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# JR. JOURNAL OF RIGHT-WING STUDIES

A PROJECT OF UC BERKELEY'S  
**Center for Right-Wing Studies**

SPECIAL ISSUE: THE FAR RIGHT IN US  
HISTORY (PART 2)

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# THE JOURNAL OF RIGHT-WING STUDIES

A PROJECT OF UC BERKELEY'S CENTER FOR RIGHT-WING STUDIES

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# C O N T E N T S

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Special Issue: The Far Right in US History (Part 2)

Guest Editors: Olivier Burtin and Kathryn Olmsted

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*Una grande Libia*: Italy joined World War I ten months after the war began. The deadlock of trench warfare was established, yet the thinking was that Italy's war would be quick and manageable—just a bigger version of Italy's successful 1912 war in Libya. Three and a half years later, WWI ended with about 700,000 Italian war dead and the conditions in place for the rise of Fascism.

The “quick war” is a recurring delusion. Today, two pillars of the nationalist international, Russia and the US, in Ukraine and Iran respectively, have succumbed to it, each convinced that vast superiority in numbers and arms made for a cakewalk, and despite having in living memory both countries' experiences in Afghanistan and the US's experiences in Vietnam and Iraq.

Attacking Iran, Donald Trump brought his old habits to bear. Trump was asked in a 1990 interview: “Is there a master plan to your deal making or is it all improvisational?” His reply: “It's much more improvisational than people might think.” Inadequate attention was paid to strategy, logistics, munitions stockpiles, and Iranian counterstrategy. Instead there was Trump's faith that “it always works out.” Six months in, with alternating bellicose announcements, declarations of victory, and threats of annihilation, Trump soothes himself mounting gold appliqués in the White House and planning a ballroom and other monuments to himself. His Defense Department seems preoccupied with commissioning World War II-era battleships, purging the officer corps, and eradicating “woke” and “low T.”

War in Iran joined with Trump's ongoing economic wars. His campaign documents back in 2016 already declared that economic war existed between the US and China. Now, Trump has taken to slapping on unconstitutional tariffs as both a quack cure-all for the domestic economy and as the weapon of choice in foreign affairs. Here too, consideration of adversaries' economic weapons and counterstrategies was inadequate: China's withholding rare earth minerals parallels Iran's blocking the Strait of Hormuz. Recently, Trump announced a new strategy of economic warfare against Iran—with his stock bellicosity he called for an “economic D-Day.” Along the way, in much the same manner as he has gutted the domestic administrative state, Trump has trampled the international free-trade order that arose after World War II. On September 4, 2026, the UN passed a resolution to correct the Mercator projection, enlarging Africa to proper size on maps. Seeing this as a woke resolution, the US was the only country opposed. The vote was 164 to 1. This, readers, is serious international isolation.

Donald Trump is the highest-ranking far-right public official in US history. And his MAGA movement may be the most successful populist mobilization on the right since the Civil War. But both he and his movement do not come from nowhere. It may be more important than ever to understand the legacy of the earlier movements and values out of which Trumpism emerged. This is the second of two issues of *JRWS* devoted to the history of the far right in the United States, guest edited by Olivier Burtin and Kathryn Olmsted, and we feel it could not be more urgent.

Lawrence Rosenthal  
September 7, 2026

## ARTICLE

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## Violence at Peekskill!

### *Paul Robeson, Anti-Communism, and Populist Fascism Among Veterans*

DENISE LYNN

University of Southern Indiana

**Abstract:** *In 1949, two riots rocked Paul Robeson concerts in Peekskill, New York. The riots were provoked by local veterans' organizations and were not anomalous, as the American Legion and other groups intentionally targeted Robeson and his public appearances. Though scholars have examined the Peekskill riots and their relationship to Paul Robeson's increased radicalism and his declining popularity, this article centers veterans' organizing against Robeson as intentional, and the violence as unexceptional. Cold War anti-communism empowered veterans' organizations to engage in what I call populist fascism—grassroots organizing against progressives and radicals that restrained citizens' rights, especially those of Black citizens, and sometimes erupted in violence. As the Peekskill riots show, law enforcement and the criminal legal system did little to prevent violence against the Robeson concerts, and the rioters faced fewer punitive consequences than alleged communists. Robeson was targeted because of anti-Black and anti-communist hysteria. The violence at the Peekskill concerts was not spontaneous protest but part of a larger conspiracy to restrain Robeson's political radicalism and contain progressive gains. Anti-communism enabled popular political expression that likened progressive anti-racism to treason and encouraged populist fascism among those who felt empowered to set the terms of Americanism, defined as defense of free enterprise and the "American way of life."*

**Keywords:** Paul Robeson, anti-communism, veterans, American Legion, fascism, Veterans of Foreign Wars

In December 1949, three months after two riots rocked Paul Robeson concerts in Peekskill, New York, the Civil Rights Congress filed a lawsuit against Peekskill police and veterans' organizations. The lawsuit alleged that the veterans and police violated the civil rights of Robeson and the people who attended the concerts. Robeson, author Howard Fast, and twenty-five other attendees were suing for \$2 million in damages for "personal injuries, property damage and deprivation of civil rights." Named in the lawsuit were the Peekskill district attorney, assistant district attorney, mayor, sheriff, and state police officials; the local commanders of the American Legion, Catholic War Veterans (CWV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Jewish War Veterans (JWV); and the

chairmen of both the Veterans Joint Council (VJC) and Associated Veterans Council (AVC), two local umbrella organizations that incorporated different veterans' groups. Attorneys alleged that the riots, organized by veterans and abetted by law enforcement, violated the plaintiffs' Fourteenth Amendment rights and the Civil Rights Acts of 1870 and 1871.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have argued that the heightened "national atmosphere" caused by anti-communism during the Cold War fed into the 1949 riot. But vigilante violence and harassment against radicals and leftists by veterans' organizations predates this time. Veterans' groups have operated as political gatekeepers for as long as they have existed and have engaged in violence against their fellow Americans to police political boundaries according to their own ideas of patriotism, ideas that were in line with European fascism and US racism and xenophobia.<sup>2</sup>

The American Legion and other veterans' groups, in collaboration with law enforcement, used violence against their fellow Americans to defend the Cold War consensus and punish Black radical activism. These organizations deliberately targeted Paul Robeson and his concerts. Though the Peekskill incidents are the most famous, the Legion along with other veterans identified Robeson as a subversive threat and encouraged members to prevent and protest all his public appearances. The violence at the Peekskill concerts was not spontaneous protests but part of a larger conspiracy and an enactment of populist fascism to restrain Robeson's political radicalism and contain progressive gains under the guise of anti-communism.

Cold War anti-communism enabled anti-radical organizing and vilified progressive leaders like Robeson as communist threats. Robeson, who is not known to have joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), was nonetheless a fellow traveler, an anti-imperialist, and an advocate of socialism. More concerning for anti-communists, he openly admired the Soviet Union, traveled there, left his son to be educated there, and advocated its alternative economic structure. Though scholars have examined the Peekskill riots and their relationship to Paul Robeson's increased radicalism and his declining popularity, this article instead centers veterans' organizing against Robeson as intentional, and the violence as unexceptional. Cold War anti-communism empowered veterans' organizations to engage in a popular politics that can be described as populist fascism because it aimed to restrain their fellow citizens' rights, especially those of Black citizens, and because it sometimes erupted into violence. As the Peekskill riots show, law enforcement and the criminal legal system did little to prevent the violence against the Robeson concerts, and the rioters faced fewer punitive

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1 "Robeson Group Asks 2 Million Riot Damages," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 16, 1949, MG 170, Paul Robeson Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York [hereafter SCRBC].

2 Scott Martelle, *The Fear Within: Spies, Commies, and American Democracy on Trial* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 132–35.

consequences than alleged communists. Robeson was targeted because of anti-Black and anti-communist hysteria aimed at restraining progressive organizing.<sup>3</sup> I argue that a fascist style of US anti-communism survived fascism's defeat in Europe in 1945, and that this anti-communism enabled popular political expression that likened progressive anti-racism to treason and encouraged populist fascism among those, including veterans' groups, who felt empowered to set the terms of Americanism. The Peekskill riots were not a unique chapter in vigilante violence against progressives and especially against a Black advocate for civil rights; rather, such violence is a throughline in the long history of veterans' organizations attacking social justice advocates, and it exemplifies a longer history of populist fascism in the United States.

### Anti-Communism and Fascism

Joseph Fronczak has examined how scholars in France in the 1980s began exploring fascism not simply as state ideology but as a "form of political behavior, predominately a form of popular politics." Though fascism is most often identified with formal parties governing nation-states, Fronczak instead describes how citizens participate in the state's disciplinary mechanisms by surveilling radicals and penetrating radical organizations. They engage in censorship and violence, often with law enforcement blessing or participation, to prevent radical organizing and uphold corporate power.<sup>4</sup>

Fronczak's study specifically explores the conservative right wing in the Depression-era US as engaging with "transnational intellectual currents that coursed through the global Right." He challenges studies of fascism that look to whether it was "an accomplished fact in a given nation" and instead looks at how there was a "transnational transmission of political ideas" among grassroots organizations in the 1930s. He identifies important commonalities in the global right, including engaging in "popular politics" against leftists, which sometimes devolved into violence.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Robeson was accused of being a "secret" Communist Party member, and the FBI was certain he was part of the CPUSA, claiming that he used the name "John Thomas." Because anti-communists and the FBI are the main source of any evidence that Robeson was a party member, we cannot assume that he was. Robeson usually refused to confirm or deny it, because, as Gerald Horne has argued, he tried to cover for his embattled communist comrades who did not have his public standing. In his memoirs, Robeson denied being a communist. See *Here I Stand* (Beason Press, 1988), 37–39. More importantly, anti-communists understood his anti-racism and anti-imperialism as subversive, and this led to marginalization and legal harassment during his lifetime, and to his erasure from popular histories of the Black freedom struggle even today. Undue emphasis on his alleged Communist Party membership remains a distraction. Gerald Horne, *Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary* (Pluto Press, 2016), 113, 127.

4 Joseph Fronczak, "The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (December 2018): 563, 565, 578, 585.

5 Fronczak, "Fascist Game," 564.

Federico Finchelstein has explored the differences and commonalities between populism and fascism. Primarily, he argues that they are transnational and not bound by borders, nor are they a phenomenon of the Global North. Twenty-first century populism, he argues, was “born out of fascism” and came from the “defeat of fascism” after World War II. By the end of the war, “populism had come to represent a continuation of fascism,” but it assimilated some democratic features, and according to Finchelstein, renounced some of the violence that had led to genocide. The post-Holocaust generation abhorred the excesses of Nazism, though not its anti-radicalism and authoritarianism. Populism had become a more democratic alternative that those with fascist sympathies could frame as an electorally viable choice, thus as something that appeared democratic.<sup>6</sup>

This article shows that what I call populist fascism—the grassroots organization against progressives and radicals that sometimes manifested in vigilante violence—did not disappear in 1945. Cold War anti-communism justified ongoing attacks against constitutional rights, legal efforts to discipline radicals and progressives, and among veterans’ organizations, the use of violence. Importantly, these vigilantes were servants of corporate power and often collaborated with business; anti-communism legitimized their (sometimes) extralegal actions. And as Finchelstein has shown, right-wing populism could mask deeds as democratic by linking radicalism to treason, and capitalism to democracy.

Progressives and radicals identified US anti-communism as an American form of fascism as it circumscribed their civil rights, expanded the surveillance state, selectively enforced constitutional rights, bolstered capitalist power, and silenced criticism of the national security state. Scholars do not agree on how long anti-labor activism has undergirded US politics, but many agree that it is pervasive, omnipresent, and unbounded by what has traditionally been labeled red scares. Anti-communism is rooted in the US’s xenophobic and racist past. Nick Fischer argues that precursors of twentieth-century anti-communism can be dated to the Reconstruction period, when anti-labor politics became a tool to police a disobedient underclass of free Blacks and working people, including recent immigrants. For Fischer, anti-communism and its antecedents justified “long-standing practices of labor exploitation and suppression of labor organizing” by blaming “foreign ideas and people.” Forcing people to labor in “intolerable conditions or for intolerable terms” was an idea that “survived slavery” and became a feature of American working life. Anti-communism has been deployed by government in collaboration with corporate interests and citizen groups, like veterans’ organizations. These organizations insisted that they could define appropriate citizenship and patriotism and punish radical leftists, especially Black radicals. For veterans’ organizations, democracy was identified with capitalism, and alternative

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6 Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (University of California Press, 2017), xxxiii–xxxiv.

economic and labor structures were treasonous. Among these alternative economic structures was racial equality and integration.<sup>7</sup>

Charisse Burden-Stelly describes anti-communism's "durable mode of governance," which operated alongside anti-Blackness to circumscribe radical demands for social justice, link them to a "foreign" conspiratorial apparatus, and prevent the advancement of equality. Burden-Stelly argues that anti-communists believed they were committed to "True Americanism," dismissing those who rejected it as un-American. This True Americanism made democracy "reduced to and conflated with the 'American Way of Life,'" and "inextricable from free enterprise." Capitalism and corporate power became synonymous with Americanism and democracy, and those in the Black freedom struggle and labor movement who criticized capitalism were constructed as un-American. This politics "normalized" reactionary and regressive legislation, as well as "illiberal actions and practices of intolerance." Anti-communism centered anti-Blackness, which targeted Black Americans as foreigners disruptive of the body politic.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars have shown that the US was not a neutral observer of the rise of European fascist states; rather, its history of slavery, segregation, and genocide proved to be inspirational. The US role in the allied victory in World War II has served to blind Americans to fascist elements in the US and to commonalities between the US and the Axis powers. The word *fascism* was coined by Mussolini's Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party) in the early 1920s, but, as Olivier Burtin argues, the politics it "describes could be found as early as mid-nineteenth century in the United States." Robert Paxton has defined fascism as a grievance politics obsessed with the notion of national decline engineered by others. This politics undergirds a unity among "nationalist militants" and "traditional elites," who are willing to abandon "democratic liberties" to pursue "redemptive violence . . . without ethical or legal restraints." Other scholars have expanded on this definition to describe fascism's preoccupation with and targeting of radical left politics. Erik McDuffie identifies several characteristics of fascism that include anti-communism and "hypernationalism." This hypernationalism pivots on the belief in a "fictive ideal past" to which the aggrieved group wants to return, ostensibly a time when people of color and women knew their proper roles at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. Fascists have no respect for human rights and are devoted to xenophobia and militarism. They launch attacks on media, invoke religion, provide unqualified support for "corporate power" against working people, and

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7 Nick Fischer, *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 1–2.

8 Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare / Red Scare: Theorizing Capitalist Racism in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 149, 165, 226–27.

demonstrate an “obsession” with law and order while excusing their own or their ally’s extralegal activity.<sup>9</sup>

Fascists also claim to speak for the people and, as Finchelstein has explored, have operated in tandem with populist politics. The Nazi’s used populist rhetoric to claim they were of the people, but they also rejected politics that expanded the rights and privileges of the people. This included “social democracy[,] . . . class-oriented collective organization[,] . . . redistributive, welfarism and socially egalitarian cultural improvement.” German fascists, like those in the US, were invested in anti-communism and were guilty of “recklessly conflating” all those in support of representative government as “*anti-nation*.”<sup>10</sup> In the US, that became “un-American.”

Scholars should also take seriously the accusations of those targeted during the Cold War, who often understood their antagonists as fascist. As Fronczak has argued, “antifascist sources are especially illuminating for the study of fascism” because scholars can see “the extent to which the understanding of fascism as practice surpassed views of fascism as an identity and fascism as an ideology.”<sup>11</sup> Before and after World War II, Black radicals recognized their own experience in the United States as similar to the treatment of racial and national minorities in fascist states. Those who had experienced imperialism and colonialism did not view fascist terror as unique or new. As Sarah Dunstan has shown, Black diasporic intellectuals ascribed Nazi brutality and genocide not to a “particular peculiarity of Germany’s Third Reich” but to a “flaw at the heart of Western Civilization.” Important thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois had long described European colonialism and US racism as fascist. He viewed the Nazi holocaust as not anomalous but part of the “fault lines” of Western liberal democracies.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have argued that the experience of people of color needs to be understood as what Alberto Toscano has called “racial fascism.” For Toscano, the Black radical critique of right-wing authoritarianism offers a crucial resource for considering the question of US fascism.

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9 Olivier Burtin, “State of the Field: Fascism Has an American History, Too,” *Reviews in American History* 49, no. 3 (2021): 495–96; Erik McDuffie, “For a New Anti-Fascist, Anti-Imperialist People’s Coalition: Claudia Jones, Black Left Feminism, and the Politics of Possibility in the Era of Trump,” in *Post-Cold War Revelations and the American Communist Party*, ed. Vernon L. Pedersen, James G. Ryan, and Katherine A. S. Sibley (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 196–97. Adolf Hitler and other Nazis officials took inspiration from the US model, especially its xenophobic legislation and eugenics movement. Hitler also admired the genocide of indigenous people. See James Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

10 Geoff Eley, “Conservatives—Radical Nationalists—Fascists: Calling the People into Politics, 1890–1930” in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, ed. John Abromeit, Briget Maria Chesterton, Gary Marotta, and York Norman (Bloomsbury, 2016), 19 (original italics).

11 Fronczak, “Fascist Game,” 579.

12 Sarah Dunstan, *Race, Rights, and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 190–91.

And thus it should not be dismissed as hyperbole when the harassed and harangued activists identified as fascist those whose mission was to silence them.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, anti-communism was a continuation of fascism: Robeson and his colleagues were stalked by government agents as well as fellow citizens, faced legal harassment, and in Robeson's case, suffered violent assault from veterans' organizations.

### American Fascism

Burtin argues that we need to consider the Ku Klux Klan as a manifestation of fascism, and that doing so "suggests a new chronology" of fascist history that does not begin with Mussolini. After Reconstruction, white supremacist vigilantes emerged to contain Black citizenship rights and prevent economic advancement. Scholars have shown that anti-radicalism emerged simultaneously, thus the histories of popular anti-Black and anti-labor violence should be explored as related phenomena. Doing so suggests a throughline linking popular politics, anti-communism, and fascism. Burtin argues this is when US fascism burst onto the political stage: "[W]hite supremacist militias . . . helped [to] overthrow Reconstruction," and they used vigilante violence to police their fellow Americans.<sup>14</sup> Two historiographic traditions, one on fascism in the US and the other on anti-communism, show that these emerged simultaneously to suppress progressive gains.

The second emergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) after 1915 was invested in setting the "meaning of Americanism and un-Americanism," and the Klan believed that it "represented the finest tradition of Americanism." Though the Klan of the early twentieth century became mainstream in many places, it still engaged in vigilante violence, and much of it targeted social justice organizing. Michael Cohen has shown that the KKK targeted the interracial International Workers of the World (IWW), known as Wobblies, because it advocated anti-racism and challenged capitalism. The Klan was not simply a racist organization: It used vigilante violence to suppress worker's organization. Cohen argues that the KKK along with the American Legion engaged in extralegal violence but still "earned a measure of state legitimacy by participating in nationally orchestrated antiradical purges." He also observes that "America's disciplinary regime," since the end of the Civil War, "comprised a decentralized and hybrid system of private security firms, vigilantism, and state policing institutions."<sup>15</sup>

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13 Alberto Toscano, "Incipient Fascism: Black Radical Perspectives," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4015>

14 Burtin, "State of the Field," 496–97.

15 George Lewis, "An Amorphous Code: The Ku Klux Klan and Un-Americanism, 1915–1965," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 4 (2013): 972; Michael Cohen, "'The Ku Klux Government': Vigilantism, Lynching, and the Repression of the IWW," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (2006): 32.

After World War I, some within the KKK rebranded themselves as fascist. During the 1930s, Klan members worked with fascist organizations in the United States. As George Lewis has shown, there were some in the Klan who were eager to work with fascists, and there had been at one point an effort to work with the American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization. Though not all Klansmen agreed with this partnership as it centered a pro-German attitude, many Klansmen saw an affinity with the group, and they continued to emphasize their own right to define Americanism. As Lewis has shown, the Klan would spend decades claiming that it was a paragon of Americanism, and anything linked to social justice was “un-American.”<sup>16</sup>

The KKK was a significant vigilante organization during the post-World War I years, but Cohen argues that it was the American Legion that became the “most significant vigilante organization to emerge after the armistice.” Created by World War I veterans, the Legion entered the debate over how to define Americanism, and as Black radicals in the IWW observed, it was the “physical arm of capital, organized to beat up and destroy the labor movement.” This kind of “terrorism of the workers,” one IWW activist observed in 1920, “is the normal condition.” Cohen argues that Black intellectuals in the 1920s “came closer than any other political thinkers . . . to formulating a theory of what would, by [Mussolini’s rise to power in] 1922, be clearly labeled fascism.” Alec Campbell has shown that the Legion was not a spontaneous organization: Its founders came from the pre-World War I preparedness movement and at its founding expected “to take part in conflicts over class and between classes.” It was not, therefore, an apolitical organization but a group devoted to being a “bulwark against an increasingly organized and radical working class.” And it “succeeded beyond their wildest dreams,” becoming “the leading anti-radical organization in the United States.”<sup>17</sup>

In one of its earliest and most significant actions, the American Legion in Centralia, Washington, planned and participated in a violent attack against an IWW Hall in 1919 as a “practical exercise in patriotism.” Legion members participated in a violent gunfight at the Wobblies meeting hall, ran down and beat World War I veteran and Wobbly Wesley Everest, and then the next day lynched him. All this was done alongside law enforcement, and while Legionnaires were killed during the assault, the American Legion had begun the violence. It was the third time they had raided the hall.<sup>18</sup>

Veterans’ organizations were early admirers of European fascists. Richard Steigmann-Gall has demonstrated this link in the life of Alvin Owsley, the national commander of the American Legion between 1922 and 1923. Owsley identified “Soviets, anarchists, I.W.W.s, revolutionary socialists and ‘red[s],’” as a danger to the US. Steigmann-Gall noted his admiration for Italian fascists in their suppression of radicals, and Owsley

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16 Lewis, “Amorphous Code,” 980.

17 Cohen, “Ku Klux Government,” 46–47; Alec Campbell, “The Sociopolitical Origins of the American Legion,” *Theory and Society* 39, no. 1 (2010): 1, 22.

18 Cohen, “Ku Klux Government,” 46–47.

was quoted as saying “that the Fascisti are to Italy what the American Legion are to the United States.” He admired Mussolini and invited him to speak at the Legion’s 1922 convention. This was not isolated—the Legion extended invitations to Mussolini to speak well into the 1930s. In 1931, the Legion passed a resolution of support for Mussolini and, in 1935, Mussolini was made an honorary member of the group.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the claim of veterans’ groups to preserve US democracy and liberty, their goal was to enforce a racially specific citizenry obedient to the capitalist political order, and they tolerated no dissent. To do so, some pursued fascist revolution. Smedley Butler, a retired Marines Corps general, revealed to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that in 1934 he had been approached by a Wall Street broker to lead a revolutionary force to overthrow Franklin Roosevelt’s government and usher in a fascist dictatorship. The uprising would be funded by Wall Street interests, and Butler was presented with \$18,000 to “take care of his expenses.” The VFW national commander James Van Zandt and the American Legion national commander Frank Belgrano were both planned participants. The conspirators were never punished. In fact, HUAC, under the direction of Congressman Martin Dies, had borrowed its understanding of “Un-Americanism” from the American Legion, the VFW, and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). The American Legion had formally requested the government create such a committee to investigate “Un-American” activities.<sup>20</sup>

In 1938, educator and former Legionnaire William Gellerman warned that the group was “Fascist and unpatriotic” and that it engaged in reactionary politics at the behest of the “privileged classes.” He wrote that the Legion was wholly devoted to the maintenance and preservation of capitalism and that it brooked no criticism of that system. The Legion had from its beginning invested in creating its own narrative of World War I and of US history more generally, producing a US history textbook in 1926. George Lewis has shown that the Legion wanted to control how US history was being taught in public schools, with “its own favored definition of Americanism.”<sup>21</sup> The Legion dismissed Gellerman’s criticisms as an “obvious libel” coming from a “communist brain-child” and an “incubator of communism.” Well into the 1950s, the American Legion magazine featured stories about how educators were brainwashing

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19 Richard Steigmann-Gall, “Star Spangled Fascism: American Interwar Political Extremism in Comparative Perspective,” *Social History* 42, no. 1 (2017): 94–95; Cohn, “Ku Klux Government,” 46.

20 Fronczak, “Fascist Game,” 564–65; “Gen. Butler Bares ‘Fascist Plot’ to Seize Government by Force,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1934, 1; Lewis, “Amorphous Code,” 973; Justin Gray, “The Legion’s Americanism,” *New Republic*, July 19, 1948, 19.

21 William MacDonald, “A Study of the American Legion,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1938, 86; “Survey Brands Legion as Fascist and Urges Educators to Fight It,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1938, 1; Gray, “Legion’s Americanism,” 19; George Lewis, “The Curation of American Patriotism: The American Legion and the Story of Our American People,” *History & Memory* 35, no. 2 (2023): 80; William Gellerman, *The American Legion as Educator* (Bureau of Publications, 1938), 264–66.

students with communist propaganda, which they often defined as promoting tolerance and racial and economic equality.<sup>22</sup>

More concerning were the Legion's relations with federal law enforcement. As the Centralia incident showed, Legion members collaborated with law enforcement in their vigilantism, but they were not confined to local agencies. Cohen has argued that the Legion and other groups became "semilegitimized national vigilante organizations" used against labor and other social justice organizations, which aided in the "building of the modern American political intelligence apparatus." In 1940, the FBI created the American Legion Contact Program to use Legionnaires as informants and civilian agents to "monitor dissent and ensure internal order." Athan Theoharis has argued that this program, which continued until 1966, demonstrates that the Bureau was motivated not by national security interests but by "conservative ideology." It allowed the Bureau to act independently and expand its own power without other government agencies knowing about it; during its existence, Congress was never made aware of the program. It came from the Legion itself, which proposed to Attorney General Robert Jackson that its chapters could monitor subversive activities. Jackson initially rejected the idea, but FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover negotiated with him to secure permission. Hoover wanted to cultivate members as "Confidential National Defense Informants." During World War II, the Bureau used tens of thousands of Legionnaires to collect information, especially on unions in wartime industries.<sup>23</sup>

Burtin reasons that significant segregation and police brutality survived well past the supposed defeat of fascism; this means that fascism is not a "distant evil relegated to the past" but "the always present underside of liberal democracy."<sup>24</sup> And veterans' organizations did not abandon their vigilantism and targeting of social justice advocates after the defeat of Italian and German fascists. Cold War anti-communism enabled populist fascism by criminalizing dissent, targeting radicals as subversive, and linking progressive goals to a foreign conspiracy. Though the exigencies of wartime security expired in 1945, Hoover extended the Legion Contact Program, which engendered good relations between the Bureau and the American Legion. Hoover ordered the Contact Program paperwork destroyed in the mid-1950s, so it is unclear the extent of the surveillance, but throughout the Cold War the Bureau maintained an official liaison with the Legion, who collected information on "subversive elements" and discouraged the Legion's support of questionable national leaders. The Legion national commander in 1948, James O'Neil, claimed that the organization was part of a network in which

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22 MacDonald, "Study of the American Legion"; "Survey Brands Legion as Fascist and Urges Educators to Fight It," *New York Times*, June 27, 1938, 1; Gellerman, *American Legion as Educator*, 264–66.

23 Cohen, "Ku Klux Government," 49; Athan Theoharis, "The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940–1966," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 273–75.

24 Burtin, "State of the Field," 496–97.

the FBI conducted “actual official investigation,” HUAC worked on “exposure,” and the Legion acted as an “unofficial advisory committee.”<sup>25</sup>

O’Neil lauded the Legion’s close relationship with the Bureau in the pages of its magazine. In a 1948 article he sought to instruct the membership to “fight Communism.” He noted that around the US were “former FBI men, Army or Navy intelligence officers,” former CPUSA members that had “come over to our side,” and others skilled in routing out communists, and “many of them are Legionnaires.” He advised Legion posts to create local committees with these individuals who could “check on the credibility” of other anti-communists. O’Neil praised the work of HUAC and urged the advisory committees to work with state legislatures to bring un-American committees to their communities. He also instructed the membership to organize against the appearance of any “pro-Soviet apologist” appearing in their cities and towns. Though he did reject “strong arm methods,” the inflammatory tone of the article could only increase the anxiety of the Legionnaires. He described communists as those hiding behind “progressive” politics, who were trained for years in propaganda and trickery, and were effectively a “secret battalion of spies and saboteurs parachuted by a foreign foe” and “operating as American citizens.” He counseled that if the communists can “indoctrinate, control and activate” their “dupes and camp followers,” the Legion could in turn “arouse, warn, and instruct” its millions of members to fight communism on their turf.<sup>26</sup>

Paul Robeson became a special target of the Legion and was featured several times in the Legion’s magazine. Months before the Peekskill riots, Richard Combs, the chief counsel of the California Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, published an article titled “How Communists Make Stooges out of Movie Stars.” An image of Robeson standing next to socialist congressmen Vito Marcantonio and Leo Isaacson appeared with the article. The caption read, “The film colony is very tolerant of Paul Robeson’s consistent devotion to Moscow.” The article then went on to list subversive organizations and Robeson’s membership in some of them, including the American League for Peace and Democracy, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, American Peace Mobilization, Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. Combs described “racial and religious intolerance, discrimination, poor housing, crooked politicians, and unemployment” in films as subtle

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25 Theoharis, “American Legion Contact Program,” 280; Gray, “Legion’s Americanism,” 19; John Sbardellati and Tony Shaw, “Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America,” *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (2003): 511–12; James F. O’Neil, “How You Can Fight Communism,” in *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd ed., ed. Ellen Shrecker (Bedford St. Martins, 2002), 122–25.

26 O’Neil, “You Can Fight Communism.”

communist propaganda.<sup>27</sup> Even after the violence at Peekskill, the Legion newspaper would continue to single Robeson out as a threat to the US body politic.

This article shows that populist fascism did not disappear after World War II and the defeat of European fascism. Instead, it manifested in anti-communism, which emboldened veterans' organizations to discipline their fellow Americans who did not meet their standards of Americanism. Reactionaries in veterans' organizations have regularly attacked their fellow citizens, in the Depression era and beyond—a history exemplified by the Peekskill riots.

### **Anti-Robeson Organizing**

An accomplished artist and athlete, Robeson could have settled into the comforts of celebrity but instead used his public image to support the Black freedom struggle and labor organizing; as a result, he became a target of those that defined Americanism based on exclusion, rigid expectations of obedience, and class, race, and gender hierarchy. In their attempts to silence Robeson and condemn him as a subversive, veterans deployed populist fascist techniques of censorship and vigilante violence. They claimed to be the final arbiters of Americanism, but in the process they violated the constitutional rights of their fellow citizens and used violence to silence others.

Robeson was an internationalist: He understood the struggles of Black America were connected to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. He was also an anti-capitalist who abhorred the exploitation of Black and working Americans and of nations of color struggling for independence from Western states and capitalist interests. He admired both the Soviet Union and China for their commitment to radical liberation, he denounced Cold War anti-communism and advocated for a peace centered in social justice, and he participated in organizations that sought global liberation. He also worked with several organizations with links to the CPUSA, including the Civil Rights Congress (CRC). Though he was presumably never a CPUSA member himself, that was of little consequence because it was widely assumed he was. In the United States of the 1940s, liberatory politics smacked of communism to law enforcement and the public, proving that anti-communism does not require the presence of communists.

Veterans' groups organized against Paul Robeson long before the Peekskill incident. Grassroots efforts against him were launched early in the Cold War and became a barrier to both his career and activism. In April 1947, Robeson was scheduled to perform in Peoria, Illinois, but the local American Legion immediately organized against his appearance. Peter Cole and Ricky Newcomb argue that this event, two years before the

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27 Richard E. Combs, "How Communists Make Stooges Out of Movie Stars," *American Legion Magazine*, May 1949, 14–15, 43–44.

Peekskill riots, “shaped and predicted the subsequent destruction” of his career, and that the incident “revealed and epitomized the nation’s political fault lines” in the early Cold War.<sup>28</sup>

The Peoria American Legion was segregated, and only the white branch organized against Robeson’s appearance. The Black Legionnaires claimed they did not agree with Robeson’s politics but supported his right to perform. Meanwhile, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) “distanced itself” from the event, presaging the group’s anti-communist commitments and the liberal abandonment of its radical allies. The NAACP and its leaders were some of the most vocal critics of Robeson and other Black radicals. As Manfred Berg has argued, the organization chose accommodation to anti-communism and “fervently denied all charges that it was dominated by Communists,” as Southern segregationists and the FBI believed. In these years it was not unusual for liberal organizations to distance themselves from Robeson, which makes the Black Legionnaires defense of his right to appear significant.<sup>29</sup>

The FBI was alerted to the event by a local informant who “consulted” the local American Legion. The informant told the FBI that Robeson was banned from using a local mosque, so the mayor offered a room in city hall so as not to appear to censor his freedom of speech. But the informant worried that the appearance would upset “loyal Americans.”<sup>30</sup> Under pressure from locals and the city council, the mayor had to reverse his decision. Clifford Hazelwood, the leader of the segregated American Legion branch (named the Roy B. Tisdell post), appealed to his congressional representative, Everett Dirksen, who forwarded his concerns to the FBI. Hazelwood, also a leader in the local NAACP, was concerned about the ensuing controversy, and he asked Dirksen to confirm what information the Bureau had on Robeson and his alleged un-Americanism. Hazelwood believed that even if Robeson were a communist, he still retained the constitutional right to freedom of speech. Though Robeson was barred from city hall, he did perform at a local Peoria unionist’s home and vowed to return despite “Peoria Fascism.”<sup>31</sup>

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28 Peter Cole and Ricky Newcomb, “Can’t Play in Peoria: Paul Robeson’s Canceled Concert, Civil Rights Unionism, and the Second Red Scare,” *Journal of African American History* 107, no. 4 (2022): 550.

29 Cole and Newcomb, “Can’t Play in Peoria,” 550, 559; Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 76.

30 Cole and Newcomb, “Can’t Play in Peoria,” 550, 559; redacted informant name to J. Edgar Hoover, April 18, 1947, 73, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File.

31 Director FBI to Attorney General, May 3, 1947, 79; Everett Dirksen to J. Edgar Hoover, May 6, 1947, 81; redacted informant to Everett Dirksen, April 24, 1947, 82–83, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File. Conservative media praised the American Legion for organizing against Robeson’s concert. Anti-communist journalist George Sokolsky wrote in his nationally

The Peoria incident set off a conflict between the segregated posts. The white American Legionnaires tried to influence the Tisdell members to condemn Robeson. Five of the Black Legion members agreed to sign a statement condemning Robeson, but the membership rebelled and retracted the five members' support. The Tisdell post then issued a statement that did not support Robeson but did support his right to freedom of speech. In response, the Illinois state American Legion commander revoked the Tisdell charter, confiscated the group's material, and padlocked its building. Hazelwood was then accused of being a communist and had to face a trial before the state American Legion. The American Legion Illinois state executive committee voted unanimously to revoke the Roy B. Tisdell charter. The white veterans had turned on their fellow veterans and chose to punish them for standing up for the First Amendment. Two weeks later in Albany, New York, Robeson won an injunction that allowed him to perform after locals tried to stop his event. A local city counselor protested the event, not because of the "color of Paul Robeson's skin," he claimed, but because of the "color of his ideologies."<sup>32</sup>

And so it went for Robeson in the years and months leading up to the Peekskill riots. Some of his concerts and speaking engagements were cancelled, lost their secured venues, or were picketed by veterans' groups. In January 1948, Robeson was scheduled to perform at an event in Gary, Indiana, at a school facility. The school district was forced to withdraw permission to use the building after protests by Harold E. Morris, the Indiana state commander of the American Legion, along with representatives from the DAR and the first district American Legion Auxiliary.<sup>33</sup>

In 1948, Robeson supported the Henry Wallace campaign for president. He appeared on stage at selected events. The Wallace campaign complained that they were not given radio time and that newspapers described Wallace as a Soviet sympathizer, ignoring his campaign platform. Robeson planned to return to Indiana with Wallace and appear at his Evansville and Indianapolis events, but the venues were controlled by veterans. The Evansville event was scheduled to take place in the Veterans Memorial Coliseum and in Indianapolis at the National Guard Armory; General Howard Maxwell oversaw both venues, and he barred Robeson from appearing at either event. Maxwell eventually relented, but in Evansville, local conflicts between radical unionists and anti-

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syndicated column that the concert was canceled because of the Legion's protests to the Peoria city council. Sokolsky also concluded that because Robeson was a Soviet "propagandist" he could not complain that being a Black man influenced the cancellation. George Sokolsky, "These Days," May 1947, 23, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File.

32 Clifford Hazelwood to J. Edgar Hoover, September 12, 1947, 25; Curtis Cavitt to J. Edgar Hoover, September 6, 1947, 27-32, FBI HQ file, 100-12304, section 2, Paul Robeson Sr. FBI File; "Legion Chiefs Vote Out Post for Communism," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 15, 1947, 12; "Ban on Robeson Studied by Court," *New York Times*, May 3, 1947, 10; "Paul Robeson Wins Injunction to Sing in New York School Hall," *New York Times*, May 7, 1947, 29.

