

The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord: Impacts on American Lives

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Introduction:

What does the word “terrorist” bring to mind? Without even seeing the accused, most people in this country automatically assume the person is Middle-Eastern and Muslim. Because of this inaccurate stereotype, I chose to focus my research on another sort of terrorist organization. Members of the group I investigated are not Middle Eastern, nor are they Islamic. The terrorist group in question is called the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord. This is a Christian organization and members are American. The research question I pose is this: how has the Covenant, Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA) affected the United States and American lives? My research suggests that this group has had a very significant impact.

Review of the Literature:

After reading Stern’s *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, which focuses mainly on Islamic terrorists, I began to wonder about the religious unrest in our own country. With so much diversity, many disparities between cultures must be overcome. Although few would consider Christians dangerous people, most Americans would say that Muslims are absolutely more dangerous than Christians. To counter this negative view of Islam, I wanted to emphasize the fact that Christian terrorist groups are just as capable of committing atrocities as Islamic terrorist organizations are. My research suggests that the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA) was in fact a very dangerous organization and impacted the United States and American lives tremendously.

Sources containing information on the CSA discussed several important factors pertaining to the cult. These topics include the leadership and group ideology, religious and political goals, terrorist actions carried out by members, and the final siege that broke the cult. Some sources were definitely more useful and accurate than others, but there were no real biases or discrepancies between any of them. Several sources gave background information, which was quite consistent throughout. The details gained from these were useful in setting the stage for the cult’s ideologies and actions (*The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*; Van Boven et al.; *Paranoia as Patriotism*).

A few authors examined the ideology of the group. Jessica Stern, an expert on the subject of terrorism, wrote the only information that discussed the psychology of the organization. She

describes at length the types of humiliation, alienation, demographics, history and territory that enable the developing of terrorists, both Muslim and Christian. Communal living helped create a perception of group identity within the CSA which helped promote cohesiveness and protection among its members.

Additional sources describe other unique beliefs and ideas of the CSA. Some of these included white supremacy, anti-Semitism, public shaming of members, and “spiritualization” of religious texts (Barkun, *Christian Identity Movement; The Covenant the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*; Mayer; *Paranoia as Patriotism*; Phelps; Stern). Some specific ideology led to the CSA’s seeming need to train members in military style combat and led to leaders having members commit crimes such as car thefts, bank robberies and bombings (*The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*; Phelps; Ridgeway, "Armies of the right"; Stern). The CSA also plotted to bomb the Oklahoma City Federal Building, but when the explosive device detonated in the hands of the man making it, the plans were terminated. Some years later, Timothy McVeigh who based his plans on the CSA’s initial design carried out the bombing; it is unknown, however, whether McVeigh received guidance from CSA leaders (Ridgeway, “After the guilty verdict”; Ridgeway, "Armies of the right"; Wheeler).

Eventually, the FBI caught wind of what was going on at the compound and the siege that took place was represented by several authors. All of the sources describe a large number of FBI agents surrounding the compound and forcing the inhabitants to surrender, but there are some discrepancies between each document as to how the events played out. *The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*, a source from Wikipedia, was the only one to describe a four-day siege that took place at the compound. Other discrepancies include the number of agents present and differences in the amounts and types of weapons found at the facility (Barkun; *Paranoia as Patriotism*; Ridgeway, "Armies of the right"; Stern; Van Boven et al). The aftermath that followed the siege included the arrest incarceration of the two principal leaders in addition to some prominent group members (Barkun; *Paranoia as Patriotism*; Stern; Van Boven et al.).

Fortunately, there was little bias found throughout my research. The few discrepancies present generally occurred in the less reputable sources, the suspicious content of which was disregarded. The information presented in the following discussion further represents the sources and shows the significance of this American terrorist organization.

Discussion:

The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord or CSA, a group of radical Christians, became one of the “most violent white supremacist centers of the 1980s” (Phelps). Members of the cult lived communally on a 250-acre compound near the Arkansas-Missouri border (Barkun 428). The group “came to accept the teachings of Identity Christianity,” which, according to Stern, includes seeing “Anglo-Saxons as the ‘true Israel,’ America as a sacred land, and the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as a God-inspired, Christian inheritance” (17).

