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119

If a Bomb Detonates in the Forest and Only the FBI Hears It

The Sting Operation That Triggered Ruby Ridge

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Abstract: *While historians have generally looked to the Ruby Ridge siege as the genesis of the 1990s militia movement or as a flare-up in the long conflict between white nationalists and federal law enforcement, I argue that the clash between the Weaver family and federal forces at Ruby Ridge should be understood most immediately as blowback from a volatile FBI sting operation that preceded the siege, a sting that was itself the product of emerging anticipatory counterterrorism practices that participated in the orchestration of right-wing terrorism as a way to prevent it. I reconstruct the overlooked role of Rico Valentino, an FBI informant embedded in Aryan Nations whose undercover work collided with an ATF investigation of Randy Weaver. Due to conflicting and uncoordinated agency incentives, Valentino exposed the ATF's informant to preserve his own cover, thus allowing Valentino and his FBI handlers to successfully carry out a high-tech sting operation that concocted and then disrupted a bomb plot involving three Aryan Nations members, among whom was a close friend of the Weaver family. This action helped precipitate the chain of events that caused the Weavers to double down on their refusal to cooperate with law enforcement and ultimately brought federal agents to the Weavers' mountain cabin.*

Keywords: Ruby Ridge, FBI, informants, preemptive counterterrorism, Rico Valentino, Aryan Nations, sedition

The phrase “Ruby Ridge” has become shorthand for a series of events in August 1992 in rural Idaho that culminated in a catastrophic eleven-day siege between federal law enforcement and the Christian Identity-practicing, white-separatist Weaver family. Among scholars of the American right, the basic contours of the events are familiar: An ATF informant, Kenneth Fadeley, ensnared Randy Weaver in an illegal-weapons sting. Agents then attempted, unsuccessfully, to recruit him as an informant. When Weaver failed to appear in court, he became a fugitive. A US Marshals reconnaissance operation went awry, resulting in the killing of Weaver's teenage son, Sammy, and a

federal marshal, William Degan. These events then triggered a standoff involving FBI SWAT teams and hundreds of federal agents. Under controversially revised rules of engagement, FBI snipers were authorized to shoot any armed adult male on sight. During the siege, a sniper accidentally shot and killed Vicki Weaver while she stood in the doorway of the cabin. The confrontation ended only when a civilian intermediary negotiated the surrender of Randy Weaver, the surviving children, and a family friend, Kevin Harris. The sequence of events reads with a kind of grim and self-fulfilling inevitability: A family already convinced that the federal government represented an apocalyptic threat ultimately had its most conspiratorial fears realized.¹

Ruby Ridge—the setting of this bloody episode—was never the name of a real place. It was a media-driven portmanteau that fused Caribou Ridge, the craggy land where the Weaver cabin stood, with Ruby Creek, the nearby waterway. The constructed nature of the term proved fitting for an episode that has become so overdetermined and saturated with political meaning as to overshadow the actual participants and the events themselves. For conservative commentators, Ruby Ridge came to embody all the dangers of big government's encroachment on families, individual rights, and gun ownership. For liberals, it demonstrated the dangers posed by unrestrained, gun-crazy, anti-government extremists. Watchdog groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center asserted that "Ruby Ridge ignited the militia movement."² Militia spokesmen broadly agreed with this assessment, as stated in the *Modern Militiaman* in 1997: "This movement was conceived at Ruby Ridge in 1992, given birth on April 19, 1993[,] at Waco, and grew up suddenly on April 19, 1995[,] when we were blamed for an act of murderous terrorism we did not commit at Oklahoma City."³

Many scholars have followed suit, interpreting the events of Ruby Ridge, followed only months later by the far deadlier ATF raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, as the episode that ignited the 1990s militia movement. Other scholars interpret Ruby Ridge not as the genesis of a new movement but as evidence of its continuity within the white power movement's long-smoldering war against the federal government, dating back to the late 1970s.⁴ Beyond periodization, other scholars have

1 For background on Ruby Ridge, see James A. Aho, *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy* (University of Washington Press, 1994), 50–68; Matthew Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right's Challenge to State and Empire* (PM Press and Kersplebedeb Publishing, 2018), 45–47; Jess Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow: The Truth and Tragedy of Ruby Ridge and the Randy Weaver Family* (Harper, 1995); Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 354–60; Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 196–205; Chris Jennings, *End of Days: Ruby Ridge, the Apocalypse, and the Unmaking of America* (Little, Brown, 2026).

2 Morris Dees, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (Harper Collins, 1996), 71.

3 Martin Lindstedt, *Modern Militiaman*, no. 5 (April 19, 1997).

4 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 196–205.

taken up Ruby Ridge as a case study in excessive force and investigative misconduct,⁵ as an outcome of a newly paramilitarized style of domestic policing,⁶ or as a symptom of the inward turn of militarization and guerilla warfare in the post-Cold War era.⁷

While there are merits to these interpretations, Ruby Ridge did not alone ignite the militia movement; it was not an overblown response to a long-standing American tradition of libertarian anti-statism; and it did not mark just another flare-up in the white power movement's long, continuous war against the state, although the Weaver family was, indeed, embedded within the white nationalist movement. Instead, the events at Ruby Ridge demonstrated, most immediately, a consequence of preemptive counterterror practices, which were themselves borne out of decades of federal surveillance and counterintelligence investigations into the right and left.⁸ The Ruby Ridge incident, while an extraordinary example, offers a window into how historians may consider far-right insurgency and conflicts with the state within both a longer history of federal surveillance (that shaped and sometimes coopted far-right movements) and new forms of increasingly preemptive counterterror policing. Ruby Ridge offers an opportunity to consider state practice not merely as *reacting* to crime or insurgency but as playing a part in shaping it too.

Despite extensive scholarship and commentary, one dimension of the Ruby Ridge siege remains underexamined. Although little noticed at the time and largely forgotten since, Ruby Ridge overlapped with another volatile undercover investigation, not by the ATF but by the FBI, involving a close associate of the Weavers. This article argues that the siege unfolded, in part, as an unintended consequence of that multiyear FBI counterterrorism sting. At the center of this story is Rico Valentino, a professional FBI informant embedded in Aryan Nations from 1987 to 1990. To preserve his cover, Valentino exposed a rival informant, Kenneth Fadeley, who was working with the ATF, ultimately allowing Valentino to successfully carry out a high-tech sting operation that orchestrated and then disrupted a bomb plot. This successful sting contributed to solidifying the Weavers' paranoia and marked hostility toward federal agents. The

5 Robert Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant's Face: Libertarian Political Violence and the Origins of the Militia Movement* (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 166–77.

6 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 196–205.

7 Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 213–14; Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 189–90.

8 These exceptional powers of security state surveillance at the expense of civil liberties were, ironically, developed in part by the historic role the right played in providing grassroots support for developing a powerful federal security apparatus to quell political rebellion and establish deeply racialized law-and-order politics. For background on the vexed relationship between the right and the security state throughout the twentieth century, see Faith Lazar, "A Deep State Affair: How the Right Fell Out of Love with the FBI," *Public Eye* 113 (Summer 2025), and, in this issue, Denise Lynn, "Violence at Peekskill! Paul Robeson, Anti-Communism, and Populist Fascism Among Veterans," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 4, no. 1 (2026): 2–29.

exposure of the ATF's informant, however, prompted the agency's hurried effort to coerce Randy Weaver into becoming an informant, giving him twenty-four hours to cooperate or face prosecution on weapons charges. The Weavers, already distrustful due to the sting orchestrated by Valentino and the FBI, interpreted the move as a setup and refused. As the Rico Valentino case demonstrates, multiple overlapping undercover operations within the same far-right movements created volatile interagency conflicts over competing informants and conflicting institutional incentives.

Reconstructing Valentino's role clarifies the chain of events leading to the Ruby Ridge fallout and places the siege within the wider context of shifting FBI counterterrorism and counterintelligence operations in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, as the Bureau adopted increasingly preemptive tactics to deter far-right political violence.⁹ When considered in this immediate context, Ruby Ridge appears less like a sudden clash between state agents and right-wing extremists over the mere threat of a misdemeanor charge, and more like part of the blowback from a volatile sting—a sting that was itself the product of emerging counterterrorism practices relying on informants whose actions were often improvised and self-interested. According to Rico Valentino's authorized biography, Valentino credits himself with outing the ATF informant, “which created a domino effect that, in a strange way, led to the infamous Ruby Ridge shootout.”¹⁰ I argue that Rico Valentino's significance lies less in any single act of his than in offering a glimpse into transitional, and even experimental, counterterror tactics built on preemptive stings that blurred the line between prevention and provocation. These tactics were taking shape in the early 1990s and would ultimately become a standard feature of preemptive counterterror operations up to the present. Such operations, in which informants encourage the very plots they are meant to disrupt, anticipated post-9/11 counterterror stings that investigative journalist Trevor Aaronson has called “security theater,” tactics designed as much to handily win orchestrated terror cases and project the image of a seemingly omnipresent surveillance apparatus as to prevent or respond to political violence.¹¹ As the Valentino case suggests, these methods were already taking shape well before the post-9/11 War on Terror.

