to occur on US soil up to that point. However, we "forget" that more Black people were likely injured and killed in 1921, just over an hour and a half away in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when white people massacred a successful Black town because of racism and perceived economic threat.¹² Many people did not know about Tulsa until the 2019 television show "The Watchmen" dramatized the massacre in its opening episode (Vary, 2020), speaking to just how "forgotten" (i.e., intentionally omitted) stories like this are. We exclude them from the official history we teach many school children because we devalue the experiences of people who don't fit the classic white settler archetype. We, at best, gloss over stories that threaten the myth that everyone has an equal chance of achieving the American Dream by reminding us of racism and other intentional interference with some people's pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Attributing the label of largest terror attack to any single event similarly excludes the systematic terror and violence of both slavery and Indigenous genocide from the calculus.

Nostalgia for rural spaces and for the settler era is actively cultivated in the history lessons that pass on the myth of our founding, but we sometimes overlook how nostalgia can also be created and reinforced in militias and similar groups that act, as historian Le Goff says, as "nostalgia merchants" (1992, p. 95). During my fieldwork, it became clear that not all militia

members joined the group with an equal investment in a mythologized past. Instead, members increasingly adopted the militia's political outlook, general concerns, and even verbiage the longer they were involved with a unit. Two members, for example, swore me to secrecy as they told me that they voted for Obama prior to joining the militia, but, within a short amount of time, both adopted a strong and unnuanced anti-Democrat stance that mirrored that of their units' other members. Around the same time, I also conducted a survey with Project Appleseed instructors that is indicative of the same pattern. This gun rights group does not consider itself to be a militia but nonetheless echoes many militia principles about the centrality of firearms for purposes of both self-defense and preserving the national character. They center their identity specifically on the tale of Paul Revere's midnight ride to warn of the British advance on Boston. Sixty-nine (83%) of 83 respondents reported that they knew nothing or next-to-nothing about this story before participating in Appleseed. To become an instructor for the organization, they are expected to know the story intimately and to help pass it to new members, and thus, according to their responses, adopted the story and its allegorical lessons only after joining the organization.

Nostalgia is something that is actively cultivated alongside group identity via repetition at events and through leaders becoming storytellers of anecdotes meant to solidify group identity and purpose. Militia units I have encountered have fewer formal history lessons during their events than Appleseed but still reference particular historical battles and figures, especially from the Revolutionary War. They also cultivate and refine stories about their own activities that highlight certain in-group-outgroup boundaries. They especially focus and find humor in stories that ridicule people who do not meet their standards, such as a white man who repeatedly failed to follow basic firearm safety procedures during a training until another member took away his weapon and told him he could only participate with a stick. This story is, nearly ritualistically, followed by questions like, "What caliber was the stick?" and heavy laughter. As sociologist Ruth Braunstein observes, stories like this are intended to simultaneously capture ideas of "who we are," "where we have been," and "where we are going" (2021, pp. 4–5). These stories altogether function as more than just an insider's script to militia culture and are treated almost like an oral holy text, one that serves as a yardstick for whether members and newcomers alike adequately understand and embrace militia values.

Nostalgia and Stated Motives for Membership

Shared commonalities are among the reasons that members cite when telling me why they joined a militia. In earlier writing based on my fieldwork, I found that their stated reasons could be divided into four categories: Comradery, Sense of Duty to Country or to Family, Personal Preparedness, or Political Expression (Cooter, 2013). I argued then that the most important common thread across these categories was masculinity. I still believe that to be true, but what I focused on less at the time was how the masculinity

implicated in each category is essentially a settler masculinity that is imbued with nostalgia.

Ten interviewees¹³ cited comradeship as their reason for joining. They said they quickly met other members with whom they shared general interests and hobbies well beyond militia activities with examples including watching the Military Channel or specific TV shows, reading historical biographies, or visiting historical tourist sites. Others talked about how they thought militia participation would simply be fun. As Mark, a 42-year-old computer technician, laughingly told me, "I like to dress up!" thus recognizing some of the more performative elements of militia training but also reflecting an embrace of simpler times with fewer demands than exist in his daily life. Militia participation likewise allows members who share an explicit interest in historical events to discuss the past they value while engaging in activities that harken a return to a simpler rural environment.

