

Anti-Abortion Extremism: The Army of God

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Introduction

Following the Supreme Court's decision in the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade* to legalize abortion, a movement instantly formed to protest what many feel is the ultimate betrayal of God's will. The anti-abortion movement takes on several forms, most of which are peaceful and perfectly legal. However, picketing abortion clinics and lobbying lawmakers were soon joined by more extreme methods of opposition largely based on violence, much to the dismay of both the pro-choice and mainstream pro-life movements. The impact of radical anti-abortion groups has almost been counteractive to the pro-life movement as a whole, because in recent years, "the ranks of nonviolent clinic blockaders have shrunk, largely as acts of terrorism have alienated many in the larger anti-abortion movement."¹

One radical anti-abortion group that has made a considerable impact in the abortion arena is the Army of God. Even though there is consistent evidence of the Army of God's activity since its inception, many experts believe the group "is not so much an organization" but more of "a shared set of ideas and enemies."² Nonetheless, the individuals who make up the Army of God have managed to channel their emotions toward a goal that has developed into stopping abortion, at all costs.

As will become evident, the formation of the Army of God stems from the violation of its value status. This sociological theory for the group's membership is based on the idea that, "When people see values central to their own self-concept challenged or threatened, they may join or support movements which promise to combat the attacks on their beliefs."³ Members of the Army of God are not

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concerned with their personal economic or social status being affected, but they see legalized abortion as disregarding their personal value system.

Historical Background

The actual origin of the Army of God is uncertain at best, and its development into its current state is an inconsistent patchwork of events. The first time the Army of God was tied to anti-abortion activity was in 1982, when three men kidnapped an abortion doctor and his wife in Granite City, Illinois. The hostages were released, and at the time investigators were unsure how seriously to take the idea of an “Army of God.”⁴ Throughout the 1980s, scattered events revealed Army of God activity but no serious concern existed within the law enforcement community. When the letters “AOG” were left at the scene of a clinic attack or used in a threatening letter, in particular one received by Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun who wrote the *Roe v. Wade* decision, authorities were somewhat baffled but still doubted the existence of an organized, violent movement.⁵

In the late 1980s, the Army of God characteristics that are known today began to develop in Atlanta jail cells. In fact, serving time in prison is one commonality that unites many of the members of the Army of God, and perhaps their frustration lies in the reality that, “They can’t vote, because they are convicted felons.”⁶ In lieu of the democratic process, confessed killer James Kopp and other anti-abortionists developed the heart of the radical approach the Army of God currently utilizes, and in 1988, these “extremists formed alliances and the roots of violence took hold.”⁷

Perhaps the most important—and most defining element—of the group’s tactics surfaced sometime after the Atlanta prison experience in 1988. The Army of God published a manual filled with its ideology and a range of methods for stopping abortions. While several of the approaches suggested are relatively benign—such as injecting superglue into a clinic’s door so it would not be able to be unlocked and opened “for business”—the violent elements go far beyond any reasonable anti-abortionist’s perspective.⁸ The manual goes into significant depth about how to build effective explosives and utilize butyric acid.

The discovery of the manual by law enforcement resulted from

the arrest of Shelley Shannon, who met James Kopp in Atlanta in 1988 and committed herself to stopping abortions soon thereafter. Shannon, who was arrested for shooting an abortion doctor in Wichita, Kansas, had the manual hidden in her backyard at her home in Oregon.⁹ The manual was not found until Shannon's arrest in 1993, but she had already bombed and burned several abortion clinics across a number of states in the prior years. This discovery gave explanations to the violence against abortion doctors in clinics in the preceding years, and it signified the "violent turn among the anti-abortion movement's most fanatical wing," something pro-choice groups had been warning law enforcement about.¹⁰

Extremist Classification

To understand the Army of God's classification as an extremist group, a three-part criteria can be employed that examines methodology, anti-pluralistic sentiment, and ideology. First, the methodology of the Army of God is clearly beyond normal democratic procedures. A group's methodology is extremist if it "advocates the use of violence...in order to achieve its goals," since it breaks "with the normative pattern of political behavior in America."¹¹ A legitimate method for achieving a group goal could be lobbying or voting, but, as noted, the Army of God's manual not only bypasses normal means, but the majority of members cannot vote due to their status as convicted felons.¹² Contrary to the standards and laws of the nation, the Army of God feels its call to action comes directly from God, therefore superceding the laws of America. It promotes what is called "justifiable homicide," effectively stating, "that killing abortion providers" is "justified in defense of innocent lives."¹³ This belief alone violates the test of methodology for an extremist group.