9 For the role Rico Valentino played in pushing Kenneth Fadeley out of Aryan Nations, see Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 79–81. For more on the inter-informant conflict, see *The Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge, ID.*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Government Information, of the Committee on the Judiciary, 104th Congress, September 9, 1995 (testimony of Kenneth Fadeley). For details on the sting operation, see *United States v. Winslow et al.*, CR-90-033-HLR, Boxes 27–28, Criminal Case Files, 1891–1990 (SE-160), Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21, National Archives and Records Administration, Seattle, WA.

10 Damian Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes: The Life and Times of Rico Valentino* (pub. by author, 2014), 27.

11 Trevor Aaronson, *The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI's Manufactured War on Terrorism* (Ig Publishing, 2013). For data on post 9/11 counterterror operations, see the “Trial and Terror” project at *The Intercept*, updated June 14, 2023, <https://trial-and-terror.theintercept.com/>.

Ultimately, the botched counterterrorism probe at Ruby Ridge became a national news story because of its failure. Yet the siege as it unfolded should also be understood as a consequence of the apparent success of the FBI counterterrorism sting that immediately preceded it. Ruby Ridge was, ultimately, a perverse outcome of evolving federal strategies for preemptive counterterrorism against the far right. These strategies sought to crack down on political violence by anticipating threats and, through reliance on informant-provocateurs, sometimes even co-creating terror plots that could be documented through surveillance and prosecuted as small-scale conspiracy cases. This evolving anticipatory federal policing strategy emerged from the failure of more traditional methods of infiltration and surveillance to secure convictions against the far right, a problem exemplified by the unsuccessful prosecution in the Fort Smith sedition trial, discussed below.

From Grand Conspiracies to Little Conspiracies: Recalibrating Counterterror after the Failure at Fort Smith, April 1987–March 1988

“What do you think of your case so far?” a reporter asked Richard Butler, head of the Aryan Nations, as he walked out of the Fort Smith, Arkansas, federal courthouse on the final day of the seven-week sedition trial in the spring of 1988. “Very good,” Butler replied, flashing an “A-OK” gesture.¹² He appeared unusually buoyant for a man facing charges of attempting to overthrow the government by force in the most ambitious sedition trial in decades.

The last time the Justice Department had charged the far right with sedition was in the 1944 case *United States v. McWilliams*, brought under the Smith Act of 1940. Richard Butler had just begun his career as a professional racist then. He was a young member of the Silver Shirts when the Silver Legion’s founder, William Dudley Pelley, and other American fascists were charged with attempting to overthrow the US government.¹³ Now sixty-nine and liver-spotted, Butler presided over the Aryan Nations Church of Jesus Christ Christian, a node of white nationalist organizing from which a campaign of political violence had erupted throughout the 1980s.

In the Fort Smith federal sedition trial, Butler and ten other defendants were charged not under the defunct Smith Act but under a rarely used Civil War-era seditious conspiracy statute. It had been unsuccessfully brought against antiwar protestors in 1919, and then dusted off in 1955 to convict Lolita Lebrón and fellow Puerto Rican nationalists after they stormed the House of Representatives with pistols, wounding

12 “Sedition Trial,” *Newscene* 7, KATV News, April 2, 1988, Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, KATV News Collection.

13 For background on the 1944 sedition trial, see Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 1983), 184–224.

five congressmen. Lebrón's case provided the legal basis for the government's argument in Fort Smith that seditious conspiracy is inherently ideological. As the government argued in its pretrial memorandum, "Typically, the defendants in a sedition prosecution are driven to desperate, violent acts by violently held political convictions," thus opening up "beliefs" as fair game for evidence.¹⁴

Federal prosecutors at Fort Smith built their sweeping conspiracy case on a tranche of FBI intelligence gathered through Operation Clean Sweep. This investigation began with murders and armored car robberies committed by The Order, an Aryan Nations-affiliated neo-Nazi cell, and widened to encompass the broader white nationalist movement.¹⁵ Fort Smith prosecutors aimed to tie white nationalist movement leaders to crimes already prosecuted in earlier Order racketeering trials, or to prove, as one informant testified, that figures like Richard Butler, Robert Miles (former Grand Dragon of the Michigan Ku Klux Klan and prominent Christian Identity preacher), and Louis Beam (former head of Louisiana Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and ambassador for Aryan Nations) may not "commit the robberies," but they "get others to follow them." They were "the fire of the movement, the spark."¹⁶

Five of the other defendants, all Order members, were already serving life sentences. In sum, the government's case at Fort Smith was conceived as an effort to connect white nationalist leadership to its already convicted foot soldiers. On this foundation, the government sought to establish that the defendants participated in plotting a sweeping conspiracy to overthrow the federal government, allegedly conceived in 1983 in the aftermath of the shootout between Gordon Kahl and federal authorities, culminating in The Order's crime spree, which was intended to secure funds for a genocidal white nationalist revolution.

Although seditious conspiracy is a risky and highly unusual charge, the Reagan Justice Department had reason to believe it might be successful. Government counsel had recently secured a series of seditious conspiracy convictions, first in 1981 and again in 1985, against ten members of the Puerto Rican nationalist group Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (Armed Forces of National Liberation). On the heels of these victories, the Justice Department pursued two ambitious cases: The first was a 1986 sedition case against the so-called Ohio 7, members of the United Freedom Front, even though the primary defendants were already serving lengthy sentences for

14 Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, 186.

15 For a detailed history of Operation Clean Sweep and other FBI investigations into white nationalist and racist movements, see William Ziegenhorn "No Rest for the Wicked: FBI Investigations of White Supremacist Groups, 1983–1988" (master's thesis, San Jose State University, 1995). For a journalistic record of The Order, see Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America's Racist Underground* (Free Press, 1989).

16 Steve Feldman, "Ark. Acquittal Raises Concerns," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), April 15, 1988.

bombing military facilities and corporations with ties to the South African apartheid government.¹⁷ Charges against the Ohio 7 were filed just months before the Fort Smith trial. Legal experts at the time described the Justice Department's strategy as "the most aggressive use of seditious conspiracy laws in recent years."¹⁸ If successful, the two coordinated seditious conspiracy trials, one aimed at the far right, the other at the far left, could establish a standard of seemingly nonpartisan enforcement for a highly politicized charge.¹⁹

Butler's co-defendant, Robert Miles, a well-spoken propagandist for white separatism and a convicted anti-desegregation terrorist who had served years in prison for tarring and feathering a school superintendent and bombing school buses in the 1970s, spoke freely to journalists throughout the trial.²⁰ Miles often placed his sedition charges within the context of other recent, ideologically diverse sedition cases; typically, however, he flattened the causes of anticolonial Puerto Rican nationalism and anti-apartheid Marxist liberation into a shared struggle for a kind of "free association" racial separatism hindered by sedition law. "Whether you are a communist or a right-winger, whether you are a Puerto Rican nationalist or a white separatist," Miles stated, "you should have the right to obtain free association with those you are comfortable with. This government wants one cookie mold from which it stirs everyone, one garden in which all the flowers look alike."²¹

The defense countered with the First Amendment, deriding the case as political persecution and arguing that the charge of sedition was tantamount to a talking crime. After seven weeks, more than two hundred witnesses, and two near mistrials, the government's sweeping conspiracy narrative collapsed. The all-white jury was unconvinced, and every defendant was acquitted on all counts. Five of the defendants, former Order members, returned to jail, where they were already serving life sentences. The rest walked, declaring victory for the movement. "I think ZOG has suffered a terrible defeat here today," declared Louis Beam, as he tore down the courthouse steps

17 "Ohio 7: On Trial, Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!" *Toronto Anarchist Black Cross*, January 1, 1988; "United Freedom Front," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, ed. C. Gus Martin, 2nd ed. (SAGE Publications, 2011), 605.

18 Katherine Bishop, "U.S. Dusts Off an Old Law," *New York Times*, March 27, 1988.

19 In August 2026, a federal judge, reportedly under pressure from Trump's Justice Department, dismissed the remaining cases involving January 6 defendants convicted of the rarely used charge of seditious conspiracy. See Salvador Rizzo, "Judge Dismisses Jan. 6 Seditious Conspiracy Charges Against Oath Keepers," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/08/04/judge-dismisses-jan-6-seditious-conspiracy-charges-against-oath-keepers/>.

20 "A Militant Crusader Faces His Biggest Trial," *Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 1987.

