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Oct. 18, 2009  
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## READY TO REVOLT: Oath Keepers pledges to prevent dictatorship in United States

### Group asks police and military to lay down arms in response to orders deemed unlawful

By ALAN MAIMON  
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Depending on your perspective, the Oath Keepers are either strident defenders of liberty or dangerous peddlers of paranoia.

In the age of town halls, talk radio and tea parties, middle ground of opinion is hard to find.

Launched in March by Las Vegan Stewart Rhodes, Oath Keepers bills itself as a nonpartisan group of current and retired law enforcement and military personnel who vow to fulfill their oaths to the Constitution.

More specifically, the group's members, which number in the thousands, pledge to disobey orders they deem unlawful, including directives to disarm the American people and to blockade American cities. By refusing the latter order, the Oath Keepers hope to prevent cities from becoming "giant concentration camps," a scenario the 44-year-old Rhodes says he can envision happening in the coming years.

It's a Cold War-era nightmare vision with a major twist: The occupying forces in this imagined future are American, not Soviet.

"The whole point of Oath Keepers is to stop a dictatorship from ever happening here," Rhodes, a former Army paratrooper and Yale-trained lawyer, said in an interview with the Review-Journal. "My focus is on the guys with the guns, because they can't do it without them."

"We say if the American people decide it's time for a revolution, we'll fight with you."

That type of rhetoric has caught the attention of groups that track extremist activity in the United States.

In a July report titled "Return of the Militias," the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center singled out Oath Keepers as "a particularly worrisome example of the Patriot revival."

The Patriot movement, so named because its adherents believe the federal government has stepped on the constitutional ideals of the American Revolution, gained traction in the 1990s and has been closely linked to anti-government militia and white supremacist movements.

The movement is blamed for spawning Timothy McVeigh, who bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people.

"I'm not accusing Stewart Rhodes or any member of his group of being Timothy McVeigh or a future Timothy McVeigh," law center spokesman Mark Potok said. "But these kinds of conspiracy theories are what drive a small number of people to criminal violence. ... What's troubling about Oath Keepers is the idea that men and women armed and ordered to protect the public in this country are clearly being drawn into a world of false conspiracy theory."

Oath Keepers got some unwanted attention in April when an Oklahoma man loosely connected to the group was arrested for threatening violence at an anti-tax protest in Oklahoma City. Rhodes called the man "a nut" who had no real affiliation with his group.

Nonetheless, Potok's group now monitors Oath Keepers on its Web site blog "Hatewatch."

Oath Keepers is not preaching violence or government overthrow, Rhodes said. On the contrary, it is asking police and the military to lay down their arms in response to unlawful orders.

The group's Web site, [www.oathkeepers.org](http://www.oathkeepers.org), features videos and testimonials in which supporters compare President Barack Obama's America to Adolf Hitler's Germany. They also liken Obama to England's King George III during the American Revolution.

One member, in a videotaped speech at an event in Washington, D.C., calls Obama "the domestic enemy the Constitution is talking about."

According to the law center, militia groups are re-emerging in this country partly as a result of racial animosity toward Obama.

It's the "cross-pollinating" of extremist groups -- some racist, some not -- that is of concern, Potok said. As evidence that the danger is real, he points to several recent murders committed by men with anti-government or racist views.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security reached a similar conclusion in a report earlier this year about the rise of right-wing extremism. The report said the nation's economic downturn and Obama's race are "unique drivers for right-wing radicalization and recruitment."

The homeland security report added that "disgruntled military veterans" might be vulnerable to recruitment by right-wing extremist groups.

That warning was enough to make Rhodes feel paranoid.

"They're accusing anybody who opposes Obama of being a racist or a potential terrorist," he said. "What they're saying is, 'We're coming after you.'"

The motto of Oath Keepers: "Not on our watch!"

The message Rhodes hears from the government: We're watching you.

Las Vegas police Lt. Kevin McMahill said his department's homeland security bureau isn't overly concerned with Oath Keepers at this point, even though Rhodes says several active-duty Las Vegas officers are members of the group.

"I wouldn't classify Oath Keepers as no threat at all, but I wouldn't classify them as a threat either," McMahill said. "There's always a chance an individual can step outside the boundaries of what an organization stands for and do something wrong."