Twenty-two total interviewees said a sense of duty was their primary impetus for joining a militia. Many of the 17 interviewees who cited a sense of duty to their country had previously served in the military and referenced having sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution and a desire to continue service to that oath after their military career ended. People stating this motive who did not serve expressed regret that they had been unable to do so because of health concerns or lamented that they had only become devoted to their country when they were too old to enlist. Regardless of military experience, members citing a sense of duty to country explicitly talked about believing their membership was a way to follow in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers and valorized the soldier-as-hero image that is at the center of the settler myth (Gibson, 1994).

Five other interviewees said a sense of duty propelled them into militia ranks, but their stated primary obligation was to family rather than country. These members all talked about embracing the hegemonic masculine role of protector and defender, which some members complained had fallen by the cultural wayside as people became more reliant on technology and less competent with individual physical skills and situational awareness. While somewhat separate from the soldier image above, people who were concerned about their families embraced a version of masculinity that is revered at the center of our founding myth.

Eight interviewees focused on their personal vulnerability as their reason for joining a militia unit. Some of these interviewees had traumatic threats to their own physical safety and security including a burglar in a childhood home, a murdered relative, and a spouse who unexpectedly died during routine surgery. These events all challenged these men's masculinity because they were unable to protect themselves or their family members from these experiences. Others who cited personal protection as their membership motivation did not report acute trauma but were each noticeably more invested in conspiracy theories about malignant global government actors than the average militia member and than the members citing other motivations for their militia participation. They wanted to find a group that would help them learn to

defend themselves from whatever tyrannical attacks they imagined the government to be plotting, thus bolstering their masculine competencies. This segment of interviewees were the most likely to overlap with the off-gridder community, but not all did so; some focused exclusively on firearms training instead of the broad preparation marking off-gridders and focused rather exclusively on the government as the likely source of threat. All respondents in this category were, in other words, also referencing a masculinity that is virtually synonymous with the protectionism embedded in the settler myth.

Finally, eight interviewees referenced political motivations as driving their participation, which they generally believed sent a tangible message to officials in power that people like them are still willing to fight for the supposedly disappearing values present at the nation's founding. For them, voting was insufficient to capture their political will; they wanted to do something more to express their distrust of both parties and their concerns with the "direction" the country was going, once more relying on masculine expressions of strong, independent men, like our constructed image of the founders and other early settlers, who are willing to fight for what they want.

Nostalgia's Influence on Action

Narratives that are valued and repeated during a group's activities help sublimate individual identities to the group. They become a kind of pervasive and patterned thinking and a kind of moral philosophy—to use social movement terminology, an interpretive frame that shapes how members interpret various world events. The stories encourage listeners to value a pristine past over a degenerate present and future. They give touchpoints (places where different trees' branches overlap in my metaphor of nostalgic groups) that provide opportunities for collaboration or even merging with other groups. Revolutionary War figures and ideals connect militias to other gun-oriented groups that have interests in firearms or Founding Fathers. Concern for the national character and a longing for a purer, simpler past become the connection for many groups who have disparate ideas about race and gender inclusion. Nostalgia with specific touchpoints becomes a kind of lowest common denominator that provides opportunities for shared collective action across militias, neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, and others, as we've seen in recent years at social justice protests and January 6th alike.

Boym (2002, p. xvi) labels this a restorative nostalgia that she says desires to restore the past and

tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters.

While "monsters" is suggestive of notable figures like Hitler who appealed to a kind of nostalgia centered on myths of ethnic purity, Boym goes on to



Figure 5.3 Militia members standing near a Gadsden flag as they wait on others from their unit to return from a qualifying walk.

say that restorative nostalgia is not “merely an individual sickness, but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion. . . . Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos” (*ibid.*).¹⁴ She suggests that progress cannot happen without a degree of longing for the past, one that becomes a hallmark of broader culture and that unfortunately comes at the cost of the wellbeing and safety of out-groups, who are the visible beneficiaries of that progress.