21 Robert Miles interview segment, *NewsScene 7*, KATV News, February 13, 1988, Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, KATV News Collection.

toward the six-foot marble Fort Smith Confederate Monument, a monument to sedition, located right on the courthouse lawn.²²

There was much that went awry for the government throughout the trial. The judge seated an all-white jury that appeared notably sympathetic, so much so that one juror would go on to marry one of the local Arkansan defendants, David McGuire. Nearly half of the government's evidence was excluded, condemned by the judge as repetitive and hearsay. Most consequentially, prosecutors chose to build their case around the testimony of two figures from within the white nationalist movement: James Ellison, who testified in exchange for the commutation of his twenty-year sentence on prior federal racketeering and weapons charges, and Frazier Glenn Miller, who was granted immunity. The two proved unconvincing witnesses, their motives for offering testimony deeply suspect. Yet the difficulty of securing seditious conspiracy convictions was not unique to this trial. The inability to persuade juries of antigovernment sedition also dogged the Ohio 7 case, where, after an expensive nineteen-month proceeding, the government's charges likewise collapsed and ended in November 1989 in acquittals and mistrials for the defendants.²³

On the day of the Fort Smith acquittals, amid the crush of Klansmen, skinheads, journalists, hecklers, and onlookers watching the rest of the recently acquitted men and the visibly rattled government attorneys file out of the courthouse, stood the hulking figure of Rico Valentino, a former professional wrestler and Butler's current bodyguard. Butler's previous bodyguard, Robert Boyers, had already been exposed during the trial as an FBI informant.²⁴ Valentino, who had arrived at Aryan Nations headquarters in Idaho just four months earlier, was also working for the FBI, relaying real-time details of Butler's activities throughout the trial, even spending time socially with Butler's lawyer, Everett Hofmeister.²⁵ Butler may have beat the sedition charges, like his predecessor William Pelley, but, with the informant Rico Valentino by his side, it was hardly the end of his time as a subject of security-state scrutiny. Valentino would remain embedded in Aryan Nations until 1990, when he too took the stand to help secure a conspiracy

22 "13 Supremacists Are Not Guilty of Conspiracies," *New York Times*, April 8, 1988. ZOG—short-hand for "Zionist Occupational [or Occupied] Government"—refers to the antisemitic conspiracy theory that the US government is controlled by Jews.

23 Josh Davidson, "Howard Zinn and the United Freedom Front Sedition Trial," Howard Zinn Digital Collection, accessed September 1, 2026, <https://www.howardzinn.org/united-freedom-front-sedition-trial/>; Finding Aid, Raymond Luc Levasseur Papers, Robert S. Cox Special Collections & University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

24 "Supremacist Sought to Eradicate FBI Informants, Witness Testifies," *Blytheville (AR) Courier News*, March 8, 1988.

25 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 7, October 11, 1990, pp. 1243–45, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

conviction against three white nationalists in a plot to bomb a gay nightclub in Seattle, the result of a complex sting operation he helped orchestrate.

For decades, the FBI had surveilled far-right groups through a revolving cadre of moles like Valentino.²⁶ Usually, however, these operations included using informants to passively gather intelligence for ongoing investigations or actively influence or neutralize the activities of far-right groups through counterintelligence operations, such as COINTELPRO White Hate (1964–1972).²⁷ What the Valentino case reveals, however, is a post-Fort Smith shift in which federal investigators and prosecutors began to incorporate the right within an evolving counterterrorism apparatus that was primarily preemptive in its focus. US counterterrorism policy, designed to preempt terrorism, emerged in the late 1970s to combat domestic leftist guerilla movements.²⁸ By the late 1980s and early 1990s, neo-Nazi groups, which had committed spectacular acts of political violence (despite widespread FBI and other federal agency informant saturation in their networks), drew a renewed focus and became themselves the targets of preemptive counterterror stings.

Ultimately, although the government's sweeping conspiracy case at Fort Smith failed, its smaller, more targeted conspiracy cases, like the Rico Valentino case, which were constructed through preemptive counterterrorism sting operations, would prove to be far more persuasive to juries nationwide.²⁹ And yet, these preemptive stings, which

26 For background on FBI infiltration programs into the far right see Lazar, "Deep State Affair"; Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists*, 163–80.

27 For a history of FBI infiltration into the 1960s Klan, see John Drabble, "To Ensure Domestic Tranquility: The FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE and Political Discourse, 1964–1971," *Journal of American Studies* 38, no. 2 (2004): 297–328; John Drabble, "From White Supremacy to White Power: The FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE, and the Nazification of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s," *American Studies* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 49–74; David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (University of California Press, 2005).

28 For a history of the origins of US counterterror policy, see Daniel S. Chard, *Nixon's War at Home: The FBI, Leftist Guerrillas, and the Origins of Counterterrorism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

29 There are many examples of preemptive stings against the far right in the 1990s. Consider, for instance, the arrest of members of the Mountaineer Militia for plotting to bomb an FBI facility in Clarksburg, West Virginia. See "Militia Head Says He Didn't Plot Against the FBI," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 2, 1997. Another case involved three Klan-affiliated men arrested based on an informant's tip for conspiring to poison water supplies and conduct assassinations. See "No Bail for 4th 'Hit List' Suspect," *The Pentagraph* (Bloomington, IL), March 14, 1998. A third example involved militia members in a group called the Southeastern States Alliance who were charged with a conspiracy to blow up a nuclear power plant and destroy vital infrastructure. See "Hickory Farms Manager Led Double Life, Authorities Say," *St. Petersburg (FL) Times*, December 10, 1999, and "Terrorism Suspect Signs Plea Deal," *Tampa Tribune*, March 10, 2000. In a fourth case, members of the San Joaquin Militia in California were arrested based on an informant's tip that they planned to sabotage electrical grids in order to spark civil unrest against the federal government. See "S.J. Militia Surfaces in Bomb Plot," *The Stockton (CA) Record*, December 6, 1999.

relied on informants like Rico Valentino who often operated with limited oversight, also introduced unpredictability and disorder into investigations.

Rico Valentino: Professional Informant

Rico Valentino went by many names in his lifetime. Born George Harold Westin Jr. in rural Nebraska, he wrestled as Rico Valentino, Beatnik Rick, and Ricky Renaldo, gaining modest fame on the Pacific Northwest circuit in the 1960s and 1970s. After a leg injury in 1979 ended his wrestling career, he reinvented himself again as an undercover informant, working with local law enforcement in Yuba City, California; Medford, Oregon; Snohomish, Washington; and for eighteen months with Alaska State Narcotics enforcement.³⁰ When he moved back to the Pacific Northwest, Valentino, ever the enterprising businessman, offered his services to the FBI, where his handlers gave him a new codename: Muscles.³¹

Rico Valentino worked for the FBI as an undercover informant embedded within Aryan Nations for over three years, from 1987 to 1990. When he first arrived at the Aryan Nations headquarters in 1987, he claimed to be a tax protestor evading authorities. Amid the men in blue stormtrooper uniforms and women modestly dressed in long denim skirts, the former wrestler stood out, dressed flamboyantly in silk shirts, diamond rings, an oversized white ten-gallon cowboy hat, and his signature opaque dark glasses. He was colossal in both stature and personality. Although long retired, his flair for showmanship made it seem as if he had never left the wrestling ring. He was always ready with a colorful insult and traded in threats of violence as if exchanging pleasantries. During his wrestling career, Valentino often played the part of the “heel,” the wrestler-villain whose job it is to fight dirty and get booed by the audience. As a former professional villain, Valentino was well suited for the Aryan Nations undercover job, and he was paid well for those talents. According to congressional and court records and his authorized biography, Valentino had worked as an informant for multiple police forces and agencies throughout the late 1980s, making a considerable living for himself. From the FBI alone Valentino made at least \$100,000 for his services, with an undisclosed lump sum reward following the end of his time as an informant.³²

When he arrived at the Aryan Nations compound, Valentino made fast friends, telling stories of his life as a wrestler, teaching jiu-jitsu to fellow members, and freestyling antisemitic songs on his acoustic guitar. The odd newcomer was helpful and generous. He paid for meals, upgraded gear, and frequently tipped acquaintances with crisp

30 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 5, October 9, 1990, p. 893, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

31 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 7, October 11, 1990, p. 1238, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

32 *Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge* (testimony of Kenneth Fadeley).

hundred-dollar bills. Valentino also contributed to daily operations on the compound, volunteering as a mechanic, assisting with construction projects, and occasionally answering the phone. And, of course, “Muscles” took on the role of enforcer, serving as the compound’s least welcoming face by escorting intruders, journalists, and other perceived nuisances off the property.³³

