

# Emergence of Extremist Groups Reflects Changing U.S. Society, Researcher Says

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OLATHE, Kan. — "Extremists are the first to sense that society is changing—and, often, the first to get it wrong."

So says Laird Wilcox, who ought to know. For three decades now, this intriguing man with the look and the burly build of a motorcycle rider — has been studying extremists the way a lepidopterist studies moths. He has interviewed their leaders and collected their often-paranoid literature. Along the way, he founded the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements at the nearby University of Kansas. It is one of the largest collections of extremist literature in the U.S.

## Eroding Freedoms

Now, as a civil libertarian, the 52-year-old Mr. Wilcox is worried. He fears the growing backlash against Oklahoma City's tragic bombing will result in new laws that erode the freedoms of everyone. "This is a fairly typical civil-liberties crisis, where a notorious, horrifying crime has been committed and they're casting a very wide net," he said. "What I think is going to happen is a civil-liberties rollback from the great gains made in the '60s. . . . What they're going to do is go back to the FBI of the '50s, with all of the abuses that existed then."

Mr. Wilcox is the first to concede that his is an unpopular view, especially now. Violence, of course, cannot be tolerated. But violence and perceptions are two different things, and he argues that extremist groups aren't *always* wrong in their perceptions that society is changing around them — or that it needs changing. Until the '60s, after all, many civil-rights groups were regarded as extreme for protesting segregation. Extremist groups are like the miner's canary, the first indicators that the political atmosphere is changing.

So what kind of change is "the populist right," as he calls it, sensing now? From its perspective, he said, it senses an American society growing steadily less tolerant of lower-middle-class values and lifestyles even as — indeed, precisely because — it is growing more tolerant of gays, of careerist women, of nonsmokers in restaurants, of endangered species.

"There has been a reversal of roles," he said. "The left is becoming the law-and-order group in society."

As a case in point, he said civil-rights attorney Morris Dees was among the first to propose tighter security laws in the wake of the Oklahoma bombing. Now, in something rare, President Clinton, Newt

Gingrich and Orrin Hatch seem to have united in a push to tighten security laws; indeed, a kind of political bidding war seems to be in its early stages.

"What I think the militias picked up on is that there are huge changes coming in society," he said. One is a growing "intolerance" of dissent — from the left as well as the right. Another is the growing role of women in politics; women are more alarmed by gun ownership than men, and their concern is being translated into laws that gun owners find threatening. Still another is the growing erosion of the importance of national boundaries by the ever-more-important global economy. All these trends, while comforting to many, also are threatening to many, particularly those in the lower-middle class. "They sense a theft of their culture," he said.

## Individualists' Rage

It's doubtful that the typical right-wing militia member would voice his sense of loss this articulately, though. "They're not deep thinkers," said John George, the co-author with Mr. Wilcox of a 1991 study of political extremism in America. This, the authors say, hints at one of the major differences between right-wing and left-wing extremist groups. Leftists tend to be more articulate and more inclined to cluster around a shared ideology; rightists, in general, are too individualistic to share any elaborate ideology and less verbal when it comes to expressing their rage.

Mr. Wilcox himself, who joined the leftist Students for a Democratic Society in his 1960s college days at the University of Kansas, left that group after becoming disenchanted with the rigid ideology that progressively enveloped it. Today, he has grown skeptical of ideologies — all ideologies. He sees them as traps of the mind. As an antidote, he compiled a book entitled "Selected Quotations for the Ideological Skeptic."

Taken as a whole, the quotations constitute a warning against extremism — and a warning against government overreaction to extremism.

On the one hand is James Baldwin, the novelist, who warned: "A devotion to humanity . . . is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause, and Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty."

But on the other is James Madison, who wrote in 1778: "I believe there are more instances of the abridgement of the freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachments by those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations."