

Soldiers of Odin USA

The Extreme European Anti-Refugee Group Comes to America

Only months after its formation in Finland, a controversial anti-refugee vigilante group known as the Soldiers of Odin has already found a welcome home in the United States.

Its new American chapter, known as Soldiers of Odin USA, has—just since February—already amassed thousands of American members and cheerleaders ready and eager to support the group’s chapters in Finland and other countries—and to bring its anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and refugee-hating ideology to American shores.

Moreover, Soldiers of Odin USA is attracting adherents from both of the two largest segments of the American extreme right—white supremacists and the anti-government extremist “Patriot” movement—and may be the most significant coalition of such extremists in the U.S. since the early 1990s.

Soldiers of Odin USA held its first formal “patrol” in a Denver suburb in March and more are on the way, raising the specter of a new wave of vigilante activity like the anti-immigrant Minutemen of a decade ago.



FROM FINLAND WITH HATE

The Soldiers of Odin originated in the tiny Scandinavian country of Finland in late 2015, but the group's formation and rise are tied to the larger refugee problem that countries across Europe have experienced in recent years. Conflicts in places such as Libya, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have created large numbers of asylum-seekers fearing persecution in their home countries, as well as refugees seeking better economic conditions than the ones in their war-torn nations.

Refugees have sought sanctuary in a wide variety of countries, but the combination of accessibility, safety, and perceived economic opportunity has made Europe the destination of choice for many of them. The flood of refugees—though tiny when compared to the total population of Europe—has caused great strains within the European Union and resulted in a disturbing rise of far right political parties and groups in a number of countries. The controversy has also resulted in a backlash against refugees in European countries, a backlash exacerbated because most of the recent refugees are Muslims.

Over the New Year's holiday in December 2015 and January 2016, a number of incidents of harassment and sexual assault took place during holiday celebrations in several European cities, including cities in Germany as well as in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. These incidents were alleged to have been committed by refugees. Retaliatory acts by anti-refugee activists, including assaults on asylum seekers and vandalism and arsons of refugee centers, soon followed.

In Finland, the backlash against refugees included the Soldiers of Odin. The group was founded in late 2015 by Finnish white supremacist Mika Ranta, but its real growth has occurred in 2016. It began in the town of Kemi, with chapters or cells of the group quickly spreading to dozens of other Finnish towns and cities. At one event in February in Tampere, more than 150 Soldiers of Odin adherents showed up.

The ostensible purpose of the group is to conduct vigilante "patrols" to protect Finnish citizens from the alleged depredations of refugees. One member interviewed by a British newspaper claimed there would be a "war on the streets and we are ready to fight." That may already be happening; in March, Finnish police launched an investigation into an assault on a man in Imatra allegedly conducted by three men wearing Soldiers of Odin jackets.

Though the Finnish group has proclaimed that it has no ideology or racist orientation, European journalists looking at its membership soon found that its individual members certainly did, with many of them linked to various white supremacist and other far right groups—and a number of them possessing criminal backgrounds.

The Soldiers of Odin did not stay within Finland. Using social media, members and supporters spread the concept to nearby Scandinavia and Baltic countries, where anti-immigrant and anti-refugee activists created chapters of their own. Chapters in other European countries rapidly

followed, the group's growth hastened by the terrorist attacks in France and Belgium. The Soldiers of Odin also spread to English-speaking countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

SOLDIERS OF ODIN IN THE UNITED STATES

It was inevitable that the Soldiers of Odin concept would reach the United States as well—and it did so by February 2016, spread by social media sharing of new stories and supportive posts about the group from sympathizers.

What was not initially clear was the degree to which the Soldiers of Odin might actually get a following in the U.S. After all, the United States was not experiencing a refugee crisis as Europe was, while the limited and controlled numbers of refugees entering the United States did so only after a lengthy screening process.

However, even the mere prospect of refugees—in particular Muslim refugees—sparked a combination of panic and outrage in many communities in the United States in recent months. Some towns and communities actually passed resolutions refusing to accept potential refugees from Syria, while people in other communities rebelled when mayors or councils offered welcomes to possible refugees.

The state of Montana offers a case in point. In late 2015, a Montana-based organization proposed creating a refugee resettlement agency in Missoula that would help settle locally about 100 refugees per year (Montana being one of only two states at the time that did not have a refugee resettlement office). The proposal got initial support from Missoula officials, but sparked a major anti-refugee backlash that resulted in organized protests not only in Missoula but in other areas as well. In Flathead County, for example, angry residents organized multiple protests attracting hundreds of people. More than 200 people tried to crowd into a March 10 county commissioners meeting to express anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiments. This resulted in the county writing a letter to the U.S. State Department opposing the resettling of refugees in Flathead County—something that had not even been proposed.

With these attitudes, it is no surprise that Flathead County was one of the places where the Soldiers of Odin emerged. In early March, anti-refugee activists created a “Soldiers of Odin Flathead – NO Refugees” Facebook page to urge people to pressure local officials and to show up for anti-refugee events. “Europe waited until AFTER she was flooded with refugees to protest in large numbers,” the Flathead Soldiers of Odin stated in a Craigslist recruiting advertisement, “We will not make the same mistake in Montana.” This was a sentiment that other American Soldiers of Odin would repeatedly echo.

But more than the specific issue of refugees, it seems to have been the rising tide of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States—one reflected in mainstream America and with greater ferocity

still within its extreme right—that has really created a receptive atmosphere for the Soldiers of Odin concept. Already substantial, anti-Muslim prejudice grew stronger in 2015-2016 thanks to the deadly shooting sprees in Chattanooga and San Bernardino, the terror attacks in Europe, and a polarizing presidential election.

By February 2016, several unconnected people were already attempting to create their own Soldiers of Odin groups in the United States, primarily using Facebook as a recruiting and propaganda tool. The earliest was a Pennsylvania white supremacist, Rick Wright, who in mid-January had created a “Soldiers of Odin United States” Facebook page, followed by a website. Other similar “pioneers” included Brodie Fontaine of Mississippi, whose Facebook “likes” include the violent white supremacist novel *The Turner Diaries*, and Adam Vordemark, a Nebraska blacksmith and apparent Norse pagan.

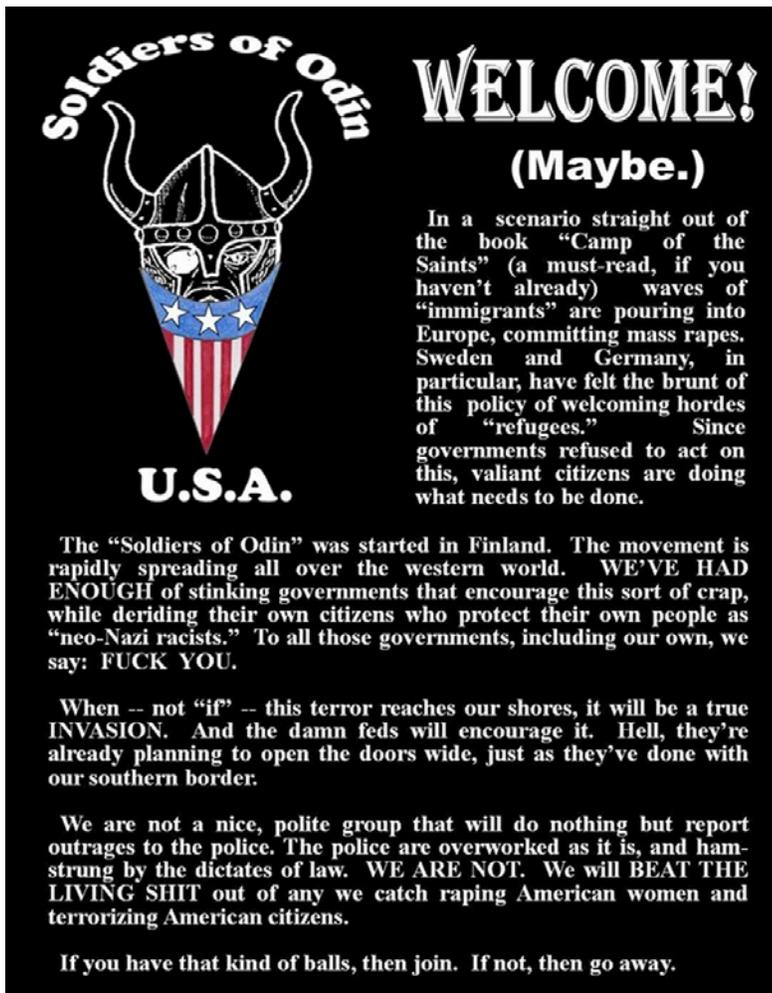
Fontaine and Vordemark soon combined forces, calling their group Soldiers of Odin USA, and secured official sanction from the Finnish Soldiers of Odin as the “official” American chapter. Fontaine and Vordemark appear to have tried to arrange a merger with the other Soldiers of Odin group but failed, leading to acrimony between the two factions. By mid-March, Wright’s group declared that it was deactivating its Facebook page, claiming that “we no longer support Soldiers of Odin. We have formed a secret society from the members of this page.”

Left with the field to themselves, Fontaine and Vordemark soon found a cadre of other organizers, including Kyle Costella of Vermont, Joshua Lee Guillim of Alabama, Chevy Sevier of Texas, and Kelly Kirby of Missouri, among others. They created a Soldiers of Odin USA Facebook Group that by late April 2016 had already reached 4,000 members and supporters. The group stated that “it stands in opposition to the hordes of ‘refugees’ that have invaded Europe and will soon be coming to America, brining massive waves of rape and crime with them...We say NO!”

The organizers also began creating Facebook pages for state chapters and recruiting state leaders, claiming at least 42 state chapters by the end of March 2016. These chapters had memberships that ranged from just a few members in size to substantial chapters with 75 or more members and supporters in states such as Alabama, California, Illinois, Florida, and Pennsylvania. In its organization, it has somewhat resembled a motorcycle club, complete with “local brass,” new members serving as prospects, and references to the group’s “colors” and to the group itself as a “club.” This is not coincidental, as the original Finnish group had connections with bikers and so do some of their American counterparts.

As the group formed, it also tried to make clear its nature, seeking a way to describe vigilantism while seeming law-abiding at the same time. The Soldiers of Odin USA official by-laws claimed that “it is time to take back our streets, states, and country” and that they believed in “protecting the streets” with patrols. Stating that they are the “eyes and ears” of the police in “places that the police cannot always be,” they have claimed that their patrols are supposed to be “observe-and-report” operations.

State chapters, however, have sometimes been a bit more forthcoming in their own characterizations of the rules. The Alabama chapter, for example, warned that “members are along at their own risk and are aware of the risks which may be related to group activities and actions.” The Utah chapter claimed that members do not get in the way of the police, because there was “too much drama and exposure of the not legal kind,” but at the same time it ordered members to “do anything to protect the ones you love.” On patrols, members who saw any “issue that needs dealing with” should “deal with it appropriately.” Moreover, “we never kill unless assaulted with deadly force/intent.” Do your best, stated another chapter rule, to stay within the boundaries of the law “if at all possible.” The chapter leader explained that he was trying to “make sure we accomplish our mission with the least amount of negative exposure possible, and the least amount of arrests.”



One Soldiers of Odin propaganda graphic stated that “we are not a nice, polite group that will do nothing but report outrages to the police. The police are...hamstrung by the dictates of law. WE ARE NOT. We will BEAT THE LIVING SHIT out of any we catch raping American women and terrorizing American citizens.”

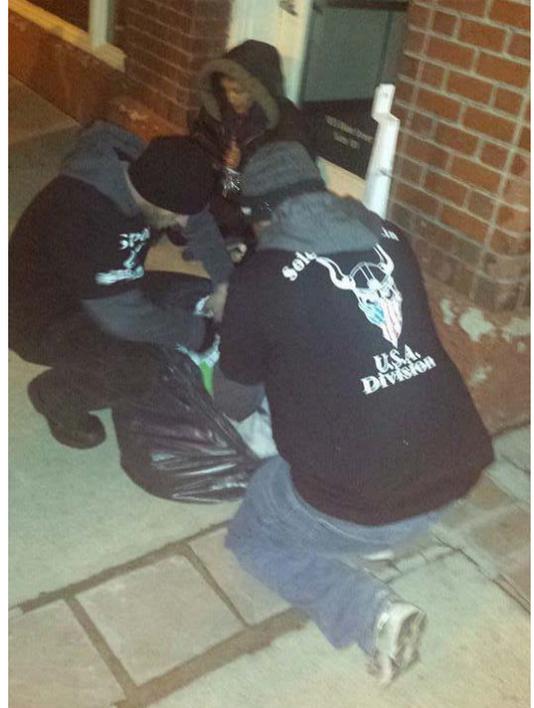
In their short existence so far, the Soldiers of Odin USA have spent most of their energy on recruiting, organization and trying to obtain Soldiers of Odin shirts and jackets—something in which it is clear members place great stock. However, by the end of March, some state chapters had already announced or even conducted their first patrols.

The “honor” of the first Soldiers of Odin patrol in the United States seems to have gone to its Colorado chapter when, on the weekend of March 20-21, four members of the group donned Soldiers of Odin t-shirts and conducted

a patrol in the Denver area, allegedly handing out jackets and food to homeless people.

The patrol was deliberately innocuous, designed to project a positive image of the group, and gave no hint of the extremism of some of the people conducting the patrol. One organizer was Ed Nelson, a white supremacist Odinist who, upon learning of President Obama’s visit to Cuba in March 2016, issued a string of obscenities against Obama on his Facebook profile, complaining that opening up Cuba would just “bring more scum to the usa,” and claiming that “tolerance is not the fucking awncer [sic] we need to go fuck em up.”

Around the same time, Jamie Nelson, his wife and fellow patroller, signed an on-line petition to declare Black Lives Matter a hate group. Hal Halvorson, a patroller from Fort Collins, was expressive with his feelings about Muslims, posting in late March that “every Muslim is a radical terrorist just waiting to get out!” and proclaiming “Death to Islam, and all who follow its teachings!”



RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE SOLDIERS OF ODIN

An examination of the members and supporters of Soldiers of Odin USA leaves no room for doubt: though not all such adherents of the group are white supremacists or bigots, so many of them clearly are that the Soldiers of Odin can easily be considered a hate group. But they are also more than that, in that they represent a diverse coalition of right-wing extremists ranging from anti-government extremists to white supremacists, coming together for the purpose of expressing hostility towards refugees and Muslims in general.

To be sure, the Soldiers of Odin USA takes pains to declare that they are not a racist group, claiming their “non-racist” nature several times in their official by-laws, as well as in many other statements issued by group leaders. “No racism” and “no religion bashing” are two of the rules of the group.

However, the official stance of the group and the beliefs of the group’s membership and supporters are two very different things. In reality, a large segment of the group’s membership and supporter base consists of white supremacists, while many other members and supporters come from other extremist movements. Moreover, some of the group’s rules—including “no racism” and “no religion bashing”—seem to be routinely ignored.