Boym’s reference to average people being willing to die or kill for this vision is not an exaggeration in some cases. It is no coincidence that experts have raised warnings about encroaching global fascism, as we have witnessed an increase in hate crimes and stochastic terrorism in recent years (Li & Lartey, 2023). It is likewise no coincidence that “Molon Labe,” Greek for “come and take them,” and the “Don’t Tread on Me” of the Gadsden flag are well-known visual identifiers of militia and militia-adjacent beliefs. For some people, these messages are not merely rhetorical but are instead indicative of a willingness to defend the status quo and potentially to violently lash out at attempts to change policy or culture that may seem central to an ideal national identity. Ongoing responses to gun control discussions and supposedly stolen elections are paramount examples here.

The restorative nostalgia that undergirds this belief system, as Boym says, “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition” (2002, p. xviii). The worldview that emerges from our mythologized history, if reinforced and legitimized at the highest levels, risks becoming unyielding and unlikely to be influenced by other opinions or fact checking. It is fed by self-reinforcing and snowballing conspiracy theories that make the people

who believe them even more insular and distrusting of other perspectives (Boym, 2002; Cooter et al., 2023; Rottweiler & Gill, 2020). It risks becoming a dogma that believers then attempt to enforce on others, sometimes with violent results.

The risk for dogmatic thinking is increased in already-insular online spaces that may become echo chambers for the ideas that caused users to seek them out in the first place. Militia members express their dedication to restorative nostalgia expressed in a variety of ways online, including in memes. For example, following school shootings like that in Nashville, Tennessee, in April 2023, slight variations on a particular meme have consistently been common in some militia and other gun rights social media circles. These memes show a person, usually a child, asking “How many children have to die before you would support gun control?” Another person, almost always an adult, white male, simply responds, “All of them.” This meme, which I’ve most commonly seen shared by militia men who are fathers, comes across as beyond callous, especially immediately following a mass casualty event. Posters tend not to mean that they would willingly sacrifice their or other children for continued firearms access, as one might easily assume while viewing these images, but instead tell me they believe that there is no point in protecting children from what they see as rare and random gun violence if the trade-off is leaving a legacy of a tyrannical state where those children cannot be free. For these members, one’s ability to defend themselves through firearm ownership is so central to individual freedom and American identity that giving them up would be equivalent to destroying the country for their children. Failing to fully understand the content and centrality of militia members’ nationalism in their identity risks dismissing them as uniformly violent extremists who are beyond reasonable discussion. In reality, most members I have encountered are using aggressive cultural scripts to reflect issues that are shared widely among US citizens, and in-roads remain possible when conversations can be refocused on shared goals and values.

Firearms and Mythic Nationalism

Firearms are crucial to the identities of militia members and are also an integral actor in the mythologized story of our founding. They have a symbolic importance that supersedes their practical use and that can serve as another frequent point of shared interest across distinct groups; or as Melzer succinctly says of his NRA participants’ goals, “Defend the guns. Win the culture war. Save America” (2012, p. 59). Some scholars argue that firearms or gun culture did not become an essential ingredient in settler masculinity until well after the frontier era, attributing gun manufacturers’ and the NRA’s influence in the 1960s and 1970s for wedding firearm worship to the settler myth long after the Revolutionary War ended (Lacombe, 2021; Steinhorn, 2013). Dunbar-Ortiz (2018) refutes this claim, in part citing data arguing that rates of firearm ownership were higher during the settler era than today

and that guns were actually more common than Bibles among early male colonists' listed possessions. But Melzer (2012, p. 28) says, the bottom line is:

Regardless of whether [gun culture] was real [during the settler era] or constructed afterward to sell stories and products, it continues to shape American culture and masculinity. Guns, masculinity, and freedom are intertwined and still resonate with Americans today.