Secondly, examining the level of anti-pluralism within the Army of God can reveal an extremist agenda. While pluralism is a distinct element of American society, an extremist group "does not recognize or accept the legitimacy of dissent and is unwilling to compromise the position."¹⁴ On its website, maintained by Reverend Donald Spitz, the Army of God refers to a 1998 task force formed to prevent violence against health care providers, which includes abortion doctors and staffs. It claims the task force "presently provides the babykillers with special

protection at tax payers expense.”¹⁵ The Army of God feels anyone associated with abortion clinics should essentially feel the wrath of anti-abortionists, since their profession is sinful and murderous in the Army of God’s opinion—the Army of God has no tolerance for opinions that conflict with its own.

Third, the ideology of a group can distinguish it as extreme or mainstream. On the surface, the Army of God is pro-life, and naturally there are millions of other Americans who identify with the same generic label. The Army of God, as a group, does not represent what a mainstream pro-life position does. It holds closely a twisted variation of being pro-life that a very small percentage of Americans identify with. To subscribe to the Army of God’s ideology, its manual suggests, “those who now claim to be part of the Army of God...are willing to kill and maim.”¹⁶ The idea of killing for one’s beliefs is not readily accepted for Americans, who believe a system is in place in America through which goals can be accomplished.

Ideological Extremism

The conclusion that the Army of God’s ideology is extreme is simple when considering the opinion it has of much of the mainstream pro-life movement. The Army of God’s website is highly critical of any pro-life woman who uses birth control, such as an oral contraceptive, and discounts the devotion any of these women have to the anti-abortion movement. The strict, no exceptions anti-abortion agenda is clear through the Army’s belief that, “‘Pro-life’ women using an oral contraceptive are committing abortions themselves on a frequent basis.”¹⁷ The extreme nature of the Army’s ideology is without a doubt the strong divider between the group and the mainstream movement. While both agree on the general principle, the Army of God’s extremism is noticeable when acknowledging a statement made by one of its younger followers. Now 21 years old, Jonathan O’Toole “thinks the movement is failing because too few people have been willing to lay their lives on the line.”¹⁸

Furthermore, Neal Horsley, also a part of the Army of God and creator of a website that lists the names of abortion doctors with their addresses, believes “that without the threat of death, doctors will never stop killing the babies.”¹⁹ Horsley is dreadfully serious in his

belief, because after an abortion doctor or member of a clinic's staff is killed, he places a line through the name of the murdered individual, which serves as a reminder of the unabashed hatred Army of God members have for anyone who has anything to do with a functioning abortion clinic. The Army of God's website serves as a constant reminder of the goal the group has, and, like Horsley's, its message has been boiled down to nothing more than a simple choice: life or death. The website poses a rhetorical question to its pro-life readers, asking which they prefer: "Live babies or live babykilling abortionist? Dead babies or dead babykilling abortionist?"²⁰ Chillingly, it asks this question following a mocking eulogy of an abortion doctor killed by an Army of God member.

Additionally, the Army of God does not limit its hatred to just abortion clinic doctors and workers. There are numerous anti-Islam, anti-homosexual remarks, and links to pages entitled "The Homo News" and "Allah News." Both pages contain dozens of links to news articles, often from biased sources, that detail any negative activity associated with Muslims or homosexuals. The Army of God believes homosexuals are "disgusting," and Muslims "will spend eternity in hell fire because they reject the one true way of salvation, The Lord Jesus Christ, and follow after a false god."²¹ Also, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), racist headlines on the Army's Christian news page are not merely a coincidence but the promotion of racism through somewhat subliminal means. Although the Army denies any type of racism, the SPLC reports the racist headlines, or stories "with a racial component" according to the website's maintainer Rev. Donald Spitz, have been run for years and represent the Army's racist beliefs.²²

Membership

Membership in the Army of God is difficult to determine, and in a way, "the group has become a catch-all for anyone involved in the radical wing of the pro-life movement."²³ The Army has no true leader, but a few key individuals take on leadership roles at necessary times. However, three sources give an insight into the Army of God following: 1) a rally of support for admitted murderer and Army of God member James Kopp at a Buffalo, New York prison; 2) a documentary on the Army in 2001 aired by Home Box Office (HBO), and; 3) names on a

“Defensive Action Statement” signed by Army of God supporters in 1993.