The Soldiers of Odin USA maintains a large private Facebook group for its members and supporters, a group with some 4,000 members. An examination of the membership of the Facebook group reveals the presence of a variety of subcultures and ideologies, from bikers to Tea Partiers. However, four types of members seem to predominate:

- 1) **White supremacists.** Klansmen, racist skinheads, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis; there are a menagerie of white supremacists belonging to or supporting the Soldiers of Odin.
- 2) **Norse pagans.** Norse paganism is a modern revival of ancient Norse religious beliefs and rituals; adherents most often refer to it as Asatru. Asatru itself is not intrinsically white supremacist, though there are racist or white supremacist variations typically called Wotanism or Odinism. A large number of members and supporters of the Soldiers of Odin clearly identify as Norse pagans. Many of these are adherents of white supremacist variations of Norse paganism, but it is possible that there are non-racist Norse pagans within the group as well. It is also theoretically possible that a few joined the Facebook group only out of a mistaken belief that the group was merely yet another Norse pagan group.
- 3) **Anti-Muslim bigots.** There are a number of members and supporters of the Soldiers of Odin whose primary motivation seems to be anti-Muslim prejudice.
- 4) **Anti-government extremists.** Among the members and supporters of the Soldiers of Odin are a large number of militia group members and, in particular, adherents of the so-called Three Percenter movement, a growing wing of the militia movement that shares its conspiratorial, anti-government ideology.

White supremacy seems to be constant within and around the Soldiers of Odin. When organizer Chevy Sevier made a Facebook post recently about Soldiers of Odin state chapters, many of the people who responded clearly identified themselves as white supremacists by using the numeric hate code “14/88.” The 14 in the code is a reference to the “Fourteen Words” white supremacist slogan: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” The 88 is an alphanumeric reference that is shorthand for “Heil Hitler.” “Time to protect what is ours! 1488,” responded an Oregon white supremacist. From Florida, Bob Jewett spoke up: “West Palm Beach checking in. 14/88.” A month later, Sevier himself would promote the Soldiers of Odin to white supremacist groups such as American Freedom Party and Wotan’s Warriors.

Even a quick perusal of the membership of the various Soldiers of Odin USA Facebook groups reveals a number of notable white supremacists among the members and supporters of the group. Representative examples include:

- William Johnson, the head of the white supremacist American Freedom Party, who achieved notoriety in 2016 for his robocalls in support of presidential candidate Donald Trump.
- Jacob Laskey, the Oregon white supremacist who pleaded guilty in 2006 to a federal hate crime after a 2002 attack on a Eugene synagogue.

- Jason Tankersley, the founder of the racist Maryland Skinheads.
- Bradley Jenkins, a long-time Alabama Klan leader and neo-Nazi.
- Dennis Durham, a Virginia organizer of the racist and neo-Confederate League of the South.
- Brien James, an Indiana white supremacist; former member of the racist skinhead Vinlanders Social Club and, more recently, a founder of the Sons and Daughters of Liberty, a new extremist group that blends white supremacy and anti-government extremism.
- Lee Woods, an Illinois unit leader of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement.

White supremacy is also present among the leaders and organizers of the Soldiers of Odin. Some have been mentioned above, but they are hardly alone. Joshua Guillim, the group's Alabama leader, is an open white supremacist who declared in late March "I'm not a Trump person, I'm a Hitler person." Fred Taylor, the Wisconsin state leader, is also an open white supremacist, with many white supremacist references on his Facebook page.

Sometimes members post information to the Soldiers of Odin Facebook group about upcoming white supremacist events, such as an April 23, 2016, event in Stone Mountain, Georgia. When that was posted, another member replied that he had planned on going, but was instead going to attend a closer rally in Rome, Georgia, organized by the National Socialist Movement for the same day.



The prevalence of racism and white supremacy within the ranks of the members and supporters of the Soldiers of Odin has caused conflict through the group's short life. Many racist rank-and-filers have clearly struggled with the group's public stance of being non-racist. Some are confused about how a group can have such a public stance while at the same time welcoming white supremacists into its ranks. Others oppose even a public stance of non-racism, because for them, race and ethnicity are at the heart of the issue to begin with. As early as February 8, Adam Vordermark had to threaten to kick people out of the group because of the arguing. "The world will always be full of DIFFERENT BELIEFS AND PEOPLE," he wrote. "GET OVER IT." Further admonitions would periodically follow.

However, "getting over it" proved to be far from easy. "Keep feeding into this bullshit of all racial communities should be welcome," complained one member, "and you[ll] be digging your own neighbors' knives out of your backs. I stand with my own. What about all the crime in the black communities or are we supposed to turn a blind eye to that seeping into our good neighborhoods in America."