Yet his generosity, which endeared him to the white separatists, also raised suspicion about his true identity. Suspicions were at an all-time high in the years before Valentino’s arrival, when Operation Clean Sweep and the Fort Smith sedition trial, which relied on the testimonies of multiple informants, revealed more clearly than ever that the Aryan Nations and other far-right organizations were saturated with federal informants, and even with moles from private watchdogs like the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center.³⁴ These private organizations handled their own informants and often worked in cooperation with the government to share information.³⁵ Additionally, there was evidence from the trial that suggested the presence of another protected informant embedded in Aryan Nations who had not been revealed during the proceedings. Trial testimony from Butler’s former bodyguard, FBI informant Robert Boyers, painted a picture of deep paranoia and suspicion within Aryan Nations. He testified that Butler threatened to use sodium pentothal, or “truth serum,” to discover infiltrators and, in his words, “eliminate the ZOG snitch.”³⁶ Despite this atmosphere of suspicion, Rico Valentino weathered the sedition trial alongside Richard Butler, and cemented his position as a trusted confidant and bodyguard. Valentino accompanied

33 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 7, October 11, 1990, p. 1238, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

34 The SPLC and ADL have maintained inconsistent, ad hoc relationships with the federal security apparatus since the Cold War. For an overview of how these organizations shared intelligence on the right with law enforcement, see Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, “Repression and Ideology: The Legacy of Discredited Centrist/Extremist Theory,” *Public Eye*, November 17, 1998. For a recent history of the ADL’s longstanding partnerships with the surveillance state and alliances with right-wing organizations throughout the twentieth century, see Emmaia Gelman, *The Anti-Defamation League and the Racial State* (University of California Press, 2026). For coverage of the Trump administration’s decision to cut ties with the SPLC and ADL, see Eric Tucker, “FBI Cuts Ties with Southern Poverty Law Center, Anti-Defamation League After Conservative Complaints,” *Associated Press*, October 3, 2025. In April 2026, the Trump Justice Department charged the SPLC with wire fraud, making false statements, and conspiracy to commit money laundering, alleging that it laundered donations to far-right and white-nationalist groups. See U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, “Federal Grand Jury Charges Southern Poverty Law Center for Wire Fraud, False Statements, and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering,” April 21, 2026.

35 James Coates and Stephen Franklin, “Underground of Racist Leaders Coordinated Crimes, FBI Tapes Show,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 1987; “No Rest for the Wicked,” 84; For historical background on the Fort Smith sedition trial, see Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 171–84; Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists*, 16–17; Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, 146–69.

36 Bill Morlin, “Ex-Wrestler Had Hold on Aryan Organization,” *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), May 27, 1990; “Supremacist Sought to Eradicate FBI Informants, Witness Testifies,” *Blytheville Courier News*, March 8, 1988.

Butler on nearly all of his cross-country trips. Together, they traveled to Whidbey Island, Washington, to visit skinhead memorials erected where neo-Nazi Order leader Robert Matthews was killed by federal agents, and to several Klan rallies in Pulaski, Tennessee, the birthplace of the original Ku Klux Klan. Travel expenses, often covered by Valentino's extravagant generosity, were later reimbursed by the FBI.³⁷

FBI files on operations involving Rico Valentino remain classified. Information regarding the details of his time embedded in Aryan Nations comes from court documents, news coverage and investigative journalism, congressional investigators, and testimony given during a hearing on the Ruby Ridge siege, as well as from Valentino's biography, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes: The Life and Times and Rico Valentino*, which was written by journalist Damien Mann. The book is generously based on interviews with Valentino, and the stories told in it are often unreliable, tending to depict larger-than-life scenarios set up like the storyline of a wrestling match. No longer the "heel" but a self-styled outlaw "hero," Valentino is able to outpunch or outfox everyone, a man who knows how to manipulate and hustle every personality for his own benefit, including the FBI. The account of Valentino's tussle with Tom Metzger after the neo-Nazi accused him of being a cop is typical: "Rico grabbed the leader of the American Nazi movement like he was taking a girl for a spin around the dance floor."³⁸ In another anecdote, the wrestler relates cooking such good Italian stew for Richard Butler that Valentino managed to steal the names and addresses from his address book without detection. One detail Valentino does not spare, and a fact confirmed by every other account of Valentino's time at Aryan Nations, is the great amount of money he was given by the FBI to spread throughout the movement.³⁹

This dubious biography—in reality, a thinly veiled memoir—demonstrates a particular need to be clear about how that money was used, beginning with an account of how Valentino sold himself to the Bureau:

Rico convinced the FBI that he could infiltrate the Aryan Nations better than previous informants. "All you've ever had is losers going through those gates," he explained. "Fix me up with a bankroll, and I'll get the goods on them." . . . With cash in hand, Rico Valentino slowly bought his way to the top. He began treating his fellow members to breakfast, lunch, and dinner.⁴⁰

37 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 5, October 9, 1990, p. 923, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

38 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 113.

39 Bill Morlin, "Ex-Wrestler Had Hold on Aryan Organization," *Spokesman-Review*, May 27, 1990; *United States v. Winslow*, 962 F.2d at 845 (9th Cir. 1992); David Neiwert, *In God's Country: The Patriot Movement and the Pacific Northwest* (Washington State University Press, 2003), 60.

40 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 109–10.

On another occasion, Valentino describes ingratiating himself with the cagey skinhead leader Johnny Bangerter by secretly stealing the neo-Nazi's wallet and then saving the day by giving him cash to travel to a skinhead festival. Valentino slipped him a few hundreds, stating: "Don't worry. . . . Remember it's for the cause." Later, Valentino relates how he convinced the FBI to fund a party for Bangerter and his skinhead friends in Las Vegas. "We set up shop in a first-class hotel on the strip. He got \$1,000 to throw a party with beer, wine, whiskey, steaks, chicken, salad, as well as two strippers and lots of music."⁴¹ After the party, Bangerter and Valentino shot off unregistered guns in the desert. According to Bangerter and his teenage brother, during this same visit Valentino urged the two to join him in setting off explosives in the mountains.⁴²

It is difficult to determine which other convictions, if any, were facilitated by Valentino's intelligence. Despite being an unabashed braggart, Valentino, in his authorized biography, does not lay claim to many intelligence victories. Instead, the narrative instills significant doubt regarding the effectiveness of infiltration and casts suspicion on his role. The wrestler laments that most individuals he encountered were all talk, recalling his time in his third year at Aryan Nations when he endured "endless rants." "They practiced shooting, they plotted and they boasted, but they were slow to act." Describing most of these individuals as "dirt poor survivalist types," Valentino asserts that "they could boast all they wanted about blowing things up, but they didn't have the cash to make things go boom."⁴³

Within the biography, several monologues expressing criticism of the FBI's counterterrorism strategies are attributed to a character named "Cadillac," purportedly Valentino's girlfriend, though she seems to be a narrative invention by Valentino and/or the book's author.⁴⁴ Cadillac is depicted as feline, flashy, and spoiled. Her petulance allows the narrative to articulate concerns and criticisms, posing naive questions and voicing ambivalence—essentially voicing what Valentino cannot. Cadillac enjoys the money and luxury provided by the FBI and consistently demands more. Valentino can maintain some semblance of integrity and machismo in his career living off the federal government as a professional snitch; he does it, after all, to pamper Cadillac, although he often concedes that he too enjoys "the flashy life," enriched by "plenty of government cash." In one presumably fabricated episode, Valentino brings Cadillac to

41 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 121.

42 Affidavit of John W. Bangerter, *United States v. Winslow*, No. 90-033-N-HLR (D. Idaho Aug. 29, 1990), NARA Seattle.

43 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 18.

44 "Cadillac" could very well have been Valentino's girlfriend; however, I can find no confirmed record of her. Valentino's wife, on the other hand, appears in court documents and was known to many in Aryan Nations. She worked at a nearby nursing home called Sunset Terrace, which would have added credibility to Valentino's cover. Single men who appeared at Aryan Nations without any family were often suspected of being potential informants.

an Aryan Nations' meeting, where she feels out of place and almost jeopardizes his cover. Stepping out of the car in high heels onto an unpaved parking lot outside the compound, she remarks, "I've never seen so many poorly dressed people in all my life." She continues, "These guys are a threat to national security? Seriously, I can't believe the federal government worries about these backwoods boobs." Cadillac's audacity provides an occasion for Valentino to express his own ambivalence: "Part of him agreed with Cadillac's assessment. Another part felt these idiots could really pull a nasty stunt that would kill a lot of people."⁴⁵

According to Valentino, he was "waiting for them to act and the FBI remained patient."⁴⁶ But that patience seemed to wear thin. As his biography puts it, although he had gained the trust of Richard Butler, suspicions still "dogged him through his four years with the master race."⁴⁷ Accusations of this sort were pervasive, and wire checks were not uncommon at Aryan Nations' gatherings. As part of his cover backstory, Valentino fibbed that he used to work as a collector for the mafia and had experience ferreting out informants.⁴⁸ In order to protect his cover, he spread rumors that Gus Magisano, an outlaw biker and arms dealer, was the alleged informant whose intelligence had been used during the sedition trial.⁴⁹ Valentino was right. Gus Magisano also went by the name Kenneth Fadeley, and he was an informant working for the ATF.