However, we cannot ignore race and racism in the assessment of how these other variables are intertwined. Scholars Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young observe that the Second Amendment is, in practice, “conditioned, in deed if not in word, by the bearer’s proximity to whiteness” (2020), based on a long history of denying Black Americans the right to bear arms. Armed Black people tend to be treated very differently by our legal system and our society as a whole because of stereotypes aligning blackness with criminality and danger.

For white people unencumbered by such stereotypes, firearms can more cleanly symbolize independence and a mythologized settler who is nobly striving for individual rights.¹⁵ They also encapsulate a moral high ground that is presumed to come with that Revolutionary War victory, but one that is necessarily drawn in contrast to ostensibly inferior people who lost the battle (Gibson, 1994). This is part of why groups like militias and Applesseed value marksmanship. Shooting accuracy is not only a sign of firearms experience and a link to the legacy of the founders, but, to them, also a signal of a moral acumen that has been constructed through self-discipline and self-control that they believe to have been crucial for early settler survival. Firearms also symbolize power and resistance towards the government—a form of rebellion that is, to no small degree, parallel to the selective and contested symbolism that the confederate flag has in some white communities. Many non-militia people do not see revering firearms as a sign of strength but rather as a violation of a social contract or even as a symptom of a folly, rightfully observing how even the largest militia arsenal would have no chance of defeating a concerted government force. It is not, however, the case that most militia members truly believe they would be able to defend against a government intent on using tanks or other major weapons of war against them. Kyle, a 36-year-old commercial painter, told me that suggestion was “bull crap” as he talked about the necessity of limiting government tyranny through voting and protest before it ever reached the point of conflict. Members are instead trying to symbolically embrace the legacy that they believe the founders left to them to prevent a loss of liberties they see as fundamental to the national identity.

This is why the Second Amendment is so important to a variety of nostalgic groups and beyond: it is not only about potential defensive capabilities against a range of threats, both real and imagined, but also because of how firearms link their users to this mythologized past. Nostalgic groups and

individuals who think like them consistently revile Democrats and efforts for gun control because they believe that such legislation indicates an outright rejection of an essential component of American identity. Groups that attach to any one or more of the symbolic meanings behind firearms can then use them as a shared reference or a rally point for collective action. Most militia members report disliking the NRA for various reasons, for example, yet support it when gun control legislation seems likely because they recognize the NRA's relatively unique and incredibly potent political power to fight for their common interest. Individual NRA members, likewise, often distance themselves from the reputation of groups like militias while nonetheless expressing the same justifications for firearm ownership and use. These justifications revolve around ideas of self-defense and rejection of government tyranny (Lacombe, 2021), and I observed as several men who said they were long-time NRA members eventually joined militia units because they wanted to do something "more than politics," as one man worded it, to personally support the Second Amendment.

Sheriffs Within the Nostalgic Settler Worldview

Ideas of politics, power, and corruption help explain why militia members tend to give local sheriffs the benefit of the doubt about their motives and trustworthiness, in contrast to usual militia views of government actors. Members see the federal government and its representatives as distant from constituents and as inherently corrupt but see sheriffs as an integral part of the communities they serve. Sheriffs are typically elected by the community, and members thus believe sheriffs are more likely to work in the interest of voters with whom they regularly interact and thereby be comparatively insulated from corruption (Cooter, 2022; Farris & Holman, 2017).

There is certainly truth to members' assumptions about sheriffs' local loyalties and general dispositions. Political scientists Emily Farris and Mirya Holman conducted a survey in 2021 for The Marshall Project and received responses from more than 500 of the nation's approximately 3100 sheriffs (Chammah, 2022a, 2022b). More than 300 respondents said they were willing to intervene between higher authorities and local constituents when they disagreed with the law those higher authorities were trying to enforce. This kind of "interposition" as it is sometimes known has been regularly expressed by sheriffs in numerous states regarding their unwillingness to enforce any proposed state or national gun control laws. Nearly half of this study's respondents also asserted that sheriffs' authority is higher than any other authority in the land, including the President's, while another quarter of respondents said they were "neutral," rather than disagreeing with that assertion.