One member said that he had served in the military and fought alongside people of "many races," but the Soldiers of Odin "must filter the races coming in our roster, only because they might be infiltrating our ranks for the opposition." Another simply noted that "the name of the group denotes that this group is for people of northern European descent. I'd like to see it kept that way." Irritated at the political correctness he thought Soldiers of Odin leaders were displaying, one member asked, "Am I at Lilith Fair drowning in a sea of estrogen? Man the fuck up. Quit trying to signal how good you are because you don't see color or have colored friends...That shit is for liberal crybabies and fake mainstream conservatives."

A sampling of racist and white supremacist comments propagated on the group's Facebook page illustrates the sentiments of many of its members:

- "These Africans are a bunch of spoiled brats contaminating clean communities. Call them out. Kick some ass. Spread the message. America needs to get tough..."
- "The immediate problem is the 'muslim surge' ...That is part of a larger agenda. The globalists/Zionists are flooding the West with primitive people from 3rd world countries..."
- "I'm not afraid now and never have been afraid of being labeled as white supremists [sic] it is what it is. I'm an Odinist who is very proud of his race and people."
- "Well, why can the ni883r Farrakhan preach white hatred in black support, but we shouldn't...I think we should stand for the rights of the Caucasion." [sic]
- "I try not to read too much Jew shit, it gives me nightmares." (in response to a suggestion that the poster should read the anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.)
- "The whole of Europe now realizes how majestic a human being Adolf Hitler was. He was a visionary who foresaw the destruction of the west and took steps to forestall it."

It is worth nothing that, though there have been regular arguments about whether or not the group should be publicly non-racist, one argument does not seem to have been raised at all: the notion of *excluding* racists and white supremacists from the group. Instead, their acceptance seems to have been simply a given.

ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY AND THE SOLDIERS OF ODIN

The conflict between members and adherents who oppose the group's non-racist stance and those who support it is not likely to stop.

However, though there have been disagreements over open racism, there has been little argument within the Soldiers of Odin about one category of people: Muslims. Anti-Muslim prejudice is not simply tolerated; it is, in effect, the reason for the group's existence. "Racist BS has nothing to do with this," stated one member, "when we are all in danger of crazy radical Muslims that want to destroy our way of life and freedom." As one Missouri adherent put it, "Being against a muzzie is not racist, as muzzies come in all colors."

One Alabama member—a member who did not want non-whites in the group—caustically noted the seeming double standard. "I'm not trying to start more shit but...they want to flip shit about being classified a racist group but it is perfectly fine to be a bigot group. We love all Americans no matter what but fuck them camel riding Muslims."

This sampling of anti-Muslim remarks gives a sense of the group's blatant bigotry against Muslims:

- "Never Trust Muslims," read a graphic meme posted to the Soldiers of Odin's closed Facebook group. "Especially Obama!" someone replied to it.
- "Hate isn't a strong enough word for what I feel for these sand monkeys."
- "I've never seen a race of people more useless."
- "Afterlife seems a good place to put them."
- "I want to blood eagle those Haji bastards." A number of people seconded this comment. One member helpfully explained, "Blood eagle is where you open a man's rib cage from the back, pull out his lungs and lay one on each shoulder while his arms are tied on a wooden stake."
- "Islam is a blight on humanity."
- "Didn't think this was a racially motivated group. Thought it was to keep our country free of Islamic wastes and the creeping of sharia law."
- "While I do hate Islam and goatfuckers, I in no way consider myself or anyone involved in this movement to be hate group related. We are protectors of our way of life, against the genocide of white people and our ancestral lands."
- "Every muslim needs to be exterminated period."

- “I just got eyeballed and pointed at earlier by 2 Muslims in a vehicle with Arabic writing...if anyone is in east Tennessee please contact me...in the case of emergency I will need back up...I can take 2 but you never know how many are watching in the shadows.”
- “The sand rats on ETSU campus are pretty sketchy, we definitely need to keep our eyes out...I have suspicions that the Muslims on ETSU campus are up to something.”

INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISTS



The group’s clear anti-Muslim orientation is the main reason that it has attracted so many supporters from anti-government extremists such as militia groups and Three Percenters (often collectively known as the “Patriot” movement).

As the “Patriot” movement evolved its distinct anti-government conspiracy theories and beliefs in the 1970s and 1980s, there was considerable overlap between anti-government extremists and white supremacists. However, beginning in the 1990s, that overlap began to shrink markedly, thanks in part to the then-newest movement, the militia movement, many of whose members sought to distance the movement from connections with white supremacy. That trend continued in the 2000s. There is still overlap between anti-government extremists and white supremacists, particularly in some sections of the country such as the Pacific Northwest, but far less than in previous decades. One branch of the “Patriot”

movement, the sovereign citizen movement, even has a large and growing number of non-white adherents.

However, in recent years, anti-government extremists and white supremacists have grown closer together thanks to shared anti-Muslim bigotry. This has been particularly true for the militia wing of the “Patriot” movement, which consists of militia groups themselves as well as two closely-related groups, the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters. Three Percenters are a loose movement whose adherents claim that only 3% of Americans fought against the British during the American Revolution and that they, the Three Percenters, are the vanguard of a similar movement to fight against tyranny—only this time that tyranny comes from the federal government.

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, there has always been some anti-Muslim sentiment within the militia movement, but in recent years members of the movement have become much more openly and explicitly anti-Muslim, fueled in part by some of the recent terror attacks in the U.S. conducted by domestic Islamic extremists. In 2015, Arizonan Ryan Payne emerged as a “poster child” for the anti-Muslim sentiments of the militia movement. The Three Percenter and one-time Oath Keeper organized anti-Muslim rallies and sold obscene anti-Muslim

clothing before his arrest in February 2016 after participating in the armed takeover of a federal wildlife refuge in Oregon.

With such rapidly growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the militia movement, it is no surprise that the Soldiers of Odin would find many supporters and adherents from within its ranks. The private Soldiers of Odin Facebook group includes members with connections to a variety of militia groups, including the Michigan Militia, the Florida Militia, the Texas State Militia, the Pennsylvania Light Foot Militia, and more.

Even more well-represented among Soldiers of Odin members and supporters are the Three Percenters. Many individuals who self-identify as Three Percenters belong to the national and state chapter Facebook groups for the Soldiers of Odin. These include not only independent or unaffiliated Three Percenters but also people associated with organized Three Percenter groups such as the Three Percent of Oregon, as well as several of the larger Three Percenter umbrella groups that have sprung up in the U.S. in the past several years, such as the III% United Patriots, III%ERS for America, and American Patriot the III%.

The power of attraction that the Soldiers of Odin clearly holds for both white supremacists and anti-government extremists has led to one of the most visible alliances between adherents of the two different right-wing extremist movements that the United States has seen in many years.

LOOKING FORWARD

Extremist movements and groups that rise in Europe do not always translate well to American settings, so it is possible that the Soldiers of Odin presence in the United States may prove short-lived. That would be welcome if it occurred.

However, the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments of large swaths of the extreme right in the United States are so virulent right now that there is an unusually receptive extremist audience for the Soldiers of Odin. The rapid spread of supporters and adherents in the U.S. in only a couple of months illustrates how primed the far right-wing is for such a group.

The fact that the Soldiers of Odin is organized as a vigilante group is also of concern—the notion of extremists taking the law into their own hands is a serious matter. In the mid-2000s, anti-immigration border vigilante groups such as the Minutemen catapulted to prominence and attracted headlines and attention. At the same time, some border vigilantes committed criminal offenses that ranged from weapons violations to murder.

Whether or not the Soldiers of Odin can achieve that level of attention and notoriety is an open question, but the mere fact that this intolerant and prejudiced group has a significant and growing foothold in the United States is itself disturbing enough.