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The Most Fearsome 'Patriots'

"This Contract With America they are talking about in Washington is a bunch of hogwash," the leader of one of Michigan's many militias told a reporter for this newspaper last week. "We already have a contract. It's called the Constitution of the United States."

This is true, though there is little evidence that any of these paramilitary zealots have actually bothered to read anything in the Constitution except the Second Amendment, which they misread to their convenience so as to find justification for the arsenals they have assembled. But this is a useful reminder that the Constitution is the secular equivalent of the Bible, a document that each reads according to his own purposes and that contains sufficient ambiguity as to make just about any reading possible, if not plausible.

About one matter, though, the Constitution is unambiguous. It was not written to foster internal warfare among the American people. Its authors, writing as "We the People of the United States," made absolutely clear in its preamble that its purpose was, as it has ever since remained, "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

There is much elsewhere in the Constitution about which we can argue, indeed about which lawyers to their profit have argued since the instant in September 1787, when its original seven articles were adopted by the Constitutional Convention. But there has never been any quarrel, except on the lunatic fringe, that one of the Constitution's central purposes is not to divide Americans but to find ways to unite them.

The framers of the Constitution understood that humankind is naturally fractious and the American of the species uncommonly so. They knew that disagreement was and would always be inescapable and at times vehement among a people who had created for themselves a society in which personal liberty was the essential ingredient. What they sought, therefore, was to devise legal mechanisms through which these disagreements could be resolved peacefully, mechanisms in which compromise rather than fiat would dominate.

In light of this, the militia movement, however sincere and even legitimate some of the concerns that motivate it, cannot be seen as anything except inherently hostile to the underlying premises of the Constitution it claims to defend. "When it comes to the Constitution," another militia figure said on talk radio a few weeks ago, "the federal government spits on us." Perhaps so. But the militia movement spits on the Constitution itself.

Precisely how does it serve any of the broad goals set forth in the Constitution as quoted above to organize private armies whose sworn enemy is the government of the United States? Even if it proves true that no militia had anything to do with the Oklahoma City bombing,

how can the existence of such organizations be interpreted as anything except a threat to the "domestic tranquility" the framers were determined to preserve? Who elected these people to take the law into their own hands, to appoint themselves as vigilantes to impose, by force if necessary, their own vision of pure Americanism upon the rest of us?

What these people fail to understand—they are scarcely the first to close their minds to this—is that one

of the compacts by which we hold ourselves together as a nation is our willingness to submit to the will of the electorate and its representatives even if we do not agree with what they decide. This acquiescence in the will of the majority is the foundation upon which a representative democracy is built, yet it is precisely what the militias wish to undermine.

There is a great deal about government in the United States at this hour in its history that many millions of Americans, myself among them, find distasteful, or worse. Leaving aside specific questions of ideology and policy, there is a deeper, more troubling matter. In the age of statist bureaucracy, there is ample reason to believe that government is no longer genuinely representative, at least not on the federal level and in many states as well. The complaint can be made with ample justification that government now does not what we want it to do but what government wants to do.

If this is true, as I think it is, then it is a subject of great national consequence. We should not be too quick to brush aside the anti-government laments of these weekend warriors and their ladies' auxiliaries, however silly they may look in their khakis and camouflage; the laments, fantastic and preposterous though some may be, arise from a fundamental change that has taken place in recent decades in the relationship between government and those it ostensibly serves. Plenty of Americans are upset, not just those who crawl around the countryside with guns and bazookas.

It is further true, to grant the militia another point, that thus far government has been utterly unresponsive to our concern about the directions it is taking: not merely the bureaucracy, which can be expected to do nothing except lumber along according to the dictates of red tape, but also those elected officials who are supposed to represent us. The "Contract With America" merely substitutes statism from the right for statism from the left; no fundamental change appears in view, unless one counts it progress that bureaucratic indifference is now to be compounded by radical right-wing meanness of spirit.

In these circumstances it is easy to understand why

many Americans despair of government, and it is hard to counsel patience with the electoral process when that process does not seem to be working the way it is supposed to. Yet if we are to hold together as a nation, there is nothing else to do. We were founded not on some God-granted "right to bear arms" but on the rule of law, law that we sometimes dislike but always find it within ourselves to obey. Since disobedience is precisely what the superpatriots of the hour advocate, this tells us all we need to know about their "patriotism."

The militia are dangerous as much for their ideas, such as they are, as for their guns. They are as anti-American, in the true sense of the term, as any of their linear predecessors: the Know-Nothings, the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens' Councils. If their fears are based in fact as well as fantasy, their conspiracy theories are fantasy through and through. They deserve to be heard because they are American citizens with grievances, but we must not let them cow us into silent assent.