On January 23, 2003, a group of individuals involved with the Army of God protested the indictment of James Kopp for murdering Dr. Barnett Slepian, an abortion doctor. Kopp, who within the Army of God is referred to as the “Atomic Dog” and is one of the first names mentioned in the acknowledgements of the Army of God manual, has been involved in the anti-abortion movement for over fifteen years. He was first arrested for anti-abortion tactics in 1986. Of the dozen members attending the protest, there is no distinct pattern of member ages, as they ranged from 20 to 60 years old. Every protester, except for one, was a man, and a significant number in the group had served time in prison. They were all white Christians, and all believed Kopp should be released because his murder was justified.²⁴

HBO first aired the documentary entitled “Soldiers in the Army of God” on April 1, 2001. It focused mainly on four Army of God members. Although four is a relatively small number, it may make up a significant portion of the Army, and their characteristics may reveal common traits. Of the four men, only one is married and has children. This man, Paul Hill, is on death row in Florida for murdering two men at an abortion clinic. Also, three of the four men have prison records, and all are white and either from the South and Midwest.²⁵

Following the murder of abortion provider Dr. John Britton in 1993, the aforementioned Rev. Paul Hill was arrested for the act. Over thirty supporters of the Army of God signed the “Defensive Action Statement,” which argued the murder of Dr. Britton was justified. Similar to the protestors in Buffalo, those who signed the statement demanded that Hill be acquitted. The occupations of the signers show that the vast majority is involved with Christian ministry or related advocacy groups, and even though there are seven female signatures, the statement is clearly male-dominated. Additionally, no geographical pattern is evident since supporters resided in every region of the country.²⁶

From these three sources, the Army of God cannot be completely profiled. Nonetheless, it is clear that members of the Army are more likely to be white males, and it would not be surprising if a significant percentage had served time in prison. They are from various

age groups, and reside in every region of the country. From the comments made by members and the observations of other reporters and scholars, there are some interesting trends that rise among a number of members that may explain membership on the individual level.

One member, Bob Lokey of Opp, Alabama, described his devotion to fighting abortion as part of a Christian rebirth that was accompanied by a commitment to celibacy. Lokey said, “I’ve been vaginally defeated all my life.”²⁷ Lokey’s membership appears to be a result of his misfit status, and his life before becoming involved in the radical anti-abortion movement lends to this idea. Lokey’s Christian rebirth and vow of celibacy came while he was serving 20 years in prison for armed robbery. Lokey, through the anti-abortion movement, has found a place to express his frustration and forget his past failures. He is able to move on by entrenching himself fully in the movement. He is entirely obsessed, for only “an obsessed man plants a sixteen-by-twenty billboard of aborted fetuses in his front yard, as Lokey has done.”²⁸

The misfit status of an individual member is not exclusive to Lokey. Jonathan O’Toole fits the misfit mold quite well. O’Toole was home schooled until high school, and with the strict Christian values he was taught from a young age, he found that he “lacked the social skills to relate to people who hadn’t grown up in a church environment.” He went “between being withdrawn to having an air of superiority.”²⁹ Describing his experience in high school gym class, O’Toole reveals his lack of athletic skills, and describes dreams in which he enters his gym class with an automatic weapon and kills his classmates—without guilt.³⁰ O’Toole, similar to Lokey, likely joined the Army of God “out of frustration with their lives. Group membership allows them to develop a new identity and to escape from previous frustration.”³¹

Activities

The Army of God has engaged in a variety of activities, but none have been more prominent than the murder of abortion doctors. As noted, Rev. Paul Hill murdered Dr. John Britton, and James Kopp confessed to the murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian. The first murder of an abortion doctor was in early 1993, when Michael Griffin killed Dr. David Gunn. This event, signifying a now common trend within the

movement, drew praise from Army of God members. Shelley Shannon, already involved with a rampage of terrorist activity against abortion clinics at the time of Gunn's murder, was inspired by Griffin's action. She wrote, "He didn't shoot Mother Teresa, he shot a mass murderer such as Saddam Hussein or Hitler."³² Griffin ultimately inspired Shelley, and soon targeted Dr. George Tiller of Wichita, Kansas, whom she wounded but was unsuccessful in killing.

Murdering an abortionist is the ultimate act of valor to the Army of God, and praise from their small community pours in honoring the killer's "justifiable action." The movement builds upon these single acts of violence, and seeks to capitalize on each action by encouraging other even more action by followers in the electronic community. In many ways, the Army of God is structured similarly to modern militia movements. The followers buy into an ideology created by a few members at the top, and individual members, and occasionally small groups, act upon the goals of the group. There is a strong argument for the Army of God being based on the strategy of "leaderless resistance," where members act alone or in small impenetrable groups focused on the goals of the unknown and unaccountable leaders.³³ Those within the Army readily admit to attempting to plant the seed of violence in the minds of followers, and hoping something instigates action in the believer. Bob Lokey, who has a personal website related to the Army of God, said, "There are people that I'm absolutely certain have read my Web site and have gone and killed somebody or hurt somebody. That was my intention."³⁴

The Army of God is largely based on a select few challenging the will of confused or weak members. They pay tribute to the individuals who have carried out their "missions" while they are fugitives and after they have been captured, hoping another member will wish to be memorialized in the same manner following the heroic acts he carries out someday. After the murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian, the Army of God website published an "Ode to Slepian," which ended with a tribute to the killer, James Kopp. It reads, after describing Kopp pulling the trigger, "A true American hero slipped away into the darkness having the honor to be chosen as an instrument in the hand of the Lord our God."³⁵

The Army of God has not limited its tactics to just murder. In

its manual, there are three sections, each containing 99 methods, on how to stop abortion. One such method has been bombing. The Army of God has claimed responsibility for the 1996 bombings of an Atlanta abortion clinic and Atlanta gay bar, and the 1998 bombing of Birmingham, Alabama abortion clinic. Also, anti-abortionist, militia member, and one of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most wanted suspects, Eric Rudolph, is believed to be tied to the Army of God, and responsible for the bombing of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.³⁶

Most recently, the Army of God capitalized on the fear of the nation following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Clayton Lee Wagner, who communicated with Army of God members and contributed to its website while a most wanted fugitive, sent over 550 hoax anthrax letters to abortion clinics in the weeks after the terrorist attacks. Each letter was signed "Army of God" and informed the recipient that he or she was going to die.³⁷

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Army of God emerged because of its fundamental belief that legalized abortion is a violation of the most basic form of Christianity. Although the Army is not tied to a particular denomination of Christianity, its ideology formed out of the teachings of three conservative traditions: Christian reconstruction, apocalyptic Catholicism, and Christian Identity.³⁸ Each of these movements emphasizes an inflexible form of Christianity that requires complete devotion to their perception of God's will, and requires the society in which they are based to structure itself around this interpretation. Today, the Army of God has developed into something more than a strict religious group. Now, it seems they have resorted to an "ultimate goal of establishing a Christian theocracy through violence."³⁹

With the inclusion of violence as a technique for establishing its means, the Army of God has developed similar philosophies to those found in the various right-wing militia groups scattered across the United States. This idea is important in understanding the theory behind the Army's beginning—violation of its value status—because they have labeled both an enemy and an "enabler." Abortion doctors are intrinsically evil in the minds of Army of God members, but the Federal government has also received tremendous scrutiny from the Army for

enabling abortions to take place and maintaining the existing laws related to abortion. The anti-government rhetoric has only escalated, and the Army sees the government as a key perpetrator in the destruction of its value system. The Army's failure to realize the role of government in America, including the protection of multiple views and minority rights, facilitates its hatred of the government and solidifies the government's standing as an anti-Christian organization. The Army believes the Federal government has had a multitude of opportunities to end abortion, and referring to its enemy, states, "Yet you mocked God and continued the holocaust."⁴⁰

The Army of God believes it is entirely within its rights when it encourages and acts upon domestic terrorism. The attack on its value system was brought on by the government when the Supreme Court ruled the way it did in *Roe v. Wade*, and the rejection of core beliefs by the government is a typical catalyst for action by an extremist group in light of the value status theory.⁴¹ The fact the government has not worked to ban abortion over the past thirty years has "made it inevitable to see a crescendo of violence. In the life and death struggle to stop this unjustified slaughter, Christian men are looking down the barrel of a rifle,"⁴² according to an Army of God spokesperson. The deeply held values of the Army of God and its members, based on ultraconservative Christianity and fear of a wrathful God, have been violated in its perspective, and the practice of abortion has given the Army a reason to construct its underground community with hopes of re-imposing its values on American society.