Kenneth Fadeley's Cover Gets Blown: Interagency Informant Clash

As the rumors about "Gus" spread, a fellow traveler within Aryan Nations, Randy Weaver, grew particularly anxious about Gus Magisano's identity. The two had first met at the 1986 Aryan Nations Congress. In October 1989, Weaver sold the informant two illegally modified shotguns that he had sawed off himself. The next month, Weaver and Gus made plans to drive together to Noxon, Montana, on November 30, 1989, to meet John Trochmann, leader of the Montana Militia, someone both the ATF and the FBI were keenly interested in gaining intelligence on. Three ATF vehicles and a plane remained on standby to trail the informant's car on the journey to the Montana Militia headquarters.

Instead, Randy used the opportunity to confront him. He brought up inconsistencies that had been bothering him. Gus often talked about his family, yet no one in Weaver's

45 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 26.

46 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 17.

47 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 110.

48 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 7, October 3, 1990, pp. 1243–45, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

49 For the role Rico Valentino played in pushing Kenneth Fadeley out of Aryan Nations, see Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 79–81; *Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge* (testimony of Kenneth Fadeley).

circle had ever seen them. There were whispers that Gus was working with law enforcement. “A guy in Spokane told me you’re bad,” Weaver told him bluntly. “If we could meet your family, that would make things a lot cooler, you know?” Gus pushed back: “I would like to know who the fuck told you that. He’s lying through his teeth ‘cause I’m not a badge, and if I was a badge, then I suppose I’d be wired, and you’re welcome to check me for a wire.” Gus had stopped wearing a wire because it was too risky; instead, a tape recorder concealed in the dashboard captured their conversation. Weaver reminded Gus of the modified shotgun deal, perhaps hoping that, if Gus was wired, the possibility of entrapment could be recorded: “You approached me and offered me a deal.”⁵⁰

When Fadeley, or “Gus,” first purchased a sawed-off shotgun from Randy Weaver in 1989, it was part of a broader ATF strategy to infiltrate the far-right movement and expand its covert operations. This increased covert capability was essential because the agency’s ability to regulate gun dealers had been severely restricted by passage of the Firearm Owners’ Protection Act (FOPA) of 1986, supported by gun rights hardliners in the US Congress and the National Rifle Association.⁵¹ But by the time Fadeley encountered Valentino in January 1990, he had not made much progress in identifying a suspected underground gun smuggling network, other than purchasing two guns off of Weaver, a minor crime that would result in little more than a misdemeanor charge.

Kenneth Fadeley and Rico Valentino both claimed to have recognized each other as informants at the time. Whether or not this is true, what seems evident is the two found themselves at cross purposes, and their redundancy made both of their jobs difficult. For Kenneth Fadeley, the sooner he could land a hefty conviction, the better, as he did not expect to be paid by the ATF for his services until after he made a conviction. Valentino, on the other hand, lived more than comfortably as an informant for the FBI and seemed in little rush to end a lucrative gig.

By March 1990, it appeared that Rico Valentino had compromised Fadeley’s cover, leaving Fadeley not only at a dead end after years of undercover work, but potentially in danger. Two of Fadeley’s targets—Steve Nelson and Procter James Baker, who were also being pursued by Valentino—one day accosted Fadeley with a video camera. They accused him of using license plates that did not match his name: “Gus, do you know who Kenneth Fadeley is?” The two men aggressively demanded to know who he was working for. The confrontation ended with Fadeley being kicked off the Aryan Nations compound for good.⁵² In his congressional testimony Kenneth Fadeley blamed Valentino for blowing his cover—a charge that Valentino would eventually admit to,

50 Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 77.

51 William Vizzard, *In the Cross Fire: A Political History of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 102–8.

52 Vizzard, *Cross Fire*, 79–81.

years later.⁵³ He characterized Fadeley as incompetent and justified “squeezing him out of the picture” on the grounds that he was mishandling the investigation, remarking that “Fadeley couldn’t master picking his own nose.”⁵⁴

During Congressional hearings in 1995 on the Ruby Ridge incident, Fadeley recalled attending a tense three-person meeting in Spokane, Washington, with only him, Rico Valentino, and the head of the Northwest Knights of the Ku Klux Klan present. All of the men were egging each other on to commit a violent attack. During cross-examination, Republican senator Arlen Specter pointed out that two of the three participants were government informants and asked Fadeley if there was any reason to suspect that the third Klansman might have also been an informant. Specter then joked, “[t]he only people not informed would be the appropriations committee.”⁵⁵ His remark had a sharp edge, highlighting that Congress allocates funds to the ATF, which had legitimate concerns about potentially losing funding or being demoted from an independent agency back to a unit of the Treasury Department.

The redundancy of informants was a profound structural failing, not just between different agencies that did not consistently share information but also within the FBI itself, which planted multiple informants in the same investigation without their knowledge of each other. But ultimately, pushing Fadeley out of the picture allowed Valentino to successfully deliver the culmination of his multiyear undercover work. Those ensnared would include two of the men who kicked Fadeley off the compound, Steve Nelson and Procter James Baker, as well as Robert Winslow, a recent arrival at Aryan Nations.

Orchestrating the Neighbours Disco Sting

While undercover, Rico Valentino had recorded hundreds of hours of conversations of the three men planning horrific things, including blowing up a gay bar to turn it into a “meat grinder,” bombing the Seattle Anti-Defamation League office with a team of fifteen “Aryan Warriors” who would pick off the survivors with Uzis, and bombing cars and businesses owned by black, Chinese, and Jewish people in the area.⁵⁶ The conspiracies recorded on the wire worn by Valentino or by the device concealed within his home television set were wide-ranging, heinously violent, and discussed over several months. However, recording murderous speech as evidence of a conspiracy was insufficient to

53 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 27–28.

54 Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 28.

55 *Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge* (testimony of Kenneth Fadeley).

56 Dell Richards, “Neo-Nazis Guilty in Gay Disco Bombing Plot,” *OutWeek*, no. 70 (October 31, 1990): 22.

build a case. The recordings needed to be supplemented by a sequence of actions aimed at carrying out a crime.

This part of the sting unfolded in stages of activation and surveillance. The first step required documenting a test detonation of a bomb in a location prearranged by Valentino and his FBI handlers. It was decided that two bombs would be made. One would be tested and the demolition recorded; the second would remain undetonated and stored for later.⁵⁷ On the day of the test demolition, April 14, 1990, Steve Nelson, Procter James Baker, and Rico Valentino placed a homemade pipe bomb in the remote Coeur d'Alene Forest in Idaho. The youngest and newest member, Robert Winslow, who had been at Aryan Nations for just three months, stayed behind to do required chores at the compound. Procter James Baker had constructed a bomb that was crudely made but powerful enough to shatter a large pine tree. While the detonation took place Valentino wore a wire and FBI agents hid, camouflaged in the woods nearby, watching the events from afar through scopes and taking pictures as evidence.⁵⁸ Next, Valentino pushed a plan that would ensure the men crossed state lines with guns in the car (all the guns were legally registered, and all belonged to Valentino). The guns and interstate trip would guarantee evidence of overt acts taken in a plan to commit a crime, necessary for conspiracy cases. Valentino's van was outfitted with a recording device with a switch concealed on the left side of the driver's seat that enabled Valentino to turn the tape recorder on and off throughout the journey.⁵⁹ A low-flying aircraft tailed the van for the drive.

The trip to Seattle was set for May 12, 1990, which, at least in one version of the story, included two separate plans. One was to pass out Aryan Nations recruitment fliers and go to a friend's recording studio and record a Nazi marching song, a plan often discussed by Nelson and Valentino, who were both musicians. The other was to set off a bomb at Neighbours Disco in Seattle. With the high-tech sting operation in place, there was one major problem: On the morning of the road trip, the actual bombmaker with the bomb, Procter James Baker, was nowhere to be found. The FBI handlers had instructed Valentino to place the pipe bomb in an ice chest filled with sand in the back of the van. If there were indeed a live bomb in the van, he would signal that it was onboard by turning on the headlights. The van pulled away with the headlights off, carrying no bomb and no materials to build one. Nelson and Winslow, who had grown

57 Notice of Objections to Final Draft Presentence Reports and Sentencing Recommendation, No. 90-033-N-HLR (D. Idaho Jan. 9, 1991), *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

58 Winslow, 962 F.2d at 845; "Neo-Nazi Convictions Upheld," *Associated Press*, April 3, 1992; "Bombing Trial Begins in Boise, Attorney for White Supremacists Blames FBI Informant in Plot against Seattle Club," *The Oregonian* (Portland), October 4, 1990; Thomas Moriarty, "Wrestler Lived Double Life as an Informant," *TCA Regional News*, May 31, 2015.