Farris's and Holman's results show how sheriffs themselves rebel against control from higher authorities while resonating with a rural mentality and with recognizable fictional archetypes of independent, stalwart lawmen

who exact their own justice in untamed landscapes. Sheriffs both represent and embody the settler colonist spirit, whereby settlers are valorized as operating “outside of the law and outside of the civilizing role of the state” (Inwood & Bonds, 2017, p. 12). Sheriffs are effectively an anachronistic outgrowth both of Founding Fathers who defied the British crown and of early frontiersmen who defied standards of civilized behavior in the interest of survival and conquest, personalities that are both encoded in our national mythos. Many who advocate for a rural mentality today find easy mental justifications for actions that violate civilized standards or even the law but fulfill individualism and self-advancement, as did the early settlers they reference.

Rebellion against authority for its own sake helps explain some breaches of decorum or even law breaking today, but the more consistent explanation members cite is self-determination. Militia members often espouse that individuals know what is best for them and their particular circumstances much better than the government or authorities ever could on topics ranging from self-defense to COVID-19 prevention to educational plans for their children. Some members, like many of the sheriffs in the above study, believe they have not only the right, but also the responsibility, to assess the legitimacy of any given law before deciding whether they will comply with it.

One member I spoke with, for example, told me that he refused to take out a required permit to build a fence on his rural property. He did not want to pay a fee to the government to modify something he believed he should have full control over because he owned it. Another was the sole employee of his own business. He used a certain chemical that individuals could use with no special dispensation, but he said the government required businesses to have a license to use it in the same quantity. He argued that such a distinction was illogical and also harmful to his ability to earn an income; so, in the unlikely event he was pulled over for a traffic infraction and an officer knew about this required license, he simply made sure to hide the chemical under other materials in his pickup truck when driving to jobs. It is an important part of most militia members’ identity to insist they are law-abiding citizens, and these two examples of legal violations are rather minimal. However, the belief that individuals can decide whether something “really” breaks the law based on their perceptions of its legitimacy can obviously lead to much larger problems, such as believing one can reject the legitimacy of electoral processes and therefore insist an election has been stolen.

Many people did not realize the potential for sheriffs and other local law enforcement to ideologically align with nostalgic groups until Sheriff Dar Leaf publicly vouched for some militia members who had been arrested for planning to kidnap and try Michigan’s Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Agar, 2020; Snell & Burke, 2020). But these connections are long-standing. Olson’s documentation from the early days of the militia shows him interacting rather cooperatively with several different sheriffs, some of whom are quoted in local newspapers as openly supporting his militia-building efforts. During

my fieldwork, I first observed how many sheriffs and other law enforcement in Michigan are aware of militia groups in their area and, like Leaf, not only tolerate but actively welcome their presence. In addition to public requests for militia help with search and rescue efforts (Higgins, 2010), members have reported to me that sheriffs ask them for assistance through less public channels for security for both private and public events. Members from a Michigan militia unit located in the western part of the state, for example, shared that they had attended a town hall held by a candidate for a state office and stood right next to the local sheriff while in camouflage and visibly wearing their sidearms. They had watched for his reaction to their open carry and happily reported at a multi-unit gathering that he “had no problem with it whatsoever.” They chatted with him after the town hall, saying, “we did offer our services to him anytime he needed us, and he was very receptive to that.” I have not personally witnessed those security requests, but similar ones were well documented (including in newspaper clippings) in archival materials from Olson’s archive and continue to be reported as happening in some jurisdictions today.

Cooperative connections between militias and sheriffs may seem startling at first glance, but especially in smaller communities, LEOs are likely to be in the same social circles as militia members. Perhaps they attended high school together, or enlisted in the military at the same time, or, in some cases, are related to each other. Local LEOs with these connections view militia members as potential allies with shared interests and some shared skills and thus may underestimate the violent threat that some militia units could pose to their communities and beyond. This perceived allyship was perhaps best exemplified when 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse traveled across state lines with his AR-15 with the reported intention of protecting businesses from protestors who were demonstrating against Jacob Blake’s death at the hands of police. Shortly before Rittenhouse shot three people, two fatally, a police officer offered him drinking water and told him that law enforcement appreciated the presence of armed citizens like him at the protest (Litke, 2020). Rittenhouse was criminally charged with several offenses related to the shootings and eventually acquitted of all of them. The acquittal not only cemented Rittenhouse’s fame in a variety of conservative circles but also served as further “proof” of the legitimacy of the self-help justice embodied in the settler myth. I further explore how ideas of justice and those sworn to enforce it intersect with militia identity and action in the next chapter.