Rhodes, a former firearms instructor, said he easily could have started Oath Keepers during the Bush administration, but his focus during those years was first on getting his law degree and then volunteering on the 2008 presidential campaign of Texas Congressman Ron Paul, a libertarian Republican in whose office Rhodes worked during the 1990s.

What Rhodes terms "the rise of executive privilege" during the post-9/11 years of the Bush presidency will in his opinion only accelerate with Obama in office. What's worse, he said, is that "gun-hating extremists" now control the White House.

Two things have happened since the Homeland Security Department and Southern Poverty Law Center released their reports on extremism: Membership of Oath Keepers has spiked dramatically. And Rhodes has had to do a lot of explaining.

"We're not a militia," he said. "And we're not part and parcel of the white supremacist movement. I loathe white supremacists."

Oath Keepers doesn't offer paramilitary training; nor does it have a military command structure. It instead has board members, which include directors in seven states and outreach coordinators to currently serving local and federal law enforcement and military personnel. The group's state director in Montana, who goes by the name Elias Alias, has said Montana and other states should consider seceding from the United States in protest of the federal government's conduct.

Leaders of the group will come together in Las Vegas starting Oct. 24 for the inaugural national conference of Oath Keepers.

Among the group's other leaders is Dave Freeman, an Army veteran and former Las Vegas police sergeant who

spent more than 30 years with the Metropolitan Police Department.

For Freeman, Oath Keepers has become something of a family affair. He recruited his niece, a former police chief, to serve as state director for Oath Keepers in Massachusetts.

"When you believe in something, you have to do more than just pay it lip service," said Freeman, the group's Southern Nevada director and national peace officer liaison. "This is a crusade I believe in."

Another prominent Oath Keeper is former Arizona sheriff Richard Mack, who has long been an outspoken government critic.

The Southern Poverty Law Center calls Mack a "longtime militia hero" who helped weaken gun control laws.

An incident earlier this year in rural Iowa, not inside the Washington Beltway, motivated Rhodes to start Oath Keepers.

He questioned why the Iowa National Guard planned to use residents of a small town to participate in training on door-to-door searches for weapons.

The Guard said the training was to help soldiers who might be asked to carry out similar searches in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But for Rhodes, it looked like preparation for a future declaration of martial law. It reminded him of the response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when police officers reportedly confiscated legally owned firearms. What the government called emergency response after the levees broke, Rhodes saw as the imposition of martial law.

If it hadn't been for April 19 of this year, Oath Keepers might not have gained the notoriety it now has.

On the anniversary of the Battle of Lexington Green, the Massachusetts battle that started the American Revolution in 1775, a group of Oath Keepers went to the battle site and reaffirmed their pledge to the Constitution.

The gathering was mentioned in the Southern Poverty Law Center report because April 19 is also the anniversary of the deadly end to the federal siege on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993; and of the retaliatory bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995.

Rhodes and Potok have never talked, but if they did, they might find themselves speaking a different language.

"Let them say what they want to say, but April 19 has very much become a day for the extreme radical right," Potok said.

Rhodes couldn't disagree more.

"There are thousands of Americans who go to Lexington to watch re-enactments of people shooting at troops," Rhodes said. "But if you're a group of military and police there, they somehow find this offensive."

Rhodes said he hopes Oath Keepers members think about the lawfulness of day-to-day orders they receive.

For example, if a police officer feels he is being asked to do an illegal search of a home or vehicle, he should stand down.

Rhodes eventually wants to create a legal defense fund for Oath Keepers who are disciplined by their employers for defying orders they deem unlawful or immoral.

"The message to law enforcement is not to become a tool of oppression," he said.

Rhodes, a husband and father of five home-schooled children, said he gets hundreds of e-mails a day, mostly from people interested in knowing more about his group.

He also gets a lot of questions from "birthers" wanting to know if he thinks Obama is really an American citizen and from "truthers" asking whether he believes the attacks of 9/11 were an inside job. The group doesn't have an official position on either issue, he said.


Some of his responses to questions have turned would-be allies against him.

"I've been accused of being a traitor or a CIA operative because I'm not coming out and declaring that the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine is a biological weapon," he said.

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