59 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 7, October 11, 1990, p. 1214, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

accustomed to Valentino paying for nearly every activity, left Idaho with only six dollars between them.⁶⁰

While on the road, Valentino allegedly conferred with an FBI agent who intercepted him at the urinals in a Perkins restaurant in Ritzville, Washington, and confirmed that there was no bomb in the van. Following this meeting, whether at the instruction of the Bureau agent or not, Valentino and his two conspirators stopped at two hardware stores and a gun shop, where Valentino each time left money on the car dashboard for Winslow and Nelson to purchase a pipe, a fuse, and gunpowder. It was just a few ingredients short of the “practice bomb” they had set off in the woods. When the group arrived at a Seattle motel, Stephen Nelson and Robert Winslow were promptly arrested by agents.⁶¹ Procter James Baker was arrested back in Idaho the same day.

Fallout from the Sting

News of the sting rippled through the white nationalist movement in Idaho. Richard Butler, who typically harbored hostility toward journalists, unexpectedly invited reporters to attend an impromptu press conference. Holding up a picture of an unusually large man, he addressed the gathering, saying, “We have a bit of trouble here, and we’re very concerned about a missing member.” Valentino, Richard Butler’s personal bodyguard, hadn’t been seen in days and his disappearance was causing a stir. Asked if it was possible that Valentino may be an informant, Butler dismissed the idea but added, “If he was the FBI sure must pay well,” gesturing to the brand new \$3,000-dollar sign that Valentino had recently purchased for the compound. He joked that the FBI was his greatest funder. Meanwhile, Valentino was packing up a moving van and heading to San Francisco. Valentino ended up testifying publicly in court, revealing the long-gestating operation. This was Butler’s third bodyguard who had proven to be a federal informant.⁶²

60 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 2, October 3, 1990, p. 233, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

61 Rico’s biography presents conflicting versions of the bomb plot. In one account, the plan was to transport an unassembled bomb, as indicated in an exchange with his girlfriend: “Earlier that morning, Rico’s girlfriend Cadillac forced as much information as she could from Rico, who was usually reticent about his undercover work. ‘You’re going to be driving down the freeway with a bomb under your butt,’ she said. ‘Not exactly, hon. . . . The bomb won’t be fully assembled’” (Mann, *Shooters, Heels & Heroes*, 102). In another chapter, the plan was less clear, and on the day of the operation, Valentino describes being surprised by not having the premade bomb: “Rico was stumped for a second, worried this gambit was going nowhere. . . . Rico, Winslow and Nelson reluctantly decided they’d head out anyway, picking up more bomb supplies on their travels” (35).

62 Lonnie Rosenwald, “Bomb Suspect Head of Aryan Youth Group,” *Spokane (WA) Chronicle*, May 16, 1990; Bill Morlin, “Wrestler Prepares for Grudge Match Inside Courtroom,” *Spokesman-Review*, March 18, 1992.

Randy and Vicki Weaver were especially panic-stricken following the arrests. The absent conspirator, Procter James Baker, whom they knew as P. J., was a close friend of the Weaver family. Vicki and Randy had been visiting with the Bakers right before FBI agents searched the latter's house in Hayden Lake, Idaho, in pursuit of the "bomb" that never quite made it to Seattle. Finding nothing incriminating at the house, agents searched a cabin owned by the Bakers one hundred miles south of the Hayden Lake area. There, agents found a pipe with traces of gunpowder and a hole drilled in it. It could have been the undetonated bomb from the April test demolition, but it had been disassembled.⁶³

In the immediate wake of the FBI sting, it was a uniquely bad moment for the ATF to approach Randy Weaver and attempt to pressure him into becoming an informant. Yet, exactly one month after the sting operation arrests, ATF agents, faced with the loss of their multiyear informant Kenneth Fadeley, decided to pursue the only other viable lead they had left to salvage their undercover operation. They approached Weaver and offered him a deal to cooperate in exchange for avoiding jail time for selling an illegally modified weapon. On June 12, 1990, ATF agents Herbert Byerly and Steve Gunderson presented the offer, giving him twenty-four hours to respond. It was a reckless move that would prove disastrous. Intelligence from Fadeley suggested that because Weaver had previously criticized Richard Butler and the Aryan Nations, he was not a committed ideologue and might be persuaded to cooperate. However, as Byerly later noted, one of the first things he observed when they approached Weaver that day was a brass belt buckle bearing the Aryan Nations insignia, along with a Nazi SS lightning bolt on the lapel of his black leather jacket.⁶⁴ Hardly the markings of a man inclined toward moderation. Weaver rejected the offer. The ATF, true to their ultimatum, began preparing to indict him for the manufacture and sale of illegal weapons.

On the evening of the day of the failed attempt to flip Randy Weaver, he and his wife wrote a letter condemning the evil machinations of "the feds." The Weavers vowed to resist complying with misdemeanor gun charges in part due to their fear of getting framed and swept up in a broader conspiracy case. Their letter, addressed to "Aryan Nations & all our brethren of the Anglo Saxon Race," read:

If we are not free to obey the laws of Yahweh, we may as well be dead! . . . We have decided to stay on this mountain, you could not drag our children away from us with chains. They are hard core and love the truth. Randy's first thought was to let them arrest him to protect his children—but he is well aware that once they have him the Feds will send agents to search

⁶³ Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 2, October 3, 1990, pp. 194–95, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

⁶⁴ *The Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge, ID.*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Government Information, of the Committee on the Judiciary, 104th Congress, September 7, 1995 (testimony of Herbert Byerly).

and destroy our home, looking for “evidence.” He knows his children—they won’t let that happen to their mother. Let Yah-Yashua’s perfect will be done. If it is our time, we’ll go home. If it is not, we will praise his Separated Name! Halleluyah!⁶⁵

It was the first of many letters Vicki would send during the sixteen months of isolation at the cabin. The Weavers made their position unmistakable: They would not cooperate. This decision was shaped in part by what had happened to P. J. Baker when his house was searched and evidence was found tying him to the bombing conspiracy. The disco sting was an immediate cautionary example, reinforcing the Weavers’ belief in the fundamentally untrustworthy and malevolent designs of the federal government, and in everything that could go wrong with cooperation.

In the weeks and months that followed, Vicki’s letters grew more incendiary. She sent letters to the US Marshals Service and the US Attorney’s office addressed to the “Queen of Babylon” or, sometimes, the “Servants of Queen of Babylon.” They invoked armies of Anglo-Saxons rising up and warned that “war is upon the land” and “tyrants [*sic*] blood will flow.”⁶⁶ These letters in particular have been remembered in connection with the events of the siege, in part because they fed directly into the threat assessment compiled by the marshals, which concluded that there was “the probability that Weaver will open fire on any law enforcement officer or agent or ZOG (‘Zionist Organized Government’) once they are identified.”⁶⁷ What tends to fall away in retrospective accounts is how closely this escalation tracked the events of the disco sting operation,

65 An abridged version of this letter was included in the Department of Justice’s 1994 investigation of misconduct at Ruby Ridge. The section excluded from the report is the line referencing Vicki’s fear that federal agents might search for evidence to frame the Weavers. For the report, see US Department of Justice, *Report of the Ruby Ridge Task Force to the Office of Professional Responsibility of Investigation of Allegations of Improper Governmental Conduct in the Investigation, Apprehension and Prosecution of Randall C. Weaver and Kevin L. Harris* (US Department of Justice, 1994), 30. For a longer quotation from the letter, see Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 85. Vicki’s term “Separated Name” refers to the Tetragrammaton, or the four-letter Hebrew name of God in the Hebrew Bible. Her use of this term, along with “Yah-Yashua” for Jesus, is characteristic of Christian Identity writing, which appropriates Jewish traditions and terminology within an antisemitic framework. Christian Identity adherents believe that White Anglo-Saxons are the “true Israelites” while portraying Jews as fraudulent usurpers of the covenant. The appropriation of Jewish traditions and Hebrew was prominent in the writings of Christian Identity preacher Wesley Swift. For more on the history of Christian Identity and Swift’s theology, see Ana Bochicchio, “Justification by Race: Wesley Swift’s White Supremacy and Anti-Semitic Theological Views in His Christian Identity Sermons,” *Journal of Hate Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021): 35–51.

66 This quote is from a letter by Vicki Weaver received by the US Attorney’s Office in Boise on February 7, 1991. It includes lines attributed to Robert Mathews, founder of The Order. Weaver quoted from Mathews’s white nationalist screed “Declaration of War.” For background on the letter and how federal agents involved in the Ruby Ridge investigation interpreted it, see US Department of Justice, *Ruby Ridge Task Force*, 40–44.

67 US Department of Justice, *Ruby Ridge Task Force*, 53.

as well as the Weavers' close ties to those involved in it, and Randy's real concern that, after years of being spied on by informants, he was potentially being set up for much more serious charges than a weapons violation. Watching a close friend get ensnared in a sting, and having been given an ultimatum, hardened his most paranoid fears of the federal government into certainty.