33 "School Officials in Gary Deny Use of Auditorium for Program Featuring Paul Robeson, Singer," *Rushville (IN) Republican*, January 10, 1948, 1.

communists and veterans' groups led to vociferous opposition to Robeson appearing. He was replaced by another performer. Veterans engaged in a riot at the Evansville event.<sup>34</sup>

The violence meted out by veterans' groups did not go unnoticed or uncriticized. Harry Truman, whose own anti-communist policies were targeted by radicals as fascist and who red-baited Wallace, believed the American Legion had "fascist potentialities." In 1948, former director of the Legion's Americanism Commission Justin Gray wrote several articles for the *New Republic* on the Legion's authoritarian tactics. He described a meeting in which the 1946 national commander, John Griffith, claimed that communism had been a part of American history since Jamestown. According to Gray, when Griffith stated that the communist experiment in Jamestown ended in failure and the men ate all the women, no one challenged his outrageous claims. It was not the only wild claim at that meeting; one attendee believed a college professor was a communist because he had been seen walking with a Black man. This laid bare the conservative belief that civil rights advocacy and integration were communist conspiracies and that Black aspirations for freedom were un-American. Gray concluded that the American Legion was "the greatest single organized menace to democracy in the United States." He believed that the Legion was masking its fascist intent behind the "guise of anti-communism."<sup>35</sup>

Gray revealed that the American Legion very liberally used the "Red brush" to accuse individuals of being communist, and that the Legion maintained a "subversive activities" file, which focused primarily on "Communist, Socialist, pacifist, [and] religious" groups. The file also included an ongoing list of individuals the group believed were subversive; to make it onto the list required very little, and the charges were not investigated. Much of the information came from Legionnaires who sent in their accusations, though some of it was shared by the FBI and HUAC, demonstrating that the relationship between the Legion and government bodies went both ways.<sup>36</sup>

Few right-wing reactionary groups were in the files, and Gray noted that some, like the Ku Klux Klan, were praised. He reported that Legion leaders had friendly relations with "ultra-reactionaries" throughout the country, including avowed fascists. The head of the American Vigilante Committee, Harry Jung, who had been praised by the Nazi regime in the 1930s, shared information with the Legion, and it shared information with him. The American Vigilante Committee had connections to individuals in the fascist Silver Shirts and the "Nazi-inspired" Knights of the White Camelia, and to outspoken antisemite Elizabeth Dilling. Gray warned that the Legion could become a

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34 Denise Lynn, "Native Fascism: Evansville's 1948 Wallace Riot," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 119, no. 3 (2023): 233–63.

35 Burtin, "State of the Field," 498; Gray, "Legion's Americanism," 19.

36 Gray, "Legion's Americanism," 20; Sbardellati and Shaw, "Booting a Tramp," 503, 511.

fascist threat in the US if it was allowed to continue as it was. But continue it did—its leadership and members, along with other veterans' groups, organized against Robeson and sparked the conflagration that led to the Peekskill violence.<sup>37</sup>

### Peekskill Riots

Gray accused the American Legion leadership of allying with fascists and federal agencies to violate the civil rights of their fellow Americans. But it was the Legion's membership in local posts, its allies in other veterans' groups, and anti-communist veterans in unions that organized against Robeson. This populist fascism did not always turn into violence, but it did intend to silence those who did not conform to a rigid understanding of Americanism. Understanding these actions as populist fascism highlights what scholars have articulated—that the US has been both a progenitor of and participant in fascism. As important, Robeson and his contemporaries understood the veterans' violence and the suppression of their freedom of speech as fascist.

Some of the troubles that plagued Robeson in the immediate postwar years only increased in 1949. On April 20, Robeson was a featured speaker at the Congress for the Partisans of Peace conference in Paris, France. During his speech he denounced war with the Soviet Union, and he was quoted in the US press as saying that “it would be unthinkable for US Negroes to join in war mania against Moscow.” Robeson and his allies had often denounced the growing US war machine and its use of Black troops against nations of color. He was not alone in saying that Black Americans should not fight in US colonial wars; his friends Claudia Jones and W. E. B. Du Bois had said the same things. Gerald Horne argues that whatever he said, it was misquoted in the US press and the response was “volcanic, stoking more fury.” The furor led to condemnations from leading Black liberals, including NAACP leader Walter White, and prompted HUAC hearings about Robeson's “disloyal and unpatriotic statements.” After the incident, the VFW committed to picketing his appearances.<sup>38</sup>

The already fiery hostility that Robeson faced was fueled further by the HUAC hearings. The hearings' very existence branded Robeson a traitor; those who testified merely became tools in the authoritarian apparatus determined to punish him. Former communist Manning Johnson described Robeson to the committee as a wannabe “Black Stalin,” who “harbored grand delusions.” Joseph Dorinson argues that the Robeson

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37 Gray, “Legion's Americanism,” 21.

38 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 114–15, 221; Denise Lynn, “Shirley Graham Du Bois, Claudia Jones, and the Liberatory Potential of Peace,” in “In Battle for Peace,” ed. Denise Lynn and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, special issue, *American Communist History* 21, nos. 3–4 (2022): 187–99; Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism and the US Peace Movement, 1945–1963* (Syracuse University, 2000), 73; Martelle, *Fear Within*, 193.

hearings demonstrated a racial double standard: White witnesses only had to quietly inform on others to be considered redeemed, whereas Black witnesses were expected to publicly denounce Robeson. The committee's "knock-out-blow" was to call Jackie Robinson as a witness. Robeson had worked hard to help integrate professional baseball, and calling Robinson was viewed as a personal attack. Robinson made a statement that did not condemn Robeson but did describe his comments as ridiculous. Robeson's response was tepid. Refusing to be baited and attack Robinson, he defended his right to free speech and pointed out that the HUAC committee chair had defended the KKK. The furor led to eighty of his booked appearances being cancelled.<sup>39</sup> Robinson's appearance before HUAC was on July 18; Robeson was scheduled to appear in Peekskill on August 27. Peekskill's veterans' groups were preparing to confront Robeson and his fans.<sup>40</sup>

The Peekskill concerts were one of several fundraisers during the Smith Act trials of the CPUSA leadership to pay for their defense. The communist leaders were accused of conspiring to violently overthrow the US government. Peekskill lay forty miles north of New York City, in Westchester County. It was an unremarkable town whose rural character was maintained through force of the will by the residents. In a report on the riots, Peekskill was described as politically "monolithic," economically depressed, and expecting "unquestioned conformity." It might appear an unusual location for a CRC fundraising event except for its substantial "summer colonists."<sup>41</sup> Much of the town's income derived from its summer residents, almost twice the number of locals. Many of the summer colonists were "Jewish traders, lawyers[,] and doctors," and some "small manufacturers or skilled workers," from New York City. According to a report from the American Civil Liberties Union, a "Communist summer colony" was established in the nearby town of Beacon, and a "Socialist summer colony" in Shrub Oak. These two groups had substantial political differences between them and made "little attempt" to influence Peekskill's politics. Robeson had performed in Peekskill in the past without incident; the August appearance would be his fourth. It was hosted by People's Artists Inc. at the Lakeland Acres picnic ground, which was not in Peekskill but nearby Cortlandt. And it was on private property, despite claims it was a public park.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 114–15, 117; Joseph Dorinson, "Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson: Athletes and Activists at Armageddon," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66, no. 1 (1999): 19–20; "Singer Paul Robeson Would Become 'Black Stalin,' Ex-Red Declares," *Kilgore News Herald* (Henderson, TX), July 17, 1949, 21.

40 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 120; Martelle, *Fear Within*, 193.

41 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), *Violence in Peekskill: A Report of the Violations of Civil Liberties at Two Paul Robeson Concerts near Peekskill, N.Y., August 27 and September 4, 1949*, 5–6, box 98, vol. 135, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC.

42 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 7, 10; Westchester Committee for a Fair Inquiry into the Peekskill Violence (WCFIPV), "Eyewitness: Peekskill USA," 1949, box 15, a306, Civil Rights Congress Papers,

Reports suggested that Peekskill residents had lost patience with the summer residents and that this, along with the local press's provocations, had inflamed the locals. But the later lawsuit recognized a larger trend across the country—a conspiracy of local veterans' organizations and law enforcement to prevent Robeson's appearances and "deprive the gatherers of rights to free speech and assembly." In other words, the Peekskill riots were not anomalous, they were just more violent. In an August 18 issue of the local newspaper, the *Peekskill Evening Star*, Vincent Boyle, the commander of the local Verplanck post of the American Legion and chairman of the Associated Veterans' Group, wrote a letter recommending that local veterans' groups "cooperate" to "vehemently oppose" the concert and leave Robeson and the attendees with "little doubt that they are unwelcome around here." Though he claimed he did not want violence, he referred to an event twenty years prior when local Irish Catholics engaged in a "bloody encounter" that drove the KKK out of Peekskill; he recommended that the veterans do the same.<sup>43</sup>

The August 23 edition of the newspaper contained protests against the concert from the Chamber of Commerce and the Cortlandt town supervisor. In addition, it announced a meeting to discuss the concert called by Assistant County District Attorney Leonard Rubinfeld, who was also the chairman of the Joint Veterans' Council (JVC), which represented the American Legion, VFW, CWV, and JWV. The Verplanck American Legion announced it planned to picket the concert and asked the cooperation of veterans in "neighboring town posts" to join. The JVC called for its members to join the pickets and encouraged "peaceful demonstrations . . . in contrast to the force and violence as practiced in communistic and dictatorship countries."<sup>44</sup>

Boyle's letter to the editor has been credited with inflaming the locals' passions and arousing concern among some that violence was on the horizon. On August 24, a group of Peekskill locals sent a telegram to the state attorney general, county executive, and district attorney urging an investigation into Boyle's statements and asking for protection for the concert. The attorney general referred it to the county DA, who then sent it to local law enforcement, which advised that they did not expect violence but would be on hand regardless. In the August 25 issue of the *Evening Star*, an "[a]ngry veterans' spokesman" announced a picket outside the concert and another veterans' group was reported to be planning a separate parade.<sup>45</sup>

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SCRBC; Howard Fast, *Peekskill, USA: Inside the Infamous 1949 Riots* (Open Road Media, 2011), 11. The book is a reprint from Fast's 1952 text. Fast was the host of the Peekskill event.

43 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 6, 7, 10, 13; WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 6; *Robeson v. Fanelli*, 94 F. Supp. 62 (S.D.N.Y. 1950).

44 WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 7.

45 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 14; WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 7; "Robeson Dares Mob to Strike 2nd time," 1949, box 15, a306, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC.

The day before the concert, the *Evening Star* featured op-eds that rejected communism but agreed that the concert should go on and locals should respect freedom of speech. One of the opinion writers, Mary Mobile, received a prank phone call calling her a “dirty red bitch” and warning her to leave town. Over the next several days she received several other calls; one told her that “the men in the Legion are out to get you.” The locals were so inflamed that the *Evening Star* ran a front-page story rejecting the very anger it had helped whip up days before.<sup>46</sup>

Author Howard Fast was chairman of the concert, and he planned to bring his daughter Rachel, six years old at the time, because she liked to hear Robeson sing. A representative of People’s Artists Inc. came to Fast’s rental home the morning of the planned concert to warn him that the “American Legion is going to march,” and that some of the local men had been “liquoring themselves up” in anticipation. Fast read the local newspaper conversations on the concert but did not believe that violence would ensue; nevertheless, he decided to leave his daughter at home.<sup>47</sup>

Fast arrived at the picnic grounds an hour before he was meant to. There was already traffic from both the protestors and the concertgoers, and he described an “unruly crowd of men” at the concert entrance intimidating a group of teenage volunteer ushers. The event organizers were blocked from entering, but Fast made it inside along with several unionists who had arrived early from nearby homes and local families with children setting up picnics. A young man alerted them to trouble, and Fast and the group of men followed him to see that hundreds more men had arrived and were blocking the entrance with “billies and brass knucks and rocks in clenched fists, and American Legion caps.” The anti-Robeson crowd was growing and filled the road leading up to the picnic grounds. Protestors had set up a barrier across the road using a Legion truck; Fast described them as a “solid mass of the American Legion.” The men attacked Fast, and his comrades were temporarily beaten back when they noticed “three miserable” deputy sheriffs nearby. One of the men in the mob told the police to “give us five minutes and we’ll murder the n----- bastards.” Fast observed that the “Legion caps” were on respectable middle-aged men and “not boys,” contrary to later press reports.<sup>48</sup>

The police insisted that it was Fast and company causing trouble. He asked them to clear the road so they could get on with their event, but the police claimed they were powerless to stop the mob and told him, “Just cut out the trouble. . . . [W]e don’t want no troublemakers.” For the next two hours only the three sheriffs were left to try to allay the “fascists,” as Fast described them. The mob attacked again, telling them, “No one of you leave here alive,” and injuring four of the group with Fast. Another group of the “fascists” went inside the picnic grounds and attacked the women and children.

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46 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 15–16.

47 Fast, *Peekskill*, 12–13.

48 Fast, *Peekskill*, 16–20, 22.

The attacks continued as Fast and his allies tried to evacuate the children and create a barrier. At some point part of the mob erected a burning cross inside the park and continued to attack the families within. Fast and the others had been pushed back to the stage area, where they created a barrier around the women and children; meanwhile, the crowd created a bonfire and burnt any literature they could find. They were “screaming obscenities, smashing chairs,” and putting them in the fire. The mob used antisemitic and racist slurs; one person yelled, “God Bless Hitler and f--- you n----- bastards and Jew bastards.” They also threatened to “kill every Commie bastard.” Paul Robeson never made it to the concert grounds. State police did not arrive until 10:00 PM; when they did, they were “non-committal” but able to push the mob out and let the attendees leave. Fast claimed it was “organized fascism” that was “directed particularly against” the Black attendees. Throughout the entire event several people had found their way out and contacted the police, who failed to respond. No arrests were made of the attackers. There were several small injuries, but thirteen people had to seek medical attention, including one concertgoer who had been stabbed.<sup>49</sup>

On August 29, Robeson demanded an inquiry into the violence and accountability for the lack of police protection. The press coverage that followed placed the blame largely on Robeson, whom the *New York Times* described as a “left-wing political storm center.” Local officials claimed that since there had been no arrests, there were no defendants to question. On August 30, Robeson released a statement noting that the “lynchers were out,” but instead of white sheets, they were hiding behind “American Legion caps, VFW buttons, and American flags.” He argued that the violent mob was fascist and the entire event was a “preview of American storm troopers,” who were backed by “the money-crowd in Wall St,” the “war-drum boys,” and the “clerical fascists.” He accused the “little legionnaires” of being capitalist tools who “know not what they do.” The blame lay with the federal government, led by Truman, who “talks a good game of civil rights” but ignored the lynchings that happened during his presidency. Robeson also blamed the state and local officials whose “law and order” was used to protect “so-called patriots” and oppress “my people.” The mob attack proved to him that “Truman was taking us down the road to fascism.” That night a protest against the violence was held in Harlem’s Golden Gate Ballroom, where Robeson condemned the attack and pledged to return.<sup>50</sup>

Veterans’ groups accused the concert attendees of initiating violence, stating that when the ticket holders attempted to get in, they tried to force their way through the large crowd of veterans at the entrance, prompting violence. Clyde Lewis, commander of the VFW, said that it was a “spontaneous protest”—contrary to the days of newspaper

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49 Fast, *Peekskill*, 22, 26; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 8–9.

50 Paul Robeson, “I Will Sing in Peekskill,” August 30, 1949, box 73, n 305, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC; “Robeson Demands Violence Inquiry,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1949, 19; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 10.

articles discussing the planning and the notices of veterans' meetings before the event—and that he rejected violence and lawlessness. But he added that the VFW would be happy to “buy Mr. Robeson a one-way ticket to Russia.” Governor Thomas Dewey ordered an investigation and removed local DA George Fanelli and Sheriff Fred W. Ruscoe to ensure it would not be biased.<sup>51</sup>

The state commander of the JWV, Arthur Aronson, claimed that if any members of the organization were found to be part of the mob, they would be court-martialed and removed. He acknowledged that the JWV did not participate as an organization but that some of its members were rumored to have been there. The antisemitism among the mob would have led to hostility toward its members, and some eyewitnesses observed that any Jew was attacked, whether they were with the mob or not. The JVC issued a statement on August 31 taking no responsibility: “The protest parade in which our organizations participated was held without any disorder and was peacefully disbanded. We decry any force or violence or any anti-religious or anti-racial demonstration that may have occurred and we welcome any investigation that may be made by all proper authorities.” Another Legion post requested an investigation into the Westchester County branch and its involvement. In probably an unsanctioned comment, the Peekskill Legion commander, Milton Flynt, claimed, “Our objective was to prevent the Paul Robeson concert, and I think our objective was reached.”<sup>52</sup>

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) countered many of the claims circulating in the press, which blamed the concert attendees. In December 1949, the ACLU released a report on the riots. Much like the NAACP, the ACLU had an uncomfortable relationship with radicals. Its concerns dated back a full decade before the Peekskill events when witnesses at HUAC hearings described it as a communist front, and then-chair of the committee, Martin Dies, claimed it was “integral” to communism. The ACLU had several vehement anti-communists on its board, including socialist Norman Thomas and lawyer and FBI informant Morris Ernst. ACLU members tried to distance themselves from the red label by actively working with Dies and HUAC. In 1940, the ACLU executive board issued a statement dismissing communism as a “totalitarian ideology” akin to Nazism and denounced permitting any communists in the organization. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a CPUSA member, was on the ACLU board and was expelled that same year after refusing to resign. This inner turmoil meant that the ACLU was not a central advocate for civil liberties during the worst of the red-baiting, but it still did a thorough investigation of Peekskill given how public the events became.<sup>53</sup>

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51 “Robeson Demands”; “Dewey Aide Urged for Robeson Row,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1949, 16.

52 “Robeson Demands”; “Dewey Aide”; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 10; ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 22.

53 Mary Ann Trasciatti, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Rebel Girl, Democracy, and Revolution* (Rutgers University Press, 2025), 155–56, 158.

The ACLU concluded that the communists and socialists had never tried to include the local Peekskill residents in their events; thus, People's Artists Inc. was expecting only its own supporters. The concert was not in Peekskill but five miles away, on private property only accessible via a private road, out of earshot of the public, so press suggestions that communists were invading were "pretended outrage." In the end, the invasion was of "Peekskill men" into nearby Cortlandt "for the purpose of committing a crime." It was "an unprovoked trespass upon private property with intent to commit malicious mischief[,] and a willful violation" of constitutional rights. The ACLU report included eyewitness accounts of men wearing "Legion caps" intimidating the attendees and initiating the violence, and it noted that until 10:00 PM no more than six police were present.<sup>54</sup>

In the days after, the local newspaper and the veterans' groups "assumed a more defensive attitude" and changed their stories. The situation remained tense in Peekskill—some locals who supported the right of the concert to proceed received death threats. The Westchester Committee for a Fair Inquiry into the Peekskill Violence was formed, and it voted to invite Robeson back on September 4. It claimed that an ever present seething antisemitism had burst into the open after the first riot. Some of the summer Jewish residents reported that cars full of men drove up to their homes and yelled antisemitic comments, and that an intruder was caught trying to sneak into one of the colonies. There were also boycotts of local businesses that had condemned the riot, and the Verplanck post tried to get the town to deny the "right of assemblage" of communist groups in Cortlandt. Peekskill was on tenterhooks in the days leading up to the next planned concert.<sup>55</sup>

Veterans applied for and received a permit to hold a protest parade in Cortlandt the day of the planned make-up concert. The concert promoters tried to get an injunction against the parade, but the judge refused on the basis that there was no evidence the veterans would cause problems. The *Peekskill Evening Star*, suddenly concerned about the furor it had helped initiate, ran a plea in its September 2 edition that noted fourteen veterans' groups planned to take part in the protests, and it hoped the mayor would not allow it to take place in front of the concert venue. Instead, it suggested that the protest parade should be in Peekskill proper. The veterans were not interested in that suggestion.<sup>56</sup> Plans were made to provide more protection than at the first concert. Governor Dewey empowered local police to use state troopers, and Robeson vowed that the concertgoers would have their own protection. Nine hundred to twelve hundred

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54 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 7, 11, 18, 25.

55 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 17, 22, 27, 30; WCFIPV, "Eyewitness," 10.

56 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 31, 33.

police officers were dispatched to Cortlandt. Twenty-five hundred to three thousand union members volunteered to provide protection.<sup>57</sup>

On September 4, anywhere from one thousand to three thousand protestors, or “aroused veterans,” appeared and blocked the entrance, preventing Robeson from entering the venue. The concert planners asked for an escort from the police, which they refused. By 2:00 PM, Robeson had made it inside the concert grounds along with a crowd of about twenty-five thousand to watch him perform. The performance went on without any issue; problems started when the concert attendees tried to leave. As cars were being directed out of the park grounds, they were attacked by stone-throwing protestors. People in the cars were urged to put their windows up, which managed to protect some of them, but stones and even bricks made it through, causing injuries. One newspaper reported that the attendees faced “a barrage of stones, pop bottles, sticks, and tree branches.”<sup>58</sup>

The union members, it was later confirmed, had not instigated any conflict with the veterans and stayed true to their intention to provide protection. The ACLU absolved Dewey of the later accusations that he did not do enough to prevent violence at the second concert but confirmed that the police did not do enough to prevent the second riot. The state police were orderly, but the county police “fraternized” with the rioters, “beat Robeson guards,” and did not dissuade the violence. A Black World War I veteran and concert attendee was beaten by police after he “talked back” when a rioter spit in his face, an event recorded on camera. The ACLU believed that this time the violence was planned. Three witnesses saw veterans “loading rocks” into their cars near the concert grounds. Multiple witnesses observed people putting rocks in their cars and recruiting teenagers, and one witness claimed that a veteran told them they wanted to make it “physically impossible for anyone to get to the concert grounds.”<sup>59</sup>

Witnesses reported the police stopped buses of people leaving, made them exit the vehicles, and beat them. The unionists, many of whom were veterans themselves, were the last to leave the concert grounds; at least twenty-five were arrested. Others were ordered out of their cars multiple times by the police and forced to run through a gauntlet of club-wielding officers, who beat them. The police also used racist epithets and reportedly refused protection when the attendees tried to leave, or they ignored the mob’s attacks. The national media was present and reported on the violence, making it much harder for locals to deny what happened. One CBS radio report observed veterans,

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57 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 31; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 11; Stephen Fischer, “ACLU Probers Find Police Guilty in Peekskill Riots,” *Daily Compass* (New York City), December 1949, 4; “Robeson Followers Stoned: Pop Bottles Fly as Cops Stand Guard,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 5, 1949, 1.

58 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 32–33; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 11; “Robeson Followers Stoned.”

59 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 31, 39, 41; WCFIPV, “Eyewitness,” 11; Fischer, “ACLU Probers”; “Robeson Followers Stoned”; Dorinson, “Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson,” 21.

organized by their service branch, breaking the lines and attacking the concertgoers, and police beating a Black attendee.<sup>60</sup>

District Attorney Fanelli issued his own report, which defied many of the eyewitness accounts and photographic evidence. He claimed that teenagers were the only ones that engaged in any violence against the concert attendees, that the police acted commendably, and that it was the concertgoers who initiated the violence. The press reported that at least eight cars were damaged and 145 people were injured; Fanelli's report noted only three damaged cars and seventy people with "minor" injuries. Only four rioters were arrested, all teenagers, for overturning a vehicle.<sup>61</sup>

Robeson remained defiant after the second riot, condemning the police and veterans. He believed the violence demonstrated the need for the progressive movement, and he "told the Legion" he would continue his work across the US and the world. The "Legion bands . . . revile me, they scandalize me, and try to holler me down on all sides." But he said it was okay, because his voice could be heard above the "screams of the intolerant."<sup>62</sup>

The national reaction condemned the violence, and George Craig, American Legion national commander, issued a tepid statement denouncing the violence and claiming that it wished to leave "pro-Communist demonstrations strictly alone." The JWV's leadership strongly condemned the riots as "shameful" and forbade its members from participating in any further demonstrations after the local American Veterans Council announced a "patriotic" demonstration in Peekskill the following week. The locals had had enough, and a group of clergy protested the planned demonstration, forcing the group to relent and cancel it.<sup>63</sup>

The ACLU report countered most of the claims made by the press and the locals. There was no "communist provocation," the police willfully withheld assistance at the first riot, and the local press was responsible for inflaming the passions of the veterans. It also laid the blame on the veterans' groups, stating that "the evidence proves beyond question that the veterans intended to prevent the concerts from being held." The locations of the "veterans' parades" were "deliberately provocative," and one of the wounded veterans was hurt while "assisting in the commission of a crime." The riots were not spontaneous, and they set the stage for local governments to further restrict freedom of speech. Local police not only did not prevent violence but encouraged and

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60 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 50–51.

61 "Police Commended in Peekskill Fray," *New York Times*, September 8, 1949, 1, 34.

62 Paul Robeson, "My Answer," *New York Age*, September 17, 1949, MG 170, Paul Robeson Papers, SCRBC.

63 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 48; "Police Commended."

sometimes participated in it, and it was only national condemnation that led some Peekskill locals to decry their neighbors' actions.<sup>64</sup>

That same month, CRC lawyers filed the lawsuit "under the seldom used Civil Rights Acts," asking for a total of \$2 million in damages and that the defendants be "forever enjoined" from "conspiring and interfering with plaintiffs and others who hereafter may peaceably assemble in Westchester County." The suit claimed it was "inconceivable that the national government is powerless to protect public discussion of ideas," a claim at the heart of Cold War radicalism, that the federal government enabled state abuse by refusing to defend constitutional liberties. The CRC also filed for a mistrial of the CPUSA leaders, claiming that the Peekskill riots and the violence done to two of the defendants in attendance, Benjamin Davis and Irving Potash, proved that the men could not receive a fair trial in the Southern District of New York.<sup>65</sup>

Governor Dewey ordered a grand jury investigation into the riots, and the lawsuit was stayed until its report was issued. The grand jury findings, released in June 1950, were provocative, describing the summer colonies as indoctrination centers and "aggressively pro-communist," teaching the overthrow of the US government. This, the grand jury concluded, had to be considered in any investigation of the events. It concluded that Robeson, "a symbol of communism itself," and his comments in 1949, presumably at the Paris Peace Conference, combined with the "awareness" of Americans that the CPUSA was planning to overthrow the US government, "were the underlying causes of the . . . disorders." The "veterans of Peekskill" organized against that threat, the cross-burning was an "unfortunate prank," and the September 4 event was organized by the CPUSA to take advantage of the publicity. The grand jury thus blamed the CPUSA for whipping up "racial and religious hatred." It also described the union volunteers as "Communist forces" who acted as a "quasi-military force" with strict discipline, but it did concede that they did not incite violence. The crowd outside was inflamed by a speaker at the event calling the veterans "un-American filth," but the grand jury dismissed the veterans' actions and instead laid the blame on teenagers and "hoodlums." It dismissed the ACLU report as "flimsy" and "scandalous," and rejected its conclusion that the violence was inflamed by racism, pointing to the participation of some Jewish war veterans in the protests. It praised the police actions and advised that veterans' groups should in the future avoid attendance near "subversive" events, presumably for their own protection. The report itself was aggressively anti-communist and endorsed constitutional violations against alleged subversives. The lawsuit was allowed to move

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64 ACLU, *Violence in Peekskill*, 50–51.

65 Stephen Fischer, "27 Sue over Peekskill Riot," *Daily Compass*, December 16, 1949, MG 170, Paul Robeson Papers, SCRBC; *Robeson*, 94 F. Supp. 62; Motion for a Mistrial, USA v. William Foster, et al., Box 112, x. 56, Civil Rights Congress Papers, SCRBC.

forward in federal courts but was dismissed in 1952 by the Supreme Court, which ruled the federal government did not have jurisdiction.<sup>66</sup>

By then Robeson had other problems—in 1950, his passport had been seized. He was popular in Europe, and this restriction on his movement damaged his career and income; it would not be returned until 1958. Compounding that was further censorship in the US. Wherever he traveled, veterans' groups attempted to get his concerts shut down, picketed the ones that were allowed to continue, and condemned him as a communist agitator. In November 1952, in Hartford, Connecticut, where the Robesons had made their home, veterans' groups organized against his appearance at a fundraising event at a local high school. It was not unusual, but it hit close to home, quite literally, as it was in the town where they lived. The Board of Education stood up for his right to sing at the school, but there were and would be more cancellations. Though his income plummeted, and veterans' groups and law enforcement haunted his every move, Robeson continued his political agitation.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Scholars have summarized the Peekskill riots as signs of the times, an expression of anti-communism only unusual in their violence. Robeson biographer Martin Duberman has explored the riots and Robeson's reaction to them as part of his "powerful will," which he combined with "ingrained optimism." In the face of resistance, Robeson powered on and even closed "his mind to counterarguments." Howard Bryant has written that the Peekskill Riots were orchestrated by law enforcement and veterans, but were not surprising. The attendees were blamed because they venerated Robeson, allegedly a treasonous tyrant and an avowed communist. Joseph Walwick has shown that the veterans believed that their actions at Peekskill were part of a larger struggle to "defend American values" in the "ongoing struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union." It was not an attack on their fellow Americans; it was an attack against the Soviets. Gerald Horne has shown that the Peekskill riots were part of a "disturbing trend" that singled out Robeson, and that his wife believed the mob was there to kill him.<sup>68</sup>

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66 "Robeson Enjoined in Peekskill Suit," *New York Times*, March 1, 1950, 3; "Excerpts from Grand Jury Report," *New York Times*, June 17, 1950, 2; "Robeson, 29 Others, Lose Damage Suit," *New York Times*, January 24, 1952, 10.

67 Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 127, 130, 133; "Recital by Robeson Opposed in Hartford," *New York Times*, November 11, 1952, 17.

68 Howard Bryant, *Kings and Pawns: Jackie Robinson and Paul Robeson in America* (Harper Collins, 2026), 158–62; Joseph Walwick, "Paul Robeson, Peekskill, and the Red Menace," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66, no. 1 (1999): 71–72; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (Ballantine Books, 1989), 363; Horne, *Paul Robeson*, 134.

The Peekskill riots have been seen as emblematic of the tense Cold War years and evidence of Robeson's steely character in the face of regular and sometimes violent harassment. This study instead centers the veterans' groups and shows that rather than just a sign of the times, the Peekskill riots demonstrate an ongoing populist fascism endemic to the US body politic. Veterans' groups are no longer engaged in organized vigilantism. But scholars have found a strong link between veterans and vigilante violence. Kathleen Belew demonstrates that one of the worst cases of domestic terrorism, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, was orchestrated by veterans Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. McVeigh and Nichols met in the US Army and were members of militias and white supremacist groups. They were likely part of a larger conspiracy, but the FBI did not follow up on credible eyewitness testimony to avoid drawing out the investigation and to convince the American public that the perpetrators had been found. Joseph Darda has shown that veterans returning from the Vietnam War were angered and felt disenfranchised by the women's and civil rights movements, and that some joined and organized with white supremacist organizations. In 2024, Amy Cooter released a study showing that veterans make up 30 percent of militia membership, and 40 percent of militia leadership. Between 13 and 17 percent of the insurrectionists charged for their actions on January 6, 2021, were veterans, which is "more than double the military representation in the US population." White supremacist organizations actively recruit within the military's ranks. In 2020, the *Military Times* found that "more than half of minority service members say they have personally witnessed examples of white nationalism or ideological-driven racism within the ranks." The House Committee on Veterans Affairs held hearings in the wake of the January 6 attacks to try and understand this link between veterans, white supremacy, and vigilantism. In 2023, the Council on Foreign Relations concluded that efforts had to be made to counter white supremacist vigilantism among veterans and service members, as a matter of national security.<sup>69</sup>

The Peekskill riots are important in demonstrating the hysteria that gripped the nation, but more than that, they show the concerted and organized efforts of veterans' groups against their fellow Americans. Though McCarthy lends his name to the period, and Hoover and the FBI perpetuated anti-leftist organization throughout his long tenure, veterans' organizations, particularly the American Legion, were instruments of

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69 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018), esp. 227–30; Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (University of California Press, 2021); Amy Cooter, "Veterans and Extremism: From Militias to January 6th and Real Patriotism," Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, January 22, 2024, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/veterans-and-extremism-militias-january-6th>; Leo Shane III, "Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops," *Military Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>; "The Violent Far-Right Terrorist Threat to the US Military," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/violent-far-right-terrorist-threat-us-military>.

anti-communist repression. These groups engaged in a populist fascism that sometimes devolved into violence and mirrored the fascism some of the individuals involved had ostensibly fought to defeat in Europe. Anti-communism provided cover for their undemocratic actions. Anti-communism and fascism are kin; they are not mutually exclusive. And veterans' groups, specifically the American Legion, have claimed the right to define patriotism and Americanism, though what they have sometimes sought is unquestioned loyalty, white supremacy, and unfettered capitalism. Their methods of censorship and vigilante violence resemble what they claim communism sought to do.

The Peekskill riots were not anomalous, nor unique to the Cold War era; rather, they suggest a throughline in vigilante violence targeting anti-capitalists and anti-racists. This populist fascism, under an anti-communist guise, operated with the sanction, and sometimes participation, of law enforcement and went unpunished because of a general acceptance by the American public, which suggests that fascism has a long history in the US. It is an oft-repeated and tired trope to link racial justice activism to a foreign conspiracy, but it resonated with veterans who saw themselves at constant war even when their official service had ended. The war they waged at home was to secure the racial status quo by muting their fellow citizens, defining Americanism as slavish devotion, and expecting the same from others. They engaged in the violent censorship that fascist states propagated, and they did so without reflection or concern for the rights of their fellow citizens.

## ARTICLE

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## *Liberty Bell's Electronic Ring*

### *Dissecting the First Computerized Hate Network*

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**Abstract:** *Despite growing research on American hate movements, the history of digital hate prior to 2000 has received little attention. Recent work on American white power movements has identified a rhetorical and organizational tradition of white supremacy in the United States but stopped short of identifying the specific mechanisms by which this rhetoric and organization moved online. Recent web histories, however, have opened the door for inquiry into the online past of white power movements. To recover white power's early digital history, this article focuses on the efforts of George Dietz to operate and maintain Liberty Bell BBS, the first hate site ever put online. While digital hate is often traced back to websites of the early 2000s like Stormfront or viewed as a precursor to the alt-right of the 2010s, Liberty Bell BBS and contemporaneous peer sites demonstrate that digital hate began in the 1980s. Recovering the earliest computerized hate network establishes a direct organizational link between far-right extremists of the digital age and white power organizations of the twentieth century, including the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nations, and the National Alliance.*

**Keywords:** Liberty Bell BBS, George Dietz, white nationalism, web history, Aryan Liberty Net, Louis Beam, Stormfront

Dear George, can I still send you a “people” letter? Your new computer letter seemed so distant and unreal I am almost afraid to answer it. . . . However, I am really glad you are into it. It is the way of the future and we had all better realize it and get with it or drop out of things completely. . . . Perhaps all this is really a break for us. It could be one way of getting free from the iron control of the enemy.

The above-quoted letter was sent on August 13, 1983, to George Dietz, a prolific publisher of hate materials, and reproduced in the November 1983 edition of his magazine, *Liberty Bell*.<sup>1</sup> Through Liberty Bell Publications, Dietz was one major node

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1 Mrs. M. M., letter to the editor, *Liberty Bell* 11, no. 3 (November 1983): 16, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-198311/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-198311/).

of the booming American white nationalist print publications trade that connected geographically disparate but ideologically aligned members of the white power movement. By the 1980s, however, a string of federal, state, and local police actions against Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi networks had curtailed much of their public and political organization. While lynchings, bombings, robberies, and intimidation continued to mark the white power movement, strategies of violence gave way in the 1980s to campaigns of massive resistance to racial integration and the wielding of the carceral state against people of color.<sup>2</sup>

To those aligned with the Fifth Klan, however, even these minor moderations were a sign of apocalyptic failure on the part of white Americans to impose a regime of state control codifying the privilege of white Christian heterosexual Americans.<sup>3</sup> In response, the 1980s were a period of radical reinvention for the American white power movement. Reacting to infiltrations and disruption by federal agents, Louis Beam wrote in a 1983 issue of the *Inter-Klan Newsletter and Survival Alert* that any future structural organization must rely on principles of “Leaderless Resistance” to avoid infiltration through decentralization.<sup>4</sup> No individual member would have complete knowledge of the larger organizational structure they operated within, making it difficult for state agents to impede the Klan.

