

***Searching for a demon: The media construction of the militia movement***

**By**

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Book: *Searching for a demon: The media construction of the militia movement*

Author: Steven M. Chermak

Publisher: Northeastern University Press

Year: 2002

Many Hollywood film previews have included phrases such as “If you are going to see just one film this year, this is it!” Such a phrase could be paraphrased for this book: “If you are looking for just one additional book that will synthesize the basic ideas developed in the criminological study of crime and media-related issues, select *Searching for a Demon*.”

Steven Chermak has been a leading figure in the study of crime and media issues for a number of years. In this book--which was researched prior to 9/11 but includes updated material on post 9/11 developments related to terrorism—the author investigates media coverage of militia groups and other alleged homegrown terrorists after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. In the process, Chermak covers much of the literature in this subfield of the discipline. The author combines this with a thorough review of pre-event, contemporaneous, and post-event newspaper and television journalism; his own interviews with those often cited within these stories; and comparisons to fictional and docudrama accounts that appeared after the incident. In this regard, Chermak’s is the most extensive, documented empirical analysis to date of what Peter Manning referred to as media looping, the post-modern reuse of materials (journalistic snippets, movie plots, etc.) to tell stories which the public can identify as “plausible,” and thus accept as “true.”

The book is presented in eight chapters. The first sets up the major theoretical frames that will guide the analysis. Chermak’s model rests firmly in the social construction of social problems tradition, particularly as it has been extended to investigate the ways in which media accounts confirm and then reify images of crime problems. As there are a plethora of crime problems, the media usually only focuses on those whose current status is defined as “crisis.” Many criminologists give lip service to the constructionist model; Chermak shows how the following factors played out in creating the “truth” that militia groups were dangerous internal saboteurs needing immediate government response, including: journalists’ working definitions of newsworthiness, over reliance on law enforcement personnel as experts, industry pressures to make stories exciting and get them on the air or in print first, and their deep conviction to the American way of life.

In the subsequent chapter, Chermak discusses the importance of FBI disasters at Ruby Ridge and Waco in creating martyrs that the militia movement could point to in their own

opposition to government intrusion into private lives, particularly gun ownership. Pre-Oklahoma City bombing coverage of militias is discussed in the next chapter. Once Timothy McVeigh was arrested as a suspect in the crime, and his (loose) affiliations to the militia movement were uncovered, media frenzy resulted in hundreds of stories on the movement generated over the subsequent half year. To implicate the entire militia movement because of one event is similar to branding the entire anti-abortion movement as potential murderers because a few extremists have shot and killed abortion clinic staff.

In chapter 4, Chermak goes in depth into how journalists construct their stories through the use of “experts,” using as their guide the journalistic mantra that most stories require that both sides be heard (or at least offered an opportunity to respond). In the militia stories, one side was typically taken by law enforcement personnel, the other by spokespersons for militia organizations. Real experts (criminologists were rarely consulted), if interviewed, are often sound-bited, seeming to take one side or the other. Militia spokespersons often ended up sounding like extremists, coming off as dissenters to what other experts had put forward as fact.

In chapters five and six the author demonstrates how militia members were labeled as “outsiders” as a result of media accounts, a threat that must be confronted, if it is to be controlled. However, after 18 months to two years the stories about militias subsided, as new enemies emerged to take their place and new crime stories came to dominate the news. One can trace the history of media criminals from the 1908s until the present and discover heightened periods in which accounts of serial killers, crack dealers, urban street gangs, satanic cults, militias and foreign terrorists dominated the press. Each, but the last, seems to drop off the radar screen over time. In the media’s 24/7 need for new stories the interstices between these major trends are filled by stories of missing congressional assistants (Chandra Levy), kidnappings by Mormons hoping to practice plural marriage (Elizabeth Smart), or audaciously planned killings (Laci Peterson). One only has to check what is on *Larry King Live* to find the latest case.

Many criminological observers fail to consider the connections between news stories and Hollywood portrayals of crime. Chermak, in chapter seven, demonstrates that the relationship is reciprocal as topical shows and quickly produced movies attempt to incorporate the latest crime waves into their scripts. One only has to look at the run of police corruption films in the wake of the LAPD Rampart scandal (*Training Day*, *Dark Blue*, Fox FX TV’s *The Shield*, etc.) to see this trend. Similarly, journalists frequently cite movie characters and plots in the effort to provide a way for the public to grasp an unusual story or criminal. Thus, subway gunman Bernard Goetz became a Charles Bronson *Death Wish* vigilante, Timothy McVeigh a *Rambo*-like guy fascinated with guns, and any number of serial killers as real life Hannibal Lechters.

Overall, Chermak’s book is a welcome addition to the literature on crime and media. Unfortunately, too few criminologists recognize the importance of this field of study. As distorted media images of crime predominate, inevitably bad social policy follows.

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