The Disco Bombing Case Goes to Trial

Meanwhile, the FBI investigation, aided by its formidable informant Rico Valentino, was developing into a promising smaller conspiracy case. Although the case was not nearly as ambitious as the Fort Smith sedition trial, it nonetheless struck directly at Aryan Nations. This time, Richard Butler was not a defendant, but he was called as a witness for the defense. Assistant US Attorney Ron Howen was assigned to the disco bombing case. Howen was fresh off winning three other Aryan Nations convictions, including one that involved another sting operation in which an undercover FBI agent posed as a hitman who was hired by Aryan Nations member Bud Cutler to murder Thomas Martinez, the primary informant responsible for bringing down The Order.⁶⁸

Because the conspirators in the disco bombing case lacked a reasonable ability to successfully assemble a bomb en route to Seattle, prosecutors faced the challenge of convincing jurors that the men's repulsive behavior and worldview still amounted to conspiracy, even without the technical means to carry out an attack. Howen reminded them of the legal standard: "In a conspiracy, you don't have to commit the actual crime, the only thing that matters is that you intended to commit the crime."⁶⁹

The government's evidence included over one hundred hours of audio recordings made by Valentino, combined with his testimony. Jurors were instructed to consider his testimony "with greater caution than that of an ordinary witness," and to "consider the extent to which it may have been influenced by the receipt of benefits and compensation from the Government." Defense attorneys played up his unreliability. They portrayed him as compromised due to financial incentives and as a professional liar: "Rico Valentino is a seducer, he's a tempter," the defense argued. "He preys upon the weak."⁷⁰

Jurors and spectators were visibly disturbed by the flood of graphic and obscene recordings played in court. One journalist remarked on the upsetting sexual undertones of the men's shared "fascist fantasies," observing that "their disturbingly vivid fantasy

68 Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 52.

69 Dell Richards, "Fascists Guilty in Bomb Conspiracy," *Dallas Voice*, October 26, 1990.

70 "Bomb Plot Blamed on FBI Informant," *Seattle Times*, October 3, 1990.

life belies an almost sexual response to violence.”⁷¹ But in his closing argument, Ron Howen urged jurors to look beyond the fantastical elements of the conspiracy and recognize its concrete danger. “This is not just some fantasy,” he said. “This is real.”⁷²

The extraordinary sums of money expended—on payments to Valentino, on the long years of investigation, on the machinery of a high-tech, multiyear effort—emerged again and again as a troubling, even scandalous, undercurrent throughout the trial. In his closing, Howen addressed jurors who might feel that the “cost here is not well spent,” urging them not to “punish the FBI for what they did by acquitting the defendants.” Instead, he pressed them to ponder “at what cost you think intervention should occur,” adding, “Mr. Valentino has received a lot of money, I’ll agree, but this is a domestic terrorism case . . . and I ask you this, what is your life worth? What is your child’s life worth?”⁷³ If the invocation of a child’s life (never mind the unlikelihood that children would have been present at the gay nightclub) did not persuade the jury that the costly undercover operation was justified, Howen reached for a familiar national tragedy: “At what stage or cost do you think Jacqueline Kennedy would have wanted the FBI to intervene if they could with Lee Harvey Oswald?”⁷⁴ Howen’s neat piece of counterfactual history framed the costs of “waiting” in Dallas as an argument for preemption in the present. In addition to weighing the details of a bombing that had yet to occur, the jury was being asked to consider whether it was the government’s obligation to anticipate, even coax, violence as a matter of national security.

The jury accepted that argument. All three men involved were found guilty of conspiracy, including Procter James Baker, the man who had successfully detonated a bomb in the woods yet was absent for the trip. The defendants’ lawyers’ argument that the case amounted to government entrapment, and that the neo-Nazis’ rhetoric of murdering and maiming people was “[m]erely violent, locker-room macho-fantasy talk,” did not convince the all-white, majority-women jury.⁷⁵ The three men were convicted of conspiracy, racketeering, and illegal weapons violations. The longest sentence carried twenty-five years in prison.

After the verdict, Assistant US Attorney Ron Howen explained why the government won: “We were here because of what they did, not what they talked about. They were

71 Dell Richards, “Seattle Bomb Conspiracy Trial Exposes Fascist Fantasies,” *Mom Guess What News* (Sacramento, CA), November 15, 1990.

72 “Three Supremacists Convicted of Plotting to Bomb Gay Disco,” *Associated Press*, October 19, 1990.

73 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 11, October 17–18, 1990, pp. 2393–94, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

74 Jury Trial Transcript, vol. 11, October 17–18, 1990, p. 2394, *United States v. Winslow*, NARA Seattle.

75 Dell Richards, “White Supremacists Guilty in Plot to Bomb Gay Disco,” *Bay Area (CA) Reporter*, October 25, 1990.

constructing a device for the purpose of killing, wounding and maiming people.”⁷⁶ This strategy of framing potential crimes as conspiracies in service of white nationalist goals made ideology, documented through long-term infiltration, both relevant and persuasive in securing convictions. Howen was building an impressive career prosecuting neo-Nazis through this formula.⁷⁷ Hatching and catching conspiracies in progress, and then recording federal police thwarting those attacks in real time, not only improved costly and unpredictable detective work but also gave the state more leeway to shape the reception of security threats. And close collaboration between federal prosecutors and law enforcement created a more reliable formula for preempting crimes and building winnable cases, even as it still depended on the inherent instability of paid informants or flipped movement members.

The following year, the defendants appealed but were denied. The appellate judge concluded:

The facts of the present case do not support a claim of outrageous government conduct. At the time Valentino first targeted the appellants for investigation, both Winslow and Nelson had already expressed interest in blowing up establishments frequented by homosexuals. Valentino’s acts of supplying Winslow with beer and food, and paying for the trip to Seattle and the bomb components, did not constitute outrageous government conduct.⁷⁸

Even though the conspiracy unfolded almost entirely under Valentino’s orchestration, the sheer volume of racist, homophobic recordings and the men’s ties to the Aryan Nations (the center of a white nationalist movement that had perpetrated crimes in recent memory) left little doubt about their intent. This kind of evidence, however, was possible only through years of infiltration and surveillance. Unlike the costly failure of the Fort Smith sedition trial, small-scale conspiracy trials like this one could be better controlled; elaborate preemptive stings and collaboration between federal investigators and prosecutors could yield predictable results. After federal prosecutor Ron Howen won this fourth high-profile victory against the Aryan Nations, he mounted the unexploded pipe, retained as evidence from the trial, in a case above his desk. Purchased in haste on the road to Seattle, it had no drilled hole or fuse and was as useful as a gun without a trigger.

76 “3 White Supremacists Are Convicted in Plot,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1990.

77 Background on Ron Howen’s career and the analysis of his strategy of winning convictions against white nationalist groups comes from Jess Walter’s *Every Knee Shall Bow*. Walter was a member of the *Spokesman Review* investigative team that was a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Ruby Ridge conflict.

78 Winslow, 962 F.2d at 845.

Impact of the Discotheque Sting on the Weavers

By December 1990, while Steve Nelson, Robert Winslow, and Procter James Baker awaited their sentencing hearing, Randy Weaver had been indicted for manufacturing illegal weapons. On January 17, 1991, the ATF, knowing that Weaver might be hostile, escalated tactics to secure his arrest through a ruse. Two ATF agents posed as a husband and wife needing assistance with a broken-down camper on the road leading to the Weaver cabin. When the Weavers stopped to help, Randy and Vicki were handcuffed. Randy Weaver was taken into custody. After posting the family cabin as bond, Weaver retreated up the mountain, ignored his court date, and did not return for sixteen months, reemerging only after the culmination of the deadly firefight and siege that claimed the lives of Vicki Weaver, their son, and a federal marshal.⁷⁹

The results of the disco sting trial further convinced the Weavers that fighting the gun charges in court would be fruitless. Everett Hofmeister, an attorney for the Aryan Nations who had won Richard Butler's sedition trial but had just lost the disco-sting case for Weaver family friend P. J. Baker, had previously represented the Weavers in lawsuits regarding a land dispute with their neighbors. Hofmeister tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the Weavers to fight the federal charges in court. Increasingly distrustful of former acquaintances, the Weavers became convinced that anyone could be an informant and stopped accepting visits from their lawyer and from other friends.⁸⁰

In one of the last letters Vicki Weaver wrote while holed up in the Ruby Ridge cabin, she cited the arrest of P. J. Baker—who by 1992 had already been released from prison (his two co-conspirators remained incarcerated, serving much longer sentences)—as a primary reason the couple believed it was better for Randy to remain a fugitive than to surrender to federal marshals. She wrote to a friend about her fears of being arrested and her children being sent to foster care. Citing Baker's arrest and his poor experience in prison, she wrote:

Remember my friend whose husband was framed? . . . He spent two years in prison. He got home last December half a man. He physically doesn't look well and half his memory is gone. They gave him a drug to destroy his mind and told him it was heart medication. He called my friend, his wife, three times in one day and couldn't remember talking to her. She asked him if he was taking any medication and if so the name of it. He gave her the name and she went to a druggist and asked what it was used for. It destroys the mind (memory) and what's gone will never come back!!⁸¹

79 As pointed out above, Valentino believed he played a decisive role in the Ruby Ridge affair (see note 10).

80 Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 99–100.