Beginning in 1983, a small group of white power activists implemented their own computer networks to avoid police infiltration. Their early experiments, led by George Dietz’s Liberty Bell BBS and the Aryan Nation’s Aryan Liberty Net, allowed for a greater degree of centralization in the dissemination of information. While seemingly contradicting the call for leaderless resistance, Beam’s 1983 text suggested such a structure that gave a small cadre of leaders significant authority within the movement. Though these first bulletin boards had limited interactivity, they provided a decade of experience with computer networks before the World Wide Web went online—experience that was directly parlayed into Don Black’s Stormfront, registered on the Web in 1995. While much academic and public interest has focused on the white power movement’s paramilitary

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2 For more on legal white supremacy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, see Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s* (Liveright Publishing, 2021); Elizabeth Gilespeie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (Oxford University Press, 2017); and Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

3 The eras of the Klan are debatable, as they are largely internally constructed, but the 1980s and 1990s are generally interpreted as the fifth era of the Klan, under the influence of Louis Beam, Richard Butler, Robert E. Miles, and many other prominent organizational leaders of the white power movement. See Stephen E. Atkins, *Encyclopedia of Right-Wing Extremism in Modern American History* (ABC-CLIO, 2011), 28–30.

4 Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Inter-Klan Newsletter and Survival Alert* (May 1983): 12–13, box 44, folder 32, “Inter-Klan Newsletter and Survival Alert,” Tufts Archives and Records Collection, Political Research Associates [hereafter TARC/PRA].

reorganization and stochastic violence in the 1980s and 1990s, this reorganization of communications channels using high technology has proven to be the more durable adaptation undertaken in this period of white nationalist reorganization.

### **Integrating Web Histories and the History of the White Power Movement**

Current scholarship suggests that the supposed “lone wolf” white domestic terrorist was the most successful adaptation to emerge from this period. White power leaders hoped that these individuals, or small groups of violent extremists, would establish a period of racial holy war (often shortened to “RAHOWA” in their materials) and bring about the destruction of the federal government. Then, from the ashes of this calamity, they would reclaim the United States as a white ethnostate. Kathleen Belew has identified this reorganization as the impetus for Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols’s 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, perhaps the most prominent example of this genre of violence. She does so by identifying a continuity of action and mission in the distribution of William Luther Pierce’s 1978 novel, *The Turner Diaries*, which laid a blueprint for a nuclear race war within the United States that would ultimately result in the global genocide of non-white peoples.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, recent scholarship has shown that the “lone wolf” narrative, while failing to bring about RAHOWA, was effective in obscuring the true size, scale, and goals of the white power movement as a whole. As such, histories of late twentieth-century white power activism have largely focused on the movement’s shift toward violent “lone wolf” attacks, while treating their contemporary computer networks as a sophisticated and interesting tool, but one ultimately subordinate to the violent goals of the movement.

James Coates’s 1989 study of the strategic reorganization of American white ethnonationalists was among the earliest of such histories and dedicated a few pages to what he dubbed the “Survivalist Right” computer network.<sup>6</sup> Coates, like later authors, treated the project of Aryan Liberty Net and other aligned hate networks as a significant though ancillary development designed to feed more violent stochastic terrorism employed by the emerging militia movement. Nearly four decades later, Kathleen Belew’s 2018 examination of Aryan Liberty Net mirrored Coates’s, focusing on how the contents of these bulletin boards fed existing processes of reorganization.<sup>7</sup> By treating these early computer networks as part of changing strategies of violence, these works do not fully

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5 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018); Andrew Macdonald [William L. Pierce], *The Turner Diaries* (National Vanguard Books, 1980).

6 James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (Hill and Wang, 1989), 194, 206–10.

7 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 103–35, 144, 172.

reckon with the ways white power activists intentionally developed their own proficiencies with digital technologies as a discrete, and ultimately more politically successful, form of strategic reorganization.

Superficial treatment of these early hate networks is a result of the challenge of archival recovery. Materials from before the establishment of the Internet Archive in 1996 often no longer exist, so scholars have focused on materials put online after the introduction of web archives. Comprehensive academic studies of white hate sites emerged in the late 1990s, with Todd Schroer's 1998 investigation of extant Klan sites, though the study "Racism on the Internet" from the same year, by Les Back, Michael Keith, and John Solomos, is considered the first in-depth analysis of the subject.<sup>8</sup> Both works focus on the rapid growth in the number of hate sites at the end of the millennium. Research in the middle of the 2000s followed this pattern, with studies by Jeffrey Kaplan and Leonard Weinberg, and by Jesse Daniels, mapping the contemporary purpose and use of hate networks.<sup>9</sup> In a 2022 book, Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg provided some historicization of white power computer networks, meaningfully connecting Don Black's Stormfront to the alt-right, though their archival work only begins in 2007, despite the site's origins in 1995.<sup>10</sup> Belew's work represents one of the first attempts to historicize white power networks beyond the 1990s, but her focus is on the establishment and origins of the militia movement, making her treatment of networks like Aryan Liberty Net understandably brief.<sup>11</sup> Other studies have historicized hate networks, providing excellent contextual information on the multifaceted ways white power activists used computer networks in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> For example, Robert Billups utilizes early internet sources to

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8 Les Back, Michael Keith, and John Solomos, "Racism on the Internet: Mapping Neofascist Subcultures in Cyberspace," in *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan (Northeastern University Press, 1998), 73–101; Todd J. Schroer, "Issue and Identity Framing Within the White Racist Movement: Internet Dynamics," in *Research in Political Sociology 9: The Politics of Social Inequality*, ed. Betty A. Dobratz, Lisa K. Walder, and Timothy Buzzell (Jai/Elsevier, 2001), 207–31.

9 Jesse Daniels, *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2009); Jeffrey Kaplan and Leonard Weinberg, *The Emergence of a Euro-American Radical Right* (Rutgers University Press, 2003).

10 Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

11 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 142–45.

12 Robert William Billups, "Martyred Women and White Power Since the Civil Rights Era: From Kathy Ainsworth to Vicki Weaver," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 4 (2023): 804–27; Sophie Bjork-James, "The Apartheid Conscience: Gender, Race, and Re-imagining the White Nation in Cyberspace," *Ethnic Studies Review* 29 no. 2 (2006): 20–45; Karen M. Douglas, Craig McGarty, Ana-Maria Bluic, and Girish Lala, "Understanding Cyberhate: Social Competition and Social Creativity in Online White Supremacist Groups," *Social Science Computer Review* 23 no. 1 (2005): 68–76; Aaron Winters, "Online Hate: From the Far-Right to the 'Alt-Right' and from the Margins to the Mainstream," in *Online Othering: From the Far-Right to the 'Alt-Right' and from the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

demonstrate how white women—specifically Vicki Weaver and Kathy Ainsworth—were commodified on white power sites as “martyrs.”<sup>13</sup> These works focus almost exclusively on post-1995 materials, however, despite the creation, expansion, and utilization of computer hate networks in the 1980s and early 1990s.

While scholars of the far right often do not include the crucial pre-internet digital past, the nascent field of web histories has frequently omitted analysis of far-right computer networks. Kevin Driscoll dubbed the period discussed in this article the “modem world” for the centrality of modems and phone line connections to the computer networks of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Driscoll and other historians have recently grappled with the challenges of an ephemeral yet easily duplicated medium, acknowledging the fragile record of pre-1995 materials from bulletin boards, newsgroups, FidoNet, and other pre-internet computer networks. Ian Milligan notes that born-digital materials are in a constant state of degradation and that the establishment of the Internet Archive in 1996 represents a foundational strut in any history of the web.<sup>15</sup>

The field of web histories is still emerging, having grown out of several convergent fields, most notably in digital humanities and internet studies. Histories of the internet have existed for decades now, though nearly all studies before 2010 focused on how networks were established, with an emphasis on the implementation of ever more complex connection protocols, and on the private-public finance models that created the broadband lines that transmit the internet. Niels Brügger, John Carey, and Martin C. J. Elton were among the first to look at the history of societies and cultures built on the internet, though they too did so primarily by historicizing various programs and tools rather than the human experiences enabled by this software.<sup>16</sup> In *The Web as History* (2017), Niels Brügger and Ralph Schroeder offered several studies that examined the remnants of Geocities and other early internet sites.<sup>17</sup> Formalizing the name of the field, Brügger and Milligan published an expansive work in 2019 that defines web histories in its present form: the study of social and cultural materials produced by previous users of computer networks, including metadata unique to computer-mediated communications.<sup>18</sup> Since then, the *Journal of Web Histories* and monographs from Milligan, Driscoll, and Avery Dame-Griff,

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13 Billups, “Martyred Women.”

14 Kevin Driscoll, *The Modem World: A Prehistory of Social Media* (Yale University Press, 2022).

15 Ian Milligan, *Averting the Digital Dark Age: How Archivists, Librarians, and Technologists Built the Web a Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 1–4.

16 Niels Brügger, ed., *Web History* (P. Lang, 2010); John Carey and Martin C. J. Elton, *When Media Are New: Understanding the Dynamics of New Media Adoption and Use* (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

17 Niels Brügger and Ralph Schroeder, eds., *The Web as History: Using Web Archives to Understand the Past and the Present* (University College London Press, 2017).

18 Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Web History* (SAGE Publications, 2019).

among others, have populated the field with comprehensive works on chatrooms, bulletin boards, and the early internet.<sup>19</sup>

When discussing past computer networks, however, these and other works often replicate techno-utopian conceptualizations of the early internet. Among these beliefs is the understanding that digital communities emerged organically: A basic organizational subject anchored an online community—place of residence, academic affiliation, sexual identity, and so forth. As users participated in these sites, they would in turn become moderators, coming to dictate the interests and interactions of their virtual community. Web histories often discuss white hate sites of the 1990s and early 2000s in the same way media from the 1990s discussed violent white power activists, echoing the notion that these malicious actors were largely digital lone wolves who only found each other once online. As this article argues, however, these purveyors of digital hate have a longer, more organized, and more intentional digital presence.

Extant literature on the white power movement of the 1980s and 1990s therefore treats the establishment of computer networks as a fascinating side project, playing only a small part in the violence of the white supremacist movement. Web histories similarly contend that early hate sites were a footnote in the broader utopian vision of democratized knowledge—an unpleasant, but perhaps necessary, perversion of a worthwhile project. Instead, researchers must understand these white supremacist networks alongside other attempts by hate movements at structural reorganization, of similar importance to their formation of militias, prison gangs, political campaigns, and music record labels. These computerized hate networks were a serious experiment undertaken by a movement desperately searching for a path forward. Reconsidering these late twentieth-century developments as a holistic process of uncertain, iterative development can help researchers see why white power computer networks proved to be the most politically and culturally successful product of the Klan's and neo-Nazis' strategic reorganization.

These early hate networks offer context to many of the white nationalist talking points that have become commonplace in contemporary far-right political rhetoric. Current scholarship identifies clear links between Don Black's Stormfront and 4chan, the result of which was the alt-right movement of the 2010s.<sup>20</sup> These studies of the contemporary

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19 Avery Dame-Griff, *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet* (New York University Press, 2023); Driscoll, *Modem World*; Ian Milligan, *History in the Age of Abundance? How the Web Is Transforming Historical Research* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); Milligan, *Digital Dark Age*.

20 On continuity in the rhetoric of white power activism on Stormfront and 4chan, including the active transmission of hateful ideology in the mid-2000s as a major contributor to the rise of the alt-right, see Donovan et al., *Meme Wars*; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right Is Warping the American Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2019); Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "A Recent History of White Supremacy," and Nicole Hemmer, "The Alt-Right in Charlottesville: How an Online Movement Became a Real-World Presence," in *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, ed. Kathleen Belew and Ramón A. Gutiérrez (University of California Press, 2021), 251–64 and 287–303, respectively.

far-right often omit any historicization beyond the early 2000s. In doing so, they miss the explicit continuity between Stormfront—often cited as the seedbed from which online white hate grew—and the white power movement of the late twentieth-century. Examining the earliest white power networks, which were put online by key white power activists in the 1980s, demonstrates organizational continuity between Liberty Bell BBS, Aryan Liberty Net, and Stormfront.

While direct archival recovery of much of the earliest white power computer networks is challenging and has limited the historicization of online hate to offline contributors, it is possible to discern from extant materials the significant dates, purpose, and operational frameworks of these 1980s networks. Researchers and activists traditionally identify the first three hate sites as Aryan Liberty Net, White Aryan Resistance BBS, and Liberty Bell BBS. The last of these, operated by George Dietz, is also the best documented in surviving primary sources. It is possible to recover substantial information about the operations of the first computerized hate network by relying on materials from Dietz's magazine, *Liberty Bell*; from fact-finding reports published by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Political Research Associates (PRA); and from contemporary bulletin board operations manuals, printouts of operations manuals for Liberty Bell BBS itself, and printouts of the network, all of which corroborate the site's operations. Similar, though less well-sourced, reconstruction is possible for Aryan Liberty Net (ALN), operated by the Aryan Nations. ALN itself became the largest hate network of the 1980s and featured frequent contributions from both Louis Beam and Robert Miles, two of the most significant Klan leaders in the 1980s. This article therefore seeks to rectify the overreliance on post-1995 internet sources in the historiography of white power activists' computer networks. It demonstrates the complexity and intentionality of their construction by analyzing the materials available from George Dietz's Liberty Bell BBS and, to a lesser extent due to archival limitations, Louis Beam's Aryan Liberty Net.

### **George Dietz and Liberty Bell BBS**

George Dietz was long established in the American and emerging transnational white power movements by the time he created Liberty Bell BBS in August 1983. His central role in the publication of hate materials played a substantial part in why he established the first white power computer network. Much of Dietz's biography comes from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Freedom of Information Act requests, largely filed by independent researcher and activist Ernie Lazar, provide the basis of Dietz's biography, alongside reporting from the 1980s.

George Dietz was born in the late 1920s in Kassel, Germany, during the Weimar Republic, though little early biographical information about him survives. Dietz's father was a German veteran of the World Wars; less documentary evidence survives about his mother. As a teenager, George Dietz joined the Hitler Youth while his father was again

off at war. Dietz recalled that having seen his father in a storm trooper's uniform helped convince him later of the antisemitic conspiracy theory that argues against the existence of a Holocaust of European Jewry. In 1980, Dietz would claim, "I'm sure my father didn't kill six million Jews." Following World War II and the division of Germany, the younger Dietz resided in West Germany until he emigrated to New Jersey in 1957.<sup>21</sup>

In 1971, Dietz relocated to West Virginia, where he became a farmland real estate broker. A self-avowed "anti-communist," Dietz grew ever more active in the reactionary right-wing politics of the United States. He began publication of *Liberty Bell* in 1973 and joined the John Birch Society in 1974. This association was short-lived, however, and Dietz left the John Birch Society in 1976, claiming the society was insufficiently antisemitic in fighting communism.<sup>22</sup> Fellow ex-Bircher Revilo P. Oliver, a prolific author whose "fingerprints showed up on virtually every far right tendency in the post-World War II years," began publishing in *Liberty Bell* in this period.<sup>23</sup> Recent work by Spencer Sunshine has identified that Dietz attempted to finance another racist publisher, James Mason—the author of *SIEGE*, a neo-Nazi "handbook" that advocated for violent stochastic terrorism to dissolve the constitutional bonds of the United States. This alliance was also short-lived, as backbiting between the two dissolved this partnership.<sup>24</sup>

From the mid-1970s onward, Dietz would focus on his own enterprise, Liberty Bell Publications, to fulfill his larger strategic objective of liberating European and American white people from the supposed yoke of Jewish oppression and the imagined evils of racial integration. Antisemitism and white supremacy dominated Dietz's political objectives. Throughout the print run of *Liberty Bell* and in various interviews, George Dietz made clear that he believed Nazi propaganda claiming a Jewish cabal had captured Western governments and was responsible for the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.

From the 1970s until the end of his operations in 1999, George Dietz would be a central organizational component of a politically active and ideologically motivated white power movement. Liberty Bell Publications was a crucial American distributor of predominantly antisemitic but broadly hateful works such as *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *Which Way Western Man?*, *Postscripts*, and *The Turner Diaries*. Both *Mein*

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21 Barry Renfrew, "Nazi Germany Is Alive and Well in the U.S.," *Spokane (WA) Review*, March 23, 1980, E6.

22 Chip Berlet and Carol Mason, "Swastikas in Cyberspace," in *Trumping Democracy: From Reagan to the Alt-Right*, ed. Chip Berlet (Routledge, 2020), 50–51; Carol Mason, *Reading Appalachia from Left to Right: Conservatives and the 1974 Kanawha County Textbook Controversy* (Cornell University Press, 2009), 57, 60, 74–76.

23 David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024), 154–79; Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2009), 393.

24 Spencer Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Counter-Cultural Fascism: The Origins and Afterlife of James Mason's Siege* (Routledge, 2024).

*Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had been distributed by Henry Ford before the United States became involved in World War II and curtailed their distribution.<sup>25</sup> Dietz's distribution of *Mein Kampf* and the *Protocols* through his own independent press represented the first large-scale reprinting of either work in the United States in over thirty years.

Like many in the white power movement, Dietz understood politics almost exclusively through a zero-sum calculus of race. Any expansion of rights for non-whites in any white-majority country necessarily meant the restriction of rights for whites. The defeat of Nazi Germany, the enactment of civil rights for Black Americans, and the integration of American civic institutions were, to Dietz, not only social catastrophes but political disasters wrought by a malicious Jewish cabal advancing rights for non-whites. Rather than understanding Judaism as a complex identity with overlapping social, cultural, religious, and ethnic components, this philosophy fallaciously construes it as a race necessarily opposed to whiteness.<sup>26</sup> Selections from Revilo P. Oliver's *America's Decline*, reproduced in several introductions to *Liberty Bell*, make clear that Dietz's ideal form of politics is the forceful dominance of white people over all other races:

We think Congoids unintelligent, but they feel only contempt for a race so stupid or craven that it fawns on them, gives them votes, lavishly subsidizes them with its own earnings, and even oppresses its own people to curry their favor. . . . The only objective criterion of superiority, among human races as among all other species, is biological: the strong survive, the weak perish. The superior race of mankind today is the one that will emerge victorious—whether by its technology or its fecundity.<sup>27</sup>

Oliver was a professor of linguistics at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and a frequent contributor to *Liberty Bell*. From the 1960s through the 1990s he wrote

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25 See George Dietz's publisher's catalog, *Books for Patriots from Liberty Bell Publications* (Liberty Bell Publications, n.d.), 1–11, box 48, folder 8, "Liberty Bell Publications," TARC/PRA.

26 On the post-1930s inclusion of antisemitic rhetoric in the traditionally anti-Black and nativist Second Klan, see Britt Tevis, "Antisemitism in U.S. History," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, ed. John Butler (Oxford University Press, 2023). Mark Weitzman identifies this specific politicized antisemitism in later online spaces in "'The Internet Is Our Sword,' Aspects of Online Antisemitism," in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, ed. John K. Roth, Elisabeth Maxwell, Margot Levy, and Wendy Whitworth (Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 911–25.