Followers of Identity Christianity also expected to have the privilege of being present for doomsday (Stern 17). In fact, the members of the CSA believed the Apocalypse was imminent (*The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*). As Kerry Noble, a minister and second in command of the CSA explains, “we are Christian survivalists who believe in preparing for the ultimate holocaust” (*Paranoia as Patriotism*). And that is exactly what they did. The organization set up an “Endtime Overcomer Survival Training School,” which offered a course in military tactics, self defense, and urban warfare (*Paranoia as Patriotism*). All male members of the group trained in every aspect of military action (*The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*) and each was issued full military gear, including a rifle and a pistol (Stern 21). Weapons and food were stockpiled at the compound because the CSA believed that American society was on the brink of famine, economic collapse and war (*Paranoia as Patriotism*).

CSA believed that if they hastened the Apocalypse, the Messiah would return sooner (Stern 11), granting them all an earlier access to paradise. Those deemed “sinners” would have to be judged. This included; homosexuals, liberals “and all those who refused the word of the Lord... they were the enemy, and so they would have to die... we wanted peace, but if purging had to precede peace, then let the purge begin” (Stern xiv).

Stern says “purging” included “murder, firebombing a synagogue and a church that accepted homosexuals” and “conspiracy to assassinate federal officials.” It also included car and gas pipeline bombings and the current “siege on abortion clinics and gay bars,” plans to poison major city water supplies with cyanide and bomb the Oklahoma City Federal Building (xiv). Other allegations involve theft and altering of vehicles (Stern 28) and bank robberies (*Paranoia as Patriotism*). In fact, the far-right gunmen were quite good at robbing banks. Successfully, they robbed 19 banks in eight states in one month in 1994 (Ridgeway, “Armies of the right”). The money they generated through these activities helped fund the purchase of land, equipment “...and amass weapons and ammunition” (Ridgeway, “Armies of the right”).

CSA's "political goals included racially cleansing the United States. They believed that ridding the world of Jews, blacks, and sinners would facilitate the Apocalypse and the Messiah's return," Stern writes. They also wanted to "replace the current government with a Christian one," destroy institutions such as the United Nations and "stop the creation of a new world order based on 'humanism' and 'materialism'" (Stern xiv). Ultimately, the group contended that it was their purpose "to spark the Second American Revolution, resulting in the creation an all-white state" (Stern 27).

Fortunately, the FBI prevented the CSA from furthering the creation of the Apocalypse. On 19 April 1985, agents surrounded the compound and after a tense standoff and negotiations, the cult's members surrendered peacefully (Van Boven). This job was especially dangerous because members of the CSA had been assigned sniper positions in case the government ever raided the compound (Stern 28). Once emptied, the FBI searched the compound and seized hundreds of weapons, including; bombs, a massive quantity of cyanide, handguns, shotguns, machine guns, silencers, an anti-tank rocket, hand grenades and large amounts of C-4 explosives (Stern 11, *Paranoia as Patriotism, The Covenant the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*). Agents also found an anti-aircraft gun from the World War II era and a homemade armored personnel carrier (Stern 11).

Obviously, members of the group were arrested, and in September 1985 the founder, James Ellison, was given a 20-year prison sentence "for the manufacture of automatic weapons and acts of bombing and arson" (Barkun 415). Kerry Nobel and four other CSA activists also were convicted of racketeering and illegal weapons charges that resulted in lengthy Federal prison sentences.

Thankfully, the group disbanded after their leaders were imprisoned. Kerry Noble renounced extremism and got his sentence reduced to two years in Federal prison after cooperating with the FBI and court system. Now, Noble helps the FBI negotiate standoffs with right-wing groups (Van Boven and Seibert).

For the moment, we are fortunate that there is little religious turmoil in the United States, compared to what is going on in the rest of the world. When it was in full swing, the CSA was a powerful and terrifying organization that had the ability to wreak havoc on various aspects of American life. It is important for us to realize that groups like this do have power, even in our own country.

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