Notes

¹ Frederick Clarkson, "Anti-Abortion Violence," *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project*, n. pag. <<http://www.splcenter.org/intelligenceproject/ip-4g2.html>>

² John Kifner, "Finding a Common Foe, Fringe Groups Join Forces," *The New York Times*, 6 December 1998.

³ William Moore, "Political Extremism: A Conceptual Framework," *Course Packet*, College of Charleston, 2003.

⁴ Patricia Baird-Windle and Eleanor J. Bader, *Targets of Hatred: Anti-Abortion Terrorism* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 167.

⁵ Clarkson, "Anti-Abortion Violence."

⁶ Michael Beebe and Jay Rey, "'Army' Outnumbered," *The Buffalo News*, 23 January 2003.

⁷ Phil Fairbanks, "Radical Fringe's Violent Bond Born in Confinement," *The Buffalo News*, 8 November 1998.

⁸ Baird-Windle and Bader, *Targets of Hatred*, 168.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

¹¹ Moore, "Political Extremism."

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Frederick Clarkson, "Kopp Lays Groundwork to Justify Murdering Abortion Provider Slepian," *Women's Enews*, 2 December 2002. <<http://www.now.org/eNews/dec2002/120202kopp.html>>

¹⁴ Moore, "Political Extremism."

¹⁵ Army of God, website. <<http://www.armyofgod.com/Coldshot.html>>.

¹⁶ Clarkson, "Anti-abortion Violence"

¹⁷ Army of God, website. <<http://www.armyofgod.com/SilentAbortion.html>>

¹⁸ Megan Rosenfeld, "Army of God: HBO Braves the Abortion War," *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2001.

¹⁹ Daniel Voll, "Neal Horsley and the Future of the Armed Abortion Conflict," *Esquire*, 2001. <http://www.esquire.com/features/articles/2001/001322_mfr_abortion_1.html>.

²⁰ Army of God, website. <<http://www.armyofgod.com/Slepianpage.html>>

²¹ Army of God, website. <<http://www.armyofgod.com/islam.html>>

²² Southern Poverty Law Center, "One More Enemy," *Intelligence Report*, Winter 2002. <http://www.tolerance.org/news/article_hate.jsp?id=671>

²³ Fairbanks, "Radical Fringe's Violent Bond Born in Confinement."

²⁴ Beebe and Rey, "'Army' Outnumbered."

²⁵ Rosenfeld, "'Army of God.'"

²⁶ Army of God, website <<http://www.armyofgod.com/defense.html>>

²⁷ Rosenfeld, "'Army of God.'"

²⁸ Voll, "Neal Horsley and the Future of the Armed Abortion Conflict."

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Moore, "Political Extremism."

³² Anne Bower, "Soldier in the Army of God," *Albion Monitor*, 18 February 1996. <<http://www.monitor.net/monitor/abortion/abortionsoldier.html>>

³³ Kifner, "Finding a Common Foe, Fringe Groups Join Forces."

³⁴ Voll, "Neal Horsley and the Future of the Armed Abortion Conflict."

³⁵ Army of God, website. <<http://www.armyofgod.com/Coldshot.html>>

³⁶ Kifner, "Finding a Common Foe, Fringe Groups Join Forces."

³⁷ Mary Jacoby, "Domestic Terrorist: Waagner on the Run," *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 August 2002.

³⁸ Kifner, "Finding a Common Foe, Fringe Groups Join Forces."

³⁹ Clarkson, "Kopp Lays Groundwork to Justify Murdering Abortion Provider Slepian."

⁴⁰ Army of God, website. <<http://www.armyofgod.com/AOGsel6.html>>

⁴¹ Moore, "Political Extremism."

⁴² Kifner, "Finding a Common Foe, Fringe Groups Join Forces."