27 Dietz irregularly contributed his own commentary to his magazine; however, the materials he chose to reproduce also demonstrate his racism and antisemitism. The following are materials reprinted by Dietz that attest to his racism, antisemitism, white supremacy, and fascistic politics: Henry Ford, "The International Jew" and "The Jew and His Fears," *Liberty Bell* 7, no. 7 (1978): 37–49 and 49–52, respectively; Revilo P. Oliver, *America's Decline: The Education of a Conservative* (Liberty Bell Publications, 1981); Charles E. Weber, "The Jewish Problem: An Aryan Survival in the United States, Rational and Irrational Approaches to the Jewish Question," *Liberty Bell* 12, no. 4 (1984): 19–26.

extensive racist and antisemitic tracts decrying the supposedly false narrative of the Holocaust, excoriating the “Zionist Occupational Government” of the United States, and raging against what he saw as the evils of the 1957, 1964, and 1968 Civil Rights Acts. A strong proponent of genocide and the violent establishment of a white ethnostate in the United States, Oliver heavily influenced his protégé William Luther Pierce. Aligned with the patently antisemitic and racist work of his mentor, Pierce would go on to establish the National Alliance—sometimes called National Vanguard—in 1974 and publish *The Turner Diaries* in 1978. Oliver also sat on the editorial board of the Institute for Historical Review, a pseudo-academic global network of tenured academics that publishes a quarterly journal. David Walsh convincingly argues that, despite Oliver’s clearly hateful rhetoric, he maintained close though closeted relations with significant figures in the mainstream American Right, most notably with William F. Buckley Jr., publisher of the *National Review* and doyen of the neoconservative movement of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>28</sup>

If race was politics for this branch of the American white power movement, then the solution to the expansion civil rights for non-white, non-Christian Americans could only be a political one. It was for this reason that Dietz chose the distribution and promotion of print publications as his field. The primary impediment to white political survival, so went their logic, was a lack of racial consciousness among white Americans. Every issue of *Liberty Bell* opened with an appeal for the white race to educate itself about the supposed evils of integration. By the early 1980s, Dietz had established himself and *Liberty Bell* as crucial fixtures in the white power movement.

Dietz would use the distribution base for *Liberty Bell* to attract computer users to Liberty Bell BBS. From its outset, Dietz was clear that Liberty Bell BBS would serve the same purpose as his print magazine—to disseminate white nationalist, racist, and antisemitic materials to as broad an audience as possible.<sup>29</sup> Committed to enlightening white Americans regarding their purported subjugation, Dietz understood information as the principal battleground of the white power movement. Electronic communications were therefore a powerful companion to printed materials.

It is in the “Letters to the Editor” section of the August 1983 edition of *Liberty Bell* that we find the first reference to any computerized hate network in the United States. Dietz protected the identity of his readership by initializing the names of his letter writers yet demonstrated the national reach of his publication by providing state-level associations for each letter that he published. Further material such as advertisements and forewords provide information on the infrastructure and distribution of Liberty Bell BBS. The two key events in the evolution of Liberty Bell BBS’s infrastructure are the creation of a second address for the site in 1988, which was hosted in Chicago, and the eventual

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28 Walsh, *Taking America Back*, 149–51.

29 George Dietz, *Command Guide* (Liberty Bell Publications, 1984), 4, box 16, folder 43, “Computers-Racists-BBS,” TARC/PRA.

closure of the bulletin board. References to the network's operation end in the early 1990s, though research materials from Political Research Associates and Chip Berlet suggest that Liberty Bell BBS only went offline following Dietz's passing in 1999.

While no digital copies of Liberty Bell BBS have yet been identified, it is possible to recover significant information about the site from materials published by Dietz and contemporary research conducted by the Anti-Defamation League and Political Research Associates. Perhaps the most extensive collection of materials on Liberty Bell BBS is provided by PRA, including two printouts of the network from 1985, later interviews with Dietz conducted by research associate Chip Berlet, physical copies of *Liberty Bell*, and an operations manual that documents Dietz's intentions for the network. The Anti-Defamation League provides insight into the antisemitic politics of Liberty Bell BBS and the material realities of operating the computer network. Finally, Dietz discussed Liberty Bell BBS extensively in the "Letters to the Editor" section of *Liberty Bell*. This latter source base provides the broadest chronology of the network, giving snippets about Liberty Bell BBS's operation up through 1990. Although it is impossible to trawl through a dedicated library of content from Liberty Bell BBS, it is possible to provide detailed qualitative analysis of the site's operations, intentions, and overall impact on the white power movement from the rich scaffolding provided by the abovementioned sources.

Liberty Bell BBS was a complex, secure hate network, with connection and security protocols on par with contemporary bulletin boards. In the February 1988 edition of *Liberty Bell*, a reader identified as R. F. from the state of New York asked Dietz directly about uploading information to Liberty Bell BBS, noting that they "played around with 'Apple Access'" and tried four specifically antisemitic passwords to gain access. Dietz responded to the letter:

We'll make a Password available to any one of our old, established subscribers and/or book customers who own a (any) computer and who may wish to "upload" textfiles into our Data Board System for possible inclusion in Liberty Bell. The phone number of the Data Board is 304-927-1773. . . . A Password is not required to gain access to the system, but is—for obvious reasons—required to enter any data/messages into the system. Any "ASCII" textfile or program file can be sent in directly on Apple //e or IBM diskettes.<sup>30</sup>

This represents an extensive look at Dietz's management and securitization of Liberty Bell BBS. Dietz's consolidation of permissions for writing materials to the network, while allowing any user unfettered reading permissions, meant he could maintain rigid control over the ideological direction of his computer network. This site did not operate as an open

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30 R. F. letter to the editor, *Liberty Bell* 15, no. 8 (February 1988): 51, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-198802/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-198802/).

forum. Keeping hate networks secure, free from subversion, and centralized in production was a key element of Louis Beam's call for a leaderless resistance. It is noteworthy that though this communiqué came just over four years after the start of Liberty Bell BBS, Dietz had already developed a sophisticated means of control for his network.

The most comprehensive material available to document the operations of this computer network is a surviving command guide for Liberty Bell BBS. The command guide is meticulously organized and describes each option, menu, and submenu that a user could input, with resources for those unfamiliar with computers and computer networks. Published by Dietz in March 1984, the command guide was mailed to *Liberty Bell* subscribers as part of a broader marketing campaign for the network. Around the same time, he began including business-card-sized advertisements for the bulletin board, which appeared often but irregularly in editions of *Liberty Bell* until the 1990s.<sup>31</sup> While much of Berlet's literature on Liberty Bell BBS refers to the site as "Info.International Network," both readers and Dietz frequently referred to the network as Liberty Bell BBS or Liberty Bell Network, and by 1988 the advertising for the site had changed to reflect this convention.

Liberty Bell BBS required significant identifying information from users who wished to use its more advanced functions. Users needed to enter basic demographic data about themselves before they could proceed to the main menu of the bulletin board. This included first and last names, telephone numbers, residential addresses, and the type of computer from which they were connecting. Only then would the system issue a password that granted access to the rest of the site. Then a password validation fee of five dollars was required for continued access to the site under the same username.<sup>32</sup> This personal data collection and charge to access the network are corroborated by Dietz's communications in *Liberty Bell* with users who wanted to gain permission to post content to the network. This basic securitization helped Dietz identify frequent users of Liberty Bell BBS while he moderated who was allowed to post messages to the site's forums.

Liberty Bell BBS was no more or less secure than most other computer networks at the time. Whereas Dietz justified these requirements as a level of securitization against potential infiltrators, this protocol was not unusual for accessing most bulletin boards in the 1980s. Password fees helped offset the costs of the equipment and electricity required to run computer networks. Political Research Associates notes that, if a user simply wished to read materials posted to Liberty Bell BBS, entering "New" as a password would grant access to the site, and that potentially false names and addresses were rarely checked against known users. This, coupled with the half-hour session times granted to each individual call to the computer network, would have made the direct policing of access to the site challenging at best. While those opposed to the

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31 George Dietz, "Liberty Bell Network Advertisement," *Liberty Bell* 15, no. 3 (November 1987): 39, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-198711-partial/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-198711-partial/).

32 Dietz, *Command Guide*.

white power movement may not have been able to significantly damage or alter the site—though users of Aryan Liberty Net did ascribe frequent downtime to malicious infiltration—it still allowed researchers and civil rights activists nearly unfettered access to the contents of Dietz’s computer network.

Once a user gained access to the site, they would arrive at the top-level menus. Dietz notes in the command guide that only two of the nineteen top-level options would direct users to content, while the rest of the options either set parameters for viewing the site or allowed users to learn more about computers. For example, the first submenu, “A,” directed users to “Apple Tips,” which instructed the caller about more effectively making use of their Apple II computer.<sup>33</sup> Option “D” allowed users to “Download Programs” to their Apple home computer. The structure of Liberty Bell BBS therefore displayed the wonkish, gangly tendencies typical of computer networks of the era. Computer usage in the United States was still relatively low in 1985—fewer than a quarter of Americans reported that they regularly accessed a computer, let alone owned a home computer. An even smaller fraction of those Americans had the capability, in either hardware or technical ability, to access computer networks.<sup>34</sup> Dietz, like other system operators of the time, understood he needed to provide extensive information for users who may be accessing a computer network for the very first time. The options on Liberty Bell BBS’s top-level menu were largely redundant or useful only once, setting users’ displays to the proper resolution, text orientation, and text speed. Crucially, however, while redundant or inefficient, these options familiarized members of the white power movement with the operation and maintenance of computer networks.

All of the above-described components were relatively standard for a bulletin board of the mid-1980s; however, in 1984, when a user selected “G” from the top-level menu, it would take them to “General Topics” and produce the following list of options:

- 1 = Prof. R. P. Oliver’s Postscripts
- 2 = WVA Real Estate Bargains
- 3 = Election News/Comments
- 4 = Historic Facts & Figures
- 5 = ‘Holocaust’: Fact or Fiction?
- 6 = List of Patriotic Orgs.
- 7 = List of Patriotic Books
- 8 = Reports and Reviews<sup>35</sup>

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33 Dietz, *Command Guide*, 5–8.

34 Robert Kominsky, “Computer Use in the United States: 1984,” in *US Bureau of the Census: Current Population Reports*, series P-23, no. 155 (US Government Printing Office, 1988).

35 Dietz, *Command Guide*, 1984. Quotes of material from Liberty Bell BBS and other networks

Chip Berlet's archival copies of the site provide the following snapshot of the content menu available to users of Liberty Bell BBS a year later, in June 1985, demonstrating that Dietz maintained, updated, and adapted the site over time:

- 1 = Prof. R. P. Oliver's Postscripts
- 2 = Reports and Reviews
- 3 = Letters to "Liberty Bell" Editor
- 4 = Historic Facts & Figures
- 5 = 'Holocaust': Fact or Fiction?
- 6 = Articles from "Liberty Bell"
- 7 = The Jew in Review
- 8 = On Race and Religion
- 9 = Computer store (not implem.)
- 10 = WVA Real Estate Bargains.<sup>36</sup>

Berlet's archival copies show that "1 = Prof. R. P. Oliver's Postscripts" contained the following digitized writings from Professor Oliver:

- 1 = The Businessmen of God
- 2 = Truth is Stranger than Fiction
- 3 = The "Holohoax"
- 4 = The F.B.I. & a White Man
- 5 = Bobby Fischer & the Jews
- 6 = A Ham Actor in the White House
- 7 = The U.S. & Latin America
- 8 = The "Godly" of Cleveland
- 9 = The Jews & Saudi Arabia
- 10 = List of Patriotic Books<sup>37</sup>

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are reproduced as they originally appeared, including with errors and irregularities.

36 Under "Real Estate Bargains," Dietz listed at least three properties near his home in Reedy, West Virginia, and encouraged buyers to use one twenty-acre property as a "Survival Camp." Alongside Louis Beam's call for a leaderless resistance, many white power organizations were establishing survivalist camps in the 1980s and 1990s. Dietz's inclusion of land sales on a digital communications network for the specific purpose of creating militant white exclaves is a good example. George Dietz, "WVA Real Estate Bargains," Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 22, box 16, folder 44, TARC/PRA; Coates, *Armed and Dangerous*; Chip Berlet, "When Hate Went Online," draft chapter adapted from a paper presented at the Northeast Sociological Association Spring Conference, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, April 28, 2001, accessed June 29, 2026, [https://simson.net/ref/leaderless/berlet\\_when\\_hate\\_went\\_online.pdf](https://simson.net/ref/leaderless/berlet_when_hate_went_online.pdf).

37 Berlet, "When Hate Went Online."

These snapshots indicate that Dietz effectively used Liberty Bell BBS as a virtual repository for his printed magazine, with a specific interest in reproducing materials written by Revido P. Oliver. While these captures are limited to a single year that was relatively early in Liberty Bell BBS's operations, they reinforce that this site functioned as another front for both the publication of *Liberty Bell* and Dietz's real estate business. While it is difficult to discern the impact that Liberty Bell BBS had on the white power movement as the first-ever American white power activist hate site, it clearly provided crucial technical proficiencies with computer networks that would become key to the strategic reorganization of the movement.

Liberty Bell BBS's potential audience was limited by several factors, and the overall significance of the content shared on these early sites to the direction of the white power movement is likely minimal. While engagement metrics and metadata corresponding to site access are irrecoverable, it is possible to make some logical extrapolations about the demographics and breadth of Liberty Bell BBS users. A 1988 publication from the United States Census Bureau notes that just under one-fifth of all Americans had regular access to a computer, and that more than two-thirds of home computers were owned by households earning more than \$25,000 per year (~\$72,000 in January 2026), representing the median income of the top one-third of American households.<sup>38</sup> Most computer users were therefore predominantly well-off white Americans with at least some technical knowledge about computer networks. Further restricting Liberty Bell BBS's audience is the fact that most computer network users in the 1980s relied on advertisements for networks that listed the specific phone number of a site.<sup>39</sup> Dietz did not advertise Liberty Bell BBS in popular magazines like *Computer Shopper*, which listed public bulletin boards, meaning his digital audience was largely limited to those who read *Liberty Bell* or other white power publications that carried Dietz's materials. The anonymity of Liberty Bell BBS was a crucial facet of the network's operation and continues to make the work of reconstructing the site's userbase difficult.

The cost to operate and access a white supremacist network in the 1980s provides a degree of materiality to the ephemeral nature of digital communications. The physical components that facilitate white power organization and communications have historically shaped the scope and scale of the movement. Linda Gordon notes that the Second Klan readily adopted film, radio, print newspapers, and other emerging technologies and effectively grew their movement into the single largest white nationalist organization of the post-Civil War United States. Film, radio, and print newspapers were top-down media

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38 Kominsky, "Computer Use." Inflation determined using the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl> (accessed July 23, 2026).

39 Driscoll, *Modem World*, 58–89.

distribution systems. They allowed the Second Klan to disseminate tightly controlled information to their followers.<sup>40</sup>

While a significant amount of literature discusses the democratizing, bottom-up nature of online communities in the 1980s, Liberty Bell BBS was constructed with a top-down model of information distribution in mind. Dietz relied on popular contributors to his magazine to populate the digital pages of his site. Revilo P. Oliver was a regular contributor and a prolific author whose books were published by Liberty Bell Publications. In December 1985, Dietz circulated an appeal to purchase an electronic word processor for Oliver, crowdsourcing funds so Oliver could more easily publish material to computer networks.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to the narrative that early computer networks formed organically from interested hobbyists, this effort by Dietz replicated within this new digital space the existing top-down hierarchy that hate networks were familiar with in print and physical organization. In the same December 1985 edition of *Liberty Bell*, multiple writers attested to donating sums of money ranging from \$5 to \$88 to acquire a password for Liberty Bell BBS so they could receive “the TRUE MESSAGE of White people from the Liberty Bell Network.”<sup>42</sup> As notable authors and leading figures in the white power movement began disseminating their ideologies in the networks of the 1980s, the ease of publication and absence of censorious pressures drew other prominent theorists and activists within the white power movement to the nascent internet. Dietz’s own experimentation with computer networks would further inform other prominent hate sites’ operations through this snowballing effect, prompting them to provide digitized access to written works.

In much the same way that Dietz collected money for Oliver’s word processor, Louis Beam and Don Black, Belew claims, utilized funds from The Order and Aryan Nations to help white power leaders purchase computers.<sup>43</sup> As Tom Metzger, head of the White Aryan Resistance, corresponded with his subscribers to help them move online, so too did Beam help draw Aryan Nations members to Aryan Liberty Net. Dietz’s Liberty Bell BBS, the very first white power hate site, ran on an Apple IIe microcomputer, was stored on a 10-megabyte hard drive, and was connected to the local phone lines via a Hayes Micromodem IIe. The tools of the digital white power revolution would run the average consumer about \$2,000 in 1985 and could be purchased at the nearest RadioShack.<sup>44</sup>

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40 Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright Publishing, 2017).

41 G. A. H., letter to the editor, *Liberty Bell* 13, no. 4 (December 1985): 53–55, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-198512/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-198512/).

42 See letters to the editor by R. W., H. J. B, Dr. H. I., and K. W., *Liberty Bell* 13, no. 4 (December 1985): 55–57, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-198512/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-198512/).

43 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 120–24, 127, 133.

44 Dietz, *Command Guide*; Justin J. Finger, *Computerized Networks of Hate: An ADL Fact Finding Report*, Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, New York, NY, January 24, 1985, <https://archive.org/>

While this cost represented ten years' worth of subscriptions to *Liberty Bell*, any home computer owner could access any other hate network either in the United States or abroad. In comparative terms, a home computer represented a capacity of scale for individual white power activists.

Liberty Bell BBS was also set up to be another source of income for Dietz, though it is unclear how much he profited or how much he laid out for operational costs. Several services on the site were locked behind what we would now call paywalls: A password cost \$5; an annual membership of \$20 granted access to an advanced layer of downloadable content and other vague, unverifiable benefits. Dietz called this elevated tier "The Club," and this fee was the same price as an annual subscription to *Liberty Bell*.<sup>45</sup> While the actual cash flow generated by Liberty Bell BBS is difficult to discern—Dietz left no indication whether the venture generated or lost money overall—at least in 1985, George Dietz saw the potential of protecting information and network usage behind paywalls.

Little evidence of Liberty Bell BBS's operations in the 1990s survives, and it is entirely plausible that the network went offline or was only intermittently available by the mid-1990s. In the late 1980s, Dietz suffered a significant health event, though the details are spotty. Liberty Bell Publications drew down significantly in operations after Dietz's infirmity. Many sections of *Liberty Bell* disappeared—including the "Letters to the Editor" section for almost a year—from which much of the longitudinal information about Liberty Bell BBS is drawn. Whereas in previous editions Dietz had published—and often responded to—up to thirty letters in a single monthly edition, after 1990 he published only a handful of letters irregularly.<sup>46</sup> Commensurate with this decline in engagement with his readership, Dietz provided less and less information about Liberty Bell BBS. The last missive about Liberty Bell BBS was published in a 1989 letter, and advertisements for the computer network disappeared shortly thereafter.<sup>47</sup> By the late 1990s, much of the discussion in *Liberty Bell* about computers had shifted to their untrustworthiness and

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details/ComputerizedNetworksOfHate/page/n3/mode/2up; Tim Miller, "The Electronic Fringe," *Washington Post*, July 14, 1985, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1985/07/14/the-electronic-fringe/17955294-9c94-4b5d-99e4-9af799b45eae/>.