Notes

1. While food insecurity interventions like this may originate in social justice initiatives, their economic and social impact needs further study. For example, some people praise efforts to allow backyard chickens in suburban or urban spaces as a nod to nutritional self-sufficiency, yet may gloss over how these efforts seem to be frequently tied into gentrification and racist double standards. For example, Black families were accused of insufficiently modernizing their properties

- and forced out of their homes in Knoxville, Tennessee, during so-called urban renewal if they possessed livestock (Kato, 2020; *Losing Home*, 2021).
2. See examples here www.mightymac.org/tahquamenonfallswinter.htm.
 3. It is worth recalling once more that even within the overly rosy portrayals of these periods, they were certainly not particularly advantageous for people of color and for many white women.
 4. White men are not the only demographic in which nostalgia can be weaponized. We have also seen this tactic in Black separatist groups, for example, and women of different races who have engaged with so-called “cottagecore” or “tradwife” efforts, especially online. My focus here is on what weaponized nostalgia looks like within the majority-white and male militia movement.
 5. See geographer Joshua Inwood (2018) for an examination of how James Baldwin’s concept of “white innocence” allows white people to focus on ideas of successful individualism in attaining the American Dream while ignoring the barriers that people of color have toward this end.
 6. Critiques of using settler colonialism as an analytic frame rightfully note how much of the work centers the perspectives of the colonizers and their inheritors, rather than on the voices of the colonized. As a white researcher, I am attempting to write from my own trajectory and privilege to help better understand the lingering impacts that settler colonialism has on systemic white supremacy today.
 7. Many Christian sects talk about issues like “changing hearts and minds for God” or “unhardening someone’s heart” for salvation, a clear parallel within Nelson’s message.
 8. https://web.archive.org/web/20230000000000*/www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1WdFCtfwEw
 9. This was my experience as well, and boosted my ability to conduct research in the field.
 10. We also collectively “forget” how Indigenous populations were erased not only through violent genocidal attacks, but also through intermarriage, rape, religious conversion, forced schooling, and, later, through inducements to move away from reservations in effort to disrupt collective identity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Nakano Glenn, 2015).
 11. There is an ironic contradiction within this symbolism, however. Some militias use state parks for various training exercises, asserting individualism and independence from the same government that cultivates and maintains those spaces for shared public use—an action that perhaps gets as close as any US government intervention to the “Communism” that militias so despise.
 12. There were 168 fatalities at Oklahoma City, with another 759 reportedly injured (Mallonee et al., 1996). The exact number of fatalities in Tulsa is not known but is believed to be as high as 300, with more than 800 others injured (*Tulsa*, 2018).
 13. Three interviewees cited reasons in more than one category, and rather than asking them to rank their importance, I included them in both categories they mentioned such that the total reported in this section is 43.
 14. It is notable that Boym speaks of nostalgia as though it is an entity with its own perceptions and consciousness. Perhaps this is an accident of translation, but it appropriately reflects her view here that nostalgia becomes a kind of cultural force, bigger than individual actors.
 15. We have less research on gun owners of color even though their numbers increased dramatically during Trump’s Presidency (Curcuruto, 2020), but while it seems that motivations for firearm ownership also focus on ideas of self-defense, their motives are more rooted in awareness of law enforcement failures to protect them (Bowen et al., 2023; Kramon, 2023) and less about embodying nostalgic archetypes. The Black Panthers similarly suggested that Black people arm

themselves as a form of protection in lieu of police (Chavez et al., 2020), echoing a history going back at least to notable journalist and activist Ida B. Wells who wrote, “a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give” (1892).

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