81 Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, 82.

While the disco bombing case, led by the work of Assistant US Attorney Ron Howen, had artfully leveraged the chaotic adventurism and improvised solutions of an informant to modify the sting into an orderly conviction, the Ruby Ridge standoff soon showed that not all chaos could be so neatly managed. Sixteen months after Weaver was declared a fugitive, federal marshals, while scouting a route to conduct a SWAT-style raid of the Weaver home, botched the operation. The marshals attracted the attention of the family dog. The marshals shot the dog and ignited a firefight between marshals and Randy, his fourteen-year-old son Sam, and family friend Kevin Harris. Marshal William Degan and Sam Weaver were both killed in the first exchange of fire. This deadly clash resulted in a major escalation in the government response, with the FBI, including its special paramilitary Hostage Rescue Team, taking over the case and initiating a highly publicized eleven-day standoff.

During the standoff, Ron Howen was stationed at a makeshift command post set up in a mountain meadow less than a mile from the Weaver home. There, several hundred FBI agents, along with US marshals and local police armed with National Guard armory weapons, established a base camp. The young prosecutor dispensed legal advice while FBI SWAT teams were issued and reissued shifting rules of engagement, improvising increasingly forceful tactics amid interagency miscommunication and breakdowns in coordination. Down the mountain, Rico Valentino, who had vanished from Idaho after the bust and trial, resurfaced, attempting to mingle among the skinhead and white nationalist protestors and spectators gathered at the barricaded road leading to the Weaver cabin.⁸² Both the professional informant and the burgeoning star prosecutor could do little but watch as the machinery of state power and paramilitarized policing lurched into motion.

On the second day of the standoff, FBI snipers shot and critically injured Kevin Harris and Randy Weaver as the men went to the shed where the Weavers had placed the body of their teenage son, Sammy. Vicki Weaver, holding her infant daughter and standing at the front steps of the house to let the two injured men inside, was struck by a sniper amid a hail of bullets and died where she fell.

Conclusion

Counterterrorism sting operations like the Valentino case, which involve potential crimes defendants were unable to commit (e.g., bombing a gay bar without a bomb), or manufactured terrorism scenarios that are controlled, documented, and executed with the help of an informant, are played out long enough to be incriminating before being disrupted. Theoretically, these setups aim to eliminate dangerous individuals who may not have devised the conspiracy on their own but prove themselves capable of destructive violence during the act. If left to their own devices, these individuals might

82 The detail that Rico Valentino was spotted at the Ruby Ridge barricade with men suspected to be undercover cops comes from Alan Block, *Ambush at Ruby Ridge: How Government Agents Set Randy Weaver Up and Took His Family Down* (Dickens Press, 1995), 79–80.

ultimately cause tragedy. This reasoning relies on the potential for future crimes and the endless possibilities of such tragedies unfolding.

The ethics and efficacy of undercover stings that use deception and encourage violence where there may have been no real conspiracy are debatable.⁸³ These stings are weighed against the potential violence they might prevent. Waiting to move in for an arrest once a crime has been committed (e.g., a bomb has been assembled with the intention to use it) is an obviously risky game to play. Even still, sting operations have the advantage of anticipating a crime before it happens, allowing for bureaucratic planning and logistics for its disruption to be worked out. Ultimately, this makes crime manageable and, perhaps, even productive. Sting operations not only allow law enforcement to anticipate, manage, and crack down on perceived security threats; they also enable law enforcement to shape public perception of these threats and their solutions. This creates a feedback loop where the security state not only identifies and responds to public threats but also positions itself as the remedy.

These experimental techniques of proactive policing and conspiracy prosecutions, examined here through the Valentino case, provided a proven strategy to win convictions and a template for subsequent counterterrorism practices. Central to this trajectory was the creation of new counterterror legal strategies, including the material support statute, first codified in 1994, then expanded in the 1996 crime bill in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing—the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in US history. The federal response to Oklahoma City became a cornerstone of post-9/11 federal terrorism prosecutions.⁸⁴ I assert that the kind of counterterrorism examined here, which serves to manufacture in real and imagined terms the threat it seeks to counter, forged a pattern of state action that bears striking similarities to the efforts undertaken by the federal government against suspected Islamists after 9/11.⁸⁵

83 J. M. Berger, “Does the F.B.I. Have an Informant Problem?,” *Foreign Policy*, September 7, 2012.

84 Floyd Ray Looker, leader of the far-right Mountaineer Militia mentioned in note 28, was the first person charged and convicted under this new material support law. This conviction was the result of a preemptive sting for which Looker and a fellow militia member were convicted of selling blueprints of the National Fingerprint Records Center for \$50,000 to an informant posing as a member of an “Islamist” terrorist organization. This material support statute would later become a cornerstone of post-9/11 federal terrorism prosecutions. More than four hundred individuals faced material support charges from 2001 to 2020, compared to just six total charges before 9/11. See Trevor Aaronson, “Homegrown Material Support: The Domestic Terrorism Law the Justice Department Forgot,” *The Intercept*, March 23, 2019.

85 For investigative coverage of contemporary preemptive counterterrorism measures, including orchestrated sting operations and informant-driven counterintelligence, see Trevor Aaronson and Paul Abowd, “FBI Terrorism Stings: Two Decades of National Security Theater,” *The Intercept*, September 11, 2021. For the FBI’s use of such tactics in the alleged plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, see Trevor Aaronson and Eric L. VanDussen, “The FBI’s Double Agent: The Informant at the Heart of the Gretchen Whitmer Kidnapping Plot Was a Liability. So Federal Agents Shut Him Up,” *The Intercept*, March 6, 2024. For similar methods used against the Black Lives Matter movement, see Trevor Aaronson, “The Snitch in the Silver Hearse: The FBI Paid a Violent Felon to Infiltrate Denver’s Racial Justice

The Rico Valentino incident illustrates the double-edged nature of institutionalizing informant-led counterintelligence. Informants granted investigators significant latitude to orchestrate sting operations, even in the absence of imminent criminal activity, effectively allowing agencies to circumvent stricter investigative rules introduced with the Levi Guidelines in 1976 and reinforced in the wake of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) controversy in 1989.⁸⁶ Yet the reliance on informants like Rico Valentino, who often operated with limited oversight, also introduced unpredictability and disorder into investigations. Still, there was nothing inevitable about the disastrous outcome at Ruby Ridge. And despite the self-importance reflected in Rico Valentino's narration of events, he was hardly solely responsible for the actions and reactions of the multiple federal agencies involved or for the Weaver family's responses. In the years preceding the standoff, and in the days it unfolded, both federal law enforcement and the Weaver family could have made choices that might have led to less violent outcomes. Valentino's involvement in the undercover operation—and particularly his recklessness in exposing another undercover informant—nonetheless contributed to the immediate and volatile circumstances in which ATF agents hastily attempted to flip Randy Weaver. It also made the Weavers deeply suspicious of cooperating, fearing that a misdemeanor gun charge might be folded into a broader terrorism conspiracy case, as had happened to their close friend Procter James Baker, who had become ensnared in the disco sting. Ultimately, writing Rico Valentino back into the Ruby Ridge story allows us to place that episode within a broader historical trend of shifting counterterrorism tactics and the rise of preemptive policing throughout the decade of the 1990s, in which strategies of preemption and forms of security theater were applied to the far right as a way to crack down on political violence.

Movement," *The Intercept*, February 7, 2023. On the Obama-era controversy surrounding a Department of Homeland Security report on right-wing extremism that was suppressed after right-wing political pressure, see Aaron Mehta, "DHS Report in 2009 Warned of 'Lone Wolf' Attacks," *Center for Public Integrity*, January 10, 2011. For recent coverage of the second Trump administration's removal of a Biden-era Justice Department study on far-right violence, see Joseph Gedeon, "U.S. Justice Department Removes Study Finding Far-Right Extremists Commit 'Far More' Violence," *Guardian*, September 17, 2025.

86 The Levi Guidelines, issued by the US attorney general after the 1976 Church Committee hearings, established protocols governing FBI intelligence and counterintelligence activities, including wiretapping, informants, and undercover operations. The guidelines have since been revised, often in response to scandals involving informants, including the FBI's groundless investigation of CISPES (a group opposing the Reagan administration's wars in Central America) based on faulty intelligence provided by an unreliable long-term informant. For an overview of these evolving guidelines, see US Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General, *The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Compliance with the Attorney General's Investigative Guidelines*, Special Report, September 2005, <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/federal-bureau-investigations-compliance-attorney-generals-investigative-guidelines>; US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *The FBI and CISPES*, report with additional views, 101st Cong., 1st sess., July 1989 (Government Printing Office, 1989).