45 Dietz, *Command Guide*, 2, 4, 19.

46 A typical print-run from *Liberty Bell* in the mid-1980s would be volume 13 (1985–1986), in which Dietz published 125 letters across twelve issues. Comparing this with a typical volume from the 1990s, such as volume 19 (1992–1993), there is a 48 percent reduction in published letters, totaling just seventy-eight published letters to the editor across ten issues. There is a significant qualitative difference in these letters as well. Published letters from the 1980s were often original letters sent to Dietz specifically, and to which Dietz often responded. Roughly a third of the letters reproduced in the 1990s were letters submitted to other publications such as the *Journal for Historical Review* and *REMARKS*, but which Dietz found of interest to his readership.

47 M. H., letter to the editor, *Liberty Bell* 16, no. 6 (February 1989): 56, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-198902/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-198902/).

the coming challenges of Y2K.<sup>48</sup> The primary focus of civil rights organizations and news coverage had shifted to larger computer networks that espoused more violent rhetoric, such as Aryan Liberty Net and Stormfront, the site that would come to dominate the digital footprint of the white power movement by the end of the millennium.

### **The Influence of Liberty Bell BBS on Aryan Liberty Net**

The direct lineage of Stormfront begins with the Aryan Nations' Aryan Liberty Net (ALN). In mid-1984, Louis Beam announced the launch of a computer network for the Aryan Nations, dubbed Aryan Liberty Net. He intended the service to link broadly affiliated forums centered around the ideologies of what Beam deemed the "Patriotic Movement." Established with three regional servers in Idaho, Texas, and Chicago, ALN quickly grew in usage. By August 1985, Political Research Associates had identified at least ten regional terminals that hosted copies of ALN. Most were in existing Klan strongholds: North Carolina alone boasted four discrete terminals all connecting users to the same forums. By noting the number provided by the computer network when users signed off, PRA was able to identify that NCKKK3 (North Carolina KKK, terminal #3) had received nearly two thousand visitors after less than a year of operation.<sup>49</sup>

Aryan Liberty Net suffers from a more severe archival dearth than Liberty Bell BBS—no extant copies of the site are available for research beyond those few remnants preserved in dot-matrix printouts by the civil rights organizations that monitored white power activists in this period. Despite this, many of the same techniques used to reconstruct Liberty Bell BBS can also be employed for ALN. Materials from the same civil rights organizations and publications from AKIA Press—the Aryan Nations' in-house print office—provide detailed information about the operations of the site. Furthermore, the similarity of these materials reinforces contemporary evaluations that George Dietz helped Louis Beam establish Aryan Liberty Net, providing continuity between the two sites.<sup>50</sup> For example, the operations guide to ALN was published shortly after the manual for Liberty Bell BBS, suggesting either direct communication between Dietz and Beam about what their userbase required or at the very least adoption of best practices based

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48 Robert Frens, "The Y2K Cockroach," and Molly Gill, letter to the editor, *Liberty Bell* 28, no. 1 (September 1998): 35–39 and 53–55, respectively, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-199809.pdf](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-199809.pdf); letters to the editor by S. R. and R. T., *Liberty Bell* 24, no. 12 (August 1997): 52–53 and 56, respectively, [https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell\\_201708/LB-199708/](https://archive.org/details/LibertyBell_201708/LB-199708/).

49 "Database," Political Research Associates, box 16, folder 43, "Computers-Racists-BBS," TARC/PRA.

50 Finger, *Computerized Networks*; Miller, "Electronic Fringe"; *Inter-Klan Newsletter and Survival Alert*, 14–15, box 16, folder 43, "Computers-Racists-BBS," TARC/PRA; Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 27, 35.

on observation. Dietz's technical expertise and experience in operating Liberty Bell BBS would form a crucial backbone of the computer networks that would go on to inform Stormfront.

Like Dietz, the Aryan Nations established its computer network to coordinate white power activists' actions more effectively through direct communication free from what it identified as Jewish censorship. In mid-1985, the welcome message that preceded Aryan Liberty Net's opening menu stated that the network was explicitly established to elude "[t]he news media, opinion moulders, the federal government and other would be 'thought police' of [the United States]."<sup>51</sup> Further tying the label "thought police" to Jewish civil rights organizations, ALN listed regional Anti-Defamation League branches under the heading "Thought Police Headquarters." This list contained street addresses, phone numbers, and in some cases the names and addresses of regional and national directors of the ADL and allied civil rights organizations.<sup>52</sup> Aryan Liberty Net was therefore established and operated as an antisemitic answer to the supposed Jewish control of American media and journalism.

The most provocative and well known of ALN's features was its "enemies list." Various printouts of ALN confirm that this list did exist and was divided into distinct categories under the General Interest submenu "Know Your Enemy." Four further submenus populated this regularly updated section:

1. Anti-Defelamation League Offices
2. Communist Party Headquarters
3. Name & Addresses of Race Traitors
4. Names & Adds. of Known ZOG (Zionest Occupational Government) Informers.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Louis Beam and fellow system operators Robert Miles and Stephen Miller would post all known information about individuals and organizations that the Klan wanted to direct violence against. The submenu on "Race Traitors" and "ZOG Informers" encouraged the extrajudicial killing of those on these lists and noted that once a supposedly "lawful" government returned to the land, those listed would be executed.<sup>54</sup>

The information about individuals on the list was comprehensive and documented known addresses and the physical appearance of potential targets. Few of the names from this list are provided in the extant documentation on ALN, though the case and

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51 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 17.

52 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 57–59, 80–81.

53 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 80.

54 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 57–59, 80–81.

fate of a purported Klan infiltrator and federal informant listed as “Buster Keaton” is reproduced in full and offers a glimpse at how the enemies list was used. Keaton was only the second such person of interest on this list, marking him as an early entrant on a list that would eventually have dozens of names. Alongside identifying information such as hair color, vocation, and height, Keaton’s supposed crime against the Klan was given—allegedly using his position as a Great Titan of the North Texas Klan to turn “info over to the Zionist Occupational Government.”<sup>55</sup> A later update to ALN jubilantly confirmed Keaton’s death, noting that the *Dallas Morning News* reported his death by mail bomb.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult, however, to verify this information, as no Dallas-based obituaries or reporting for this period discussed this incident, and Buster Keaton was also the name of a famous film actor. These materials were regularly updated by all three of the system operators: Beam, Miles, and Miller. These regular updates demonstrate their deliberate maintenance not just of the enemies list but of Aryan Liberty Net as a whole.

Louis Beam used ALN not only to coordinate violent direct action from users of the bulletin board but also to highlight the Klan’s public presence. A November 1984 post from Beam on ALN directed users to tune into a rebroadcast of Klan leaders’ appearance on a local Dallas TV station.<sup>57</sup> Other subheadings provided users access to reading materials from Beam, such as his 1983 *Essays of a Klansmen*, digitized in full.<sup>58</sup> Additional offline white power organizations were also advertised on ALN, helping coordinate this vast and geographically disparate movement—though it charged organizations \$5 to be listed.<sup>59</sup> One post directed users of the network to a memorial for white supremacist Robert Matthews that would be erected in the Pacific Northwest in 1985, though Beam requested that anyone interested in visiting the monument contact the Aryan Nations directly for information on its location.<sup>60</sup> The Aryan Nations benefited from the flexibility of digital publications and the ease with which content could be updated, compared to the publication process of AKIA Press and other aligned white power publications.

Digital memorials to white power activists killed by police were a major component of Aryan Liberty Net. Robert Billups notes that, in later and more public white power web forums, Kathy Ainsworth and Vicki Weaver were memorialized as martyrs to emphasize the brutality of police action in killing white women.<sup>61</sup> In the bulletin board era, however,

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55 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 83.

56 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 31, 83.

57 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 30.

58 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 18, 39, 45.

59 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 38, 90–92.

60 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 34.

61 Billups, “Martyred Women.”

memorials on ALN commemorated men like Gordon Kahl and Robert Matthews.<sup>62</sup> While these deaths were more proximate to the establishment of ALN—Kahl, a member of Posse Comitatus, was killed in 1983, and Matthews, leader of The Order, was killed in 1984—this difference can also be explained by a distinction in audience. As Billups notes, later internet sites were established with the understanding that Americans from outside the white power movement may be more sympathetic to memorials of slaughtered women.<sup>63</sup> In comparison, Beam hoped that the predominantly male white power community of the 1980s would be driven to action by the violent fates of comrades. Given their early presence on ALN, it is likely that these digital reveries for martyrs of the white power movement originated with Aryan Liberty Net. Tracing this material forward to Billups's sources further reinforces the influence ALN's structures had on the white power movement's later digital projects.

Frequently discussed in the literature about ALN is Louis Beam's possible use of money illegally obtained by The Order in a series of robberies that targeted armored cars and banks to finance the implementation and distribution of this computer network. Kathleen Belew discusses the veracity of this claim, citing a letter from North Carolina Klan leader Glenn Miller as evidence for a \$200,000 fund to establish the computer network.<sup>64</sup> While the specific items purchased with this illicit capital may never be ascertained, it is possible to discern from Beam's writing on the site and in an associated command guide that the Aryan Nations did not materially assist individual white power activists in obtaining their own home computers. Instead, Beam wrote that the Aryan Nations was willing to provide information on the kind of computer to buy—often either a genuine or “imitation” Apple IIe, as George Dietz also suggested, for its simplicity of use right out of the box—and how to establish a network connection through a modem and router. Even then, Beam cautioned against overspending on a computer, noting: “Currently a new Apple IIe imitation, can be had for \$850. Unless you are an organizational leader, you do not need to spend more than this.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, though the Aryan Nations may not have provided substantial material support to enable access to ALN, there was a network of informational support and assistance for accessing and operating these computer networks.

While George Dietz was more focused on using *Liberty Bell* and Liberty Bell BBS to disseminate information, Louis Beam, Robert Miles, and Stephen Miller saw Aryan Liberty Net as a powerful tool of group organization that could subvert the supposed “Zionist” control of traditional media. For these men, a white supremacist computer

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62 Aryan Liberty Net, Liberty Bell BBS, 29.

63 Billups, “Martyred Women.”

64 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 144.

65 Louis Beam, “Announcing Aryan Nations / Ku Klux Klan Computer Net,” *Inter-Klan Newsletter and Survival Alert* (April 1985), box 16, folder 43, “Computers-Racists-BBS,” TARC/PRA.

network would only be potent as a political weapon if it could attract ever more users and encourage a plethora of violent and nonviolent actions. The available materials show that ALN maintained an active userbase and was frequently reported on in the media throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its utilization clearly dwarfs that of Liberty Bell BBS, though the latter is better attested in archival sources.

### **The Influence of Liberty Bell BBS and Aryan Liberty Net on Stormfront**

As digital communications protocols became more sophisticated throughout the 1990s, white power activists had to adapt to rapidly advancing digital technologies. Hyperlinks, born of more responsive packet switching techniques developed by Tim Berners-Lee in the early 1990s, allowed internet users to effortlessly cycle between links on web pages. In contrast, if users wanted to move between sites on older networks, they had to end their current connection and dial into a new web page.<sup>66</sup> While Aryan Liberty Net maintained an ever-decreasing digital presence, it was Don Black's Stormfront that would become the most popular site for white power activists on the internet in the 1990s and 2000s. Initially published as both a bulletin board and newsgroup, Stormfront was registered by Black in 1995, and he quickly integrated the contents of his existing sites, including updated copies of Louis Beam's *Essays of a Klansmen*, Arthur Butz's Holocaust-denial tract *Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, and essays by William L. Pierce.<sup>67</sup> By 1996, Stormfront not only linked to Black's other digital projects but also provided modern web hosting for ALN, quickly making Stormfront the most popular white-hate site on the internet and a direct inheritor of the Aryan Nations' computer network.<sup>68</sup> The links for ALN soon disappeared from Stormfront's homepage, replaced by a forum interface.

Like George Dietz and Louis Beam, Don Black did not choose web management as his first project to advance the strategic objectives of the white power movement. Black's early white power activism was in violent organization through state-level Klans. As former Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan of Alabama, Black had attempted to overthrow the government of Dominica to establish a white ethnostate in the Caribbean in a 1981 plot dubbed "Operation Red Dog." Black did not embark on his invasion,

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66 George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992): 35–70; Martin C.J. Elton and John Carey, "The Prehistory of the Internet and Its Traces in the Present," in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. W. H. Dutton (Oxford University Press, 2013), 27–47.

67 "Links to Other Websites," Stormfront, December 30, 1996, <https://web.archive.org/web/19961230152643/http://www.stormfront.org/>.

68 "Aryan Nations," homepage hosted on Stormfront, November 27, 1996, <https://web.archive.org/web/19961127155648/http://www2.stormfront.org/an.htm>.

however, as he and nine coconspirators were apprehended by federal agents and charged with violating the 1798 Neutrality Act. For his part in the operation, Black was sentenced to three years in federal prison.<sup>69</sup> Just as federal infiltration had pushed Beam toward establishing Aryan Liberty Net, Black's failed ethnostate project and arrest pushed him toward Stormfront. While serving his three-year sentence, Don Black took courses in computer science, which he later credited with giving him the technical ability to establish Stormfront.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Black became a nexus of the online white power movement and the successor to ALN. By integrating ALN, along with other legacy hate sites such as the forums of the National Alliance (and its publication *National Vanguard*), Don Black was able to utilize the expertise, experience, and audiences of the bulletin-board era to operate his own site. Relying on a knowledge base that stretches back to George Dietz's establishment of Liberty Bell BBS in August 1983, Black was able to grow Stormfront into the largest internet site dedicated to the spread of white nationalist propaganda and discussion—boasting nearly three hundred thousand monthly users by the mid-2000s.

## Conclusion

The limitations of the materials presented in this article must be considered. As noted above, the recovery of usage statistics is nearly impossible. The snapshots available to historians of Liberty Bell BBS and Aryan Liberty Net also provide only a slim chronology for each site. While George Dietz's site is more comprehensively documented in extant primary source material from Dietz himself, ALN received more contemporary study from scholars and civil rights networks. The recovery of any further primary materials from these sites is improbable—though not necessarily impossible—given how quickly older magnetic hard drives deteriorate. While later newsgroups provided more demographic information about specific users, these bulletin boards did not.<sup>71</sup> Despite shortcomings in the archival record, these snapshots and the associated scaffolding material do provide information on the operations, usage, goals, accessibility, and chronology of the earliest hate networks.

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69 Stewart Bell, *Bayou of Pigs: The True Story of an Audacious Plot to Turn a Tropical Island into a Criminal Paradise* (John Wiley and Sons, 2008); Robin Lloyd, "Web Trackers Hunt Racist Groups Online," *CNN*, August 12, 1999, <https://www.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9908/12/hate.online/>; Daniels, *Cyber Racism*, 81.

70 David Schwab Abel, "The Racist Next Door," *Broward Palm Beach (FL) New Times*, February 19, 1998, <https://www.browardpalmbeach.com/news/the-racist-next-door-6332282>.

71 Alexis de Coning provides an excellent example of how the metadata provided by later computer network forums that host subversive subjects—in her case, newsgroups for a men's rights movement called "meninism"—can yield significant personal information about network usage in extremist communities. See "A 'Lifetime of Indentured Servitude:' Rights, Labor, and Gender Anxieties in a Dead Men's Rights Newsgroup," *Internet Histories* 6, nos. 1–2 (2022): 223–36.

Grasping the aims and evolution of white power activists' early successes with computer networks can help right-wing studies researchers understand how white power activists' ideologies and rhetoric established a foothold in online spaces, while also complicating the utopian view of early web cultures. Relying on materials from George Dietz's *Liberty Bell*, we can determine that the first computer network published by the organized far right went online sometime in August 1983. Taking seriously the dates of letters published by Dietz that reference the arrival of a "computer letter," it is possible to pin this origin down to sometime between August 11 and August 13, 1983. This is almost a year earlier than the scholarly consensus regarding Klan and neo-Nazi hate networks, including even those reports that were contemporary to the publication of Liberty Bell BBS.

Crucially, this predates Louis Beam's call for a leaderless resistance, and the subsequent shift to a cell-style movement. Louis Beam and Stephen Miller's announcement in the spring of 1984 about the establishment of Aryan Liberty Net appeared shortly after Beam's article in the same publication about the necessity of leaderless resistance, implying they had been developing their own computer network alongside their theories on structural reorganization. Even leaderless resistance must be assessed by the outcome of this reorganization—a more centralized movement driven by a handful of key leaders—rather than by their written materials advocating stochastic terror. With this in mind, we should also recall that ALN was produced concurrently with the establishment of Beam's militia training camp in Texas. Online reproductions of lengthy written materials, including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Beam's own *Essays of a Klansmen*, alongside the frequent updating of ALN, demonstrate significant work on this site. While it is impossible to say how much time and capital Beam and Miller expended maintaining and operating ALN, it is clear they devoted considerable attention to it. The revised chronology argued for in this article, and the effort put into early hate sites it demonstrates, means that scholars of the far right must consider the diverse strategies that white power activists employed to evade policing and anti-Klan actions at the end of the twentieth century. The implementation of decentralized but ideologically aligned violence was simply one reform employed by leaders within the white power movement in the 1980s.

Furthermore, the shared competency with computer networks and web forums developed in the evolution from Liberty Bell BBS to Aryan Liberty Net to Stormfront shows that scholars of online white extremism must historicize these movements beyond Stormfront. More fully historicizing Stormfront reveals not just a site operated by a former Klansman but one that had deep roots in the same strategic reorganization of white nationalists that produced devastating acts of terrorism in the 1990s. Connecting these sites paints a radically different picture of Stormfront and its recruitment and harassment campaigns in the mid-2000s. While the work of Les Back, Michael Keith, and John Solomos (1998), Jesse Daniels (2009), Alexandra Minna Stern (2019), and Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg (2022) all identify stages in the transmission of white nationalist rhetoric on computer networks, connecting these authors' insights to a longer, intentional structural reorganization driven by elite figures within the white

power movement reveals that online white ethnonationalism did not emerge from murky internet subcultures but was instead the product of a deliberate, largely successful offline campaign.

The intentional, structured movement of white power activists onto computer networks also complicates the conventional narrative in web histories that the earliest online communities were composed of hobbyists and enthusiasts who organically developed virtual communities. Instead, this research documents that, at the same time many famous early communities such as the WELL were going online, hate sites were also being established.<sup>72</sup> Researchers must understand these timelines together, though they offer a competing model of how networked cultures arose. The strict control over messaging and membership on early hate sites contradicts the standard view that these pre-internet sites, communities, and networks flourished because they encouraged freedom of expression and participation.

While online communities did grow organically out of other offline communities and identities, their interactions in virtual space are often discussed as unique to the virtual environment in which they take place. While the information available on Aryan Liberty Net and Liberty Bell BBS is limited, it is also clear that there was little of the social and conversational dynamism present in the vibrant early cyber communities described in Driscoll's account of the "modem world." Instead, these networks appear to have been echo chambers for the leaders of the white power movement—though this was their intended purpose. Leaders such as Beam, Miller, and Miles were not interested in using computer networks to foster debate and discussion; they were interested in using these networks to more effectively disseminate propaganda, strategy, and courses of action crucial to the restructuring of the American white power movement of the 1980s.

Diving into the extant material on these two early sites and their direct continuity with Stormfront therefore provides significant nuance to our understanding of early digital cultures and white supremacists' efforts at reorganization in the 1980s. Focusing on the development of these networks—George Dietz's Liberty Bell BBS and the Aryan Nations' Aryan Liberty Net—as on par with other avenues of structural reform casts the 1980s as a period of trial and error for the white power movement. The popularity of Stormfront, which built upon the lessons learned by Dietz and the Aryan Nations, should prompt researchers of the US far right to consider digital structural reorganization, rather than just violent extremism, as among the successful adaptations to emerge from

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72 The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) is one of the longest-running, and still active, computer network communities. Originally established in 1985 by as a bulletin board, the WELL survives today as a web community. The WELL is often discussed as a prominent early computer network and received significant journalistic and academic focus in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Susan Aasman notes this is largely due to journalists receiving free subscriptions to the bulletin board, and that "they were neither the first nor the only online community" in the 1980s. Susan Aasman, "The WELL," *The Sage Encyclopedia of the Internet*, ed. Barney Warf (SAGE, 2018), 962–64, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473960367.n282>.

that period of trial and error. When organized violence led to lethal resistance from local, state, and federal law enforcement, the white power movement produced the “lone wolf” domestic terrorist; when state and nonstate actors cracked down on the international distribution of hate materials and Klan affiliation across the United States declined, white nationalist leaders produced some of the earliest computer networks to more effectively, cheaply, and securely organize their movement.

## ARTICLE

56

## Moms for Liberty and the Legacy of White Maternalist Activism

### *Gendered Power and Cultural Organizing in Far-Right Movements*

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**Abstract:** *Through an analysis of Moms for Liberty’s rhetoric and organizing strategies, this article situates the group’s “parental rights” advocacy within a broader historical framework. I define a white maternalist political tradition that connects Moms for Liberty to twentieth-century maternalist groups, demonstrating how the organization reproduces strategies developed by activists who, from the 1950s through the 1980s, portrayed “communism” and “secular humanism” as creeping threats to children and violations of parental rights. Like its predecessors, Moms for Liberty claims that children are being indoctrinated—now by a sinister “woke” ideology allegedly infiltrating schools across the nation. I argue that white maternalist groups organizing around education consistently employ three strategies: 1) suturing a range of progressive causes into a single, conspiratorial container of threat; 2) mobilizing grassroots maternal surveillance to identify and uproot those threats within local schools and communities; and 3) engaging in cultural organizing that reproduces the nuclear family and weaponizes motherhood as a source of moral—and ostensibly apolitical—authority. By presenting themselves not as political actors but as concerned mothers, these activists recast efforts to preserve racial, gendered, and sexual hierarchies as a brave and selfless defense of home and family. Tracing these continuities across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries denaturalizes the rhetorics of apolitical motherhood and child protection that propel these movements, demonstrating instead that these rhetorics are political tools through which far-right activists advance their agendas.*

**Keywords:** maternalism, Moms for Liberty, anti-communism, far-right organizing, parental rights

Moms for Liberty (MFL) is an extremist “parental rights” group that unites under the slogan “we do NOT co-parent with the government” (Miller and Kieffer 2022).<sup>1</sup> The group initially formed to oppose COVID-era education policies such as

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1 The Southern Poverty Law Center designated MFL an extremist anti-government group in 2023. See

school closures, masking in schools, vaccine mandates, and mandatory testing, gaining national attention (and an eventual FBI probe) for its disruptive presence at school board meetings nationwide (Craig 2021). The group's official narrative is that its members "woke up" during the pandemic, claiming that remote learning allowed them to "see behind the education curtain" and realize that their children were being indoctrinated and "groomed" into progressive ideologies. After 2021, the group's activism evolved into advocacy against what it calls "woke indoctrination" within the education system. MFL organizes this opposition into six main issue areas: what it calls critical race theory, social emotional learning, sex education, restorative justice, gender ideology, and "porn" in libraries. Describing themselves as "Mama Bears" and "Joyful Warriors," members claim they fight for a lost right to direct the upbringing of their children. MFL is simultaneously local and national, with a national office facilitating the efforts of local chapters within states. As of February 2024, the organization had 310 chapters across forty-eight states (Perry 2024). The group has built a powerful grassroots network, mobilizing thousands of mothers to run for school boards and monitor classrooms for "woke indoctrination."

Since the group's founding in 2021, MFL's policy demands have been translated into law across the nation. As of October 2024, twenty-one states had passed bans on the teaching of "divisive concepts," such as those dealing with race, gender, and sexuality within K–12 education (PEN America 2024b). And, as of July 2025, sixteen states had passed twenty-two laws censoring discussions of "divisive concepts" or "diversity, equity, and inclusion" within higher education (Benitez et al. 2025). These bills have been a primary policy objective for MFL, which insists that "woke education" caused the progressive protest movements of the 2010s and early 2020s by brainwashing young people and turning them against the United States. In addition, MFL has worked to ban library books and school texts about race, gender, and sexuality. As of November 2024, PEN America (2023, 2024a) had tracked 15,940 book bans across forty-three states, 58 percent of which were tied to MFL in 2023. MFL has also championed policies restricting the rights of transgender youth. As of July 2025, twenty-seven states had enacted bans on gender-affirming care for minors, nineteen states had passed bans on trans people using the bathroom aligned with their gender identity, and twenty-seven states had barred trans youth from participating in school sports (HRC Foundation 2025; Redfield 2025; Yurcaba 2025). MFL also led a successful legal challenge to Joe Biden's trans-inclusive Title IX reforms, leading to the reforms being blocked in any school or district where an MFL member's child attended (Walsh 2024).

The group has further acted as a critical force in the second Trump administration's governing strategy. The Associated Press reported that the Trump administration "embraces and amplifies [Moms for Liberty's] message, launching the group into a

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"Moms for Liberty," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/moms-liberty/>.

new level of influence on public policy” (Binkley 2026). Tina Descovich, the group’s current leader, claimed to have attended about twelve White House events, stating, “We have a seat at the table in so many policy discussions throughout the administration” (Binkley 2026). Moms for Liberty members, leaders, and their children have been guests at the signing of executive orders that actualize the group’s agenda. Twenty MFL members and their daughters attended the signing of Trump’s “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports” executive order, for instance (Dashiell and Smith 2025). And Trump has taken up the group’s long-standing grievance with the Southern Poverty Law Center: Descovich co-wrote an August 2025 letter urging federal agencies to stop using Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) research. The FBI severed ties with the organization two months later, “echoing language from [her] letter” (Binkley 2026). The Justice Department subsequently indicted the SPLC on fraud charges, which MFL claimed as a victory for its longstanding campaign against the organization.<sup>2</sup>

And, finally, MFL has reshaped the structure of education in America by building political support for school privatization, using its national platform to promote vouchers and other forms of private school choice as alternatives to the “indoctrination” in public schools (Stewart 2025). This agenda gained federal force through Trump’s January 2025 executive order “Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families,” which directed federal agencies to identify ways of supporting private, religious, charter, and home-based education with federal funds (Trump 2025a). Two months later, Trump issued “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities,” partially actualizing MFL’s longstanding demand to abolish the Department of Education (MFL leaders attended its signing) (Trump 2025b; Montesano 2025). Congress further advanced this agenda in July 2025 by establishing the nation’s first voucher-style federal tax-credit scholarship program, which uses federal tax credits to incentivize donations to organizations that provide families with scholarships for private-school tuition and other educational expenses (Anderson 2025). MFL has thus successfully transformed opposition to “woke indoctrination” into grassroots support for policies that redirect public funds toward private and religious education (Cunningham 2024).

The group’s abrupt trajectory from outsider activist group to the center of the contemporary right’s governing strategy makes it crucial to understand how MFL so rapidly achieved its political and policy success. In order to better understand MFL’s path to political power, this article places its activism in historical context by examining how the group’s strategies mirror the work of twentieth-century maternalist activists in American education. By refiguring progressive reforms around LGBTQ inclusion and racial justice as forms of “brainwashing,” MFL opened a new salvo in the long-standing

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2 See “Breaking! SPLC Exposed,” Moms for Liberty, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://www.momsforliberty.org/splc/>.

educational battles that Zimmerman (2022) terms the “culture wars” in American education.

Pulling from a range of secondary sources that detail twentieth-century maternalist crusades against “communism” and “secular humanism” in education, I define the tradition that unites MFL with its predecessors as a *white maternalist political tradition*. In the article’s three sections, I define three elements of this tradition: 1) maternalist groups suture together a variety of progressive issue areas into one container of threat; 2) they work to uproot this threat by surveilling local communities for any evidence of progressive ideologies in education; and 3) they engage in cultural organizing that (re)creates the “traditional” right-wing nuclear family through political performance. By leveraging the moral authority of motherhood to resist progressive changes in education, maternalist activists cast movements for racial and gender justice as insidious plots to manipulate children and undermine the nuclear family.

Each era of maternalist activism I examine followed a period of highly visible progressive reform, forming a reactive countermovement that sought to preserve white supremacist, heteropatriarchal hierarchies in response to social change. In the 1950s, white maternalists responded to New Deal social welfare programs, the creation of the United Nations, and the desegregation of schools by figuring these changes as examples of a creeping form of communism that threatened to infect the minds of schoolchildren and, eventually, rot America from the inside. In the 1970s, activists characterized movements for gender justice, civil rights, and queer liberation as insidious forms of “secular humanism” that had uprooted Christian education and threatened to atrophy the moral development of children. In our day, MFL responds to the growing acceptance and mainstreaming of LGBTQ people—alongside the Black Lives Matter movement and the racial justice protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd—by insisting that these movements happened because of “woke” indoctrination in the nation’s schools. By casting progressivism as either educational indoctrination itself or the eventual result of educational indoctrination, white maternalists have continually shifted the national conversation from structural injustices to the supposed manipulation of innocent children. I thus define the white maternalist political tradition as an enduring ideological framework that transforms reactionary politics into a defense of children, family, and nation.

I focus on defining a white maternalist political tradition rather than on women’s roles in right-wing politics to emphasize that motherhood is the authorizing force of this activism. The term “maternalism” is broader than the subject position of “mother,” referring both to this subject position *and* to a particular political ideology about motherhood itself. The term “maternalism” works to draw attention to a specific political performance of motherhood that translates the authority of the domestic into the political sphere. For right-wing women, motherhood is more than identity: It is a subject position that authorizes political speech, naturalizes power over child and family, and lays claim to a timeless and incontestable moral authority. Within the

political hierarchy of the Christian nuclear family—which, under Christian nationalism, represents a model for the political hierarchy of the nation as a whole—the mother has a powerful and authoritative role, subordinate to the patriarch but in control of home, family, and children (Bjork-James 2020). Nickerson (2012), McRae (2018), Kintz (1997), and Benowitz (2015) demonstrate that right-wing women have long drawn on these ideas to argue that, as mothers, they need to step into public activism to protect their children. White maternalism thus transforms women's apparent subordination within the patriarchal family into a source of political authority, allowing them to claim power in the public sphere precisely through their responsibility for home and children.

I refer to this activist tradition as *white* maternalism to draw attention to the fact that maternalist movements have widely disparate histories. While right-wing maternalist movements have worked to reinscribe racial and gender hierarchies, maternalism has also been invoked in support of movements for civil rights and economic justice (Bracewell and Daily 2024). I thus use *white maternalism* to draw attention to the fact that gender is inextricable from race and class: The white maternalists I write about fought for a specific constellation of gendered, racialized, and classed privileges, not for “motherhood” alone. Their activism was rooted in culturally white, female, and upper-middle-class domestic spaces. I also use *white* not to describe activists' individual racial identities but rather to name maternalists' investment in white supremacist politics—even as the form and content of these politics has shifted across historical contexts. And, while white maternalism has a history that extends far beyond the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I limit my discussion to the post–World War II period because scholars identify the maternalist grassroots activism of this period as a critical force that constructed the family-values politics of the US “New Right,” which still holds political power today (Dowland 2015, 10; McGirr 2015; Klatch 1988).

When I define white maternalism as a “political tradition,” I mean the repertoire of rhetorics, organizing tactics, and political performances that connect MFL with maternalist groups of the past. The term “political tradition” does not necessarily mean that MFL members have intentionally studied the activist strategies of previous groups to consciously replicate them. When I conducted informal interviews with members of MFL at national summits in 2022, 2023, and 2024, most women I spoke with identified themselves as apolitical wives and mothers. Claiming that they had little previous political experience or historical knowledge, they told me they were responding to active threats against their children. While I was not able to interview the leadership of the organization, I closely examined their rhetoric across public events, speeches, and MFL's *Joyful Warriors* podcast, and likewise found no indication that they were aware of how forcefully their movement repeats history. A limitation of this article is thus that it does not ask or answer whether Moms for Liberty members themselves “know” the histories of their own activist tradition. I thus use the word “tradition” in place of “political strategy” because traditions are not always consciously studied and deliberately replicated. Instead, they endure as inherited ways of doing and thinking that feel natural or self-evident, the way things have always been done. I demonstrate

how the white maternalist political tradition draws from a deeply sedimented cultural association between white motherhood, child protection, and defense of social order, which, for white maternalist activists, is urgent and deeply felt.

This article employs a mixed-methods, comparative approach that juxtaposes secondary historical sources with ethnographic detail from my own participant observation at MFL's public-facing recruitment and training events. To make my arguments about maternalist activists of the twentieth century, I draw from a number of secondary sources that detail the history of right-wing women's activism. Following Beatty (2025, 54), I focus on the "recurring patterns and themes [that] are clearly visible across different pieces of . . . archival material," working to identify common patterns that appear both throughout historical sources and the contemporary activism I observed. In approaching these histories by analyzing the commonalities between MFL and its predecessors, I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive, linear history of activism across decades. Each maternalist group, each decade of activism, and each political project—alongside how they influenced one another—merits an article or book. The purpose of this article is instead to define the political tradition that unites them. Another limitation of this article is thus that, because it works toward a broad synthesis of activism happening across the country, it necessarily elides important differences between maternalist groups and time periods.

To make my arguments about MFL, I draw from my participant observation at MFL's public-facing summits, training events for new members, and events by local chapters, which I conducted between June 2022 and September 2024. On the national level, I attended each of MFL's four-day summits in July 2022, July 2023, and August 2024, as well as an array of online trainings offered by the national organization. On the local level, I attended a year-long event series called the 2022–2023 School Year for Parents (SYP) put on by the Williamson County, Tennessee, chapter of MFL, plus local events in several states. For a full list of the MFL events I attended, see the appendix. In addition to the listed events, I listened to all episodes of MFL's *Joyful Warriors* podcast (hosted by Tiffany Justice) released between November 5, 2021, and August 12, 2024. Only the episodes I quote from are listed in the bibliography.

### **Defining Threat: Maternalist Activists of the Twentieth Century**

A critical aspect of the white maternalist tradition is its ability to leverage the racialized and gendered authority of white motherhood to frame discriminatory politics not as oppression but as protection of children against dangerous, subversive ideas. Each era of maternalist activism has responded to progressive change by redefining the accomplishments of progressive movements as dangerous forms of educational indoctrination. Maternalist activists in the 1950s responded to the reforms of the New Deal, desegregation, and the creation of the United Nations with conspiratorial charges of "communist" indoctrination. Likewise, right-wing women in the 1960s and 1970s

responded to campaigns for civil rights, queer liberation, and women's rights by casting these movements as forms of "secular humanism" that had infiltrated schools and eroded children's home-taught morals. In recent years, Moms for Liberty has responded to feminist, LGBTQ, and racial justice movements by depicting queer-inclusive policies and accurate historical education as forms of "woke indoctrination." Across these decades, white maternalist activists have developed a durable political grammar that has allowed them to bundle together disparate social movements into a singular threat. And, by claiming to fight "communism," "secular humanism," or "wokeness," white maternalist movements have developed a vocabulary to articulate their opposition to social justice movements that allows them to avoid directly expressing discriminatory ideologies.

In the 1950s and 1960s, maternalist activists across the United States launched a wave of anti-communist organizing centered on rooting out ideological subversion in K–12 schools (McRae 2018; Nickerson 2012; Benowitz 2015; Critchlow 2005). They argued that communism had infiltrated the education system and threatened to weaken America from the inside—and that they, as mothers, were uniquely situated to expose and destroy it. Maternalist activists across the country raised the alarm with articles such as the *American Legion Magazine's* "Your Child Is Their Target," (1952), books such as *The Devil's Advocate* (1952), *School of Darkness* (1954), and *Education or Indoctrination?* (1955), and pamphlets with titles like *What's Happened to Our Schools?* (1956). These works detailed how subversive educators were using schools to create a new social order by manipulating children into collectivist mentalities (Benowitz 2009, 105, 107, 108). Emergent and existing women's organizations—such as Women for America, Minute Women (a play on "minutemen"), Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), and National Association of Pro America—called their vast member bases into action, asking them to take action to root out the communist threat in their local communities (Benowitz 2009; Nickerson 2012; McRae 2018, 146). Activists mobilized en masse to conduct ideological investigations of the nation's schools, searching for the faintest hint of subversion across textbooks and other classroom materials.

Historians argue that white maternalists' hunt for so-called communist indoctrination within the education system functioned as a code for white supremacist ideology, providing a seemingly neutral, nondiscriminatory language through which to articulate racial grievances. Nickerson (2012, 18) calls maternalist anti-communist activism "a common anticommunist discourse of protest against the civil rights movement," highlighting that such activism was powerful precisely because it translated explicitly segregationist or racist agendas into the more socially acceptable language of patriotism and child protection. McRae (2018, 13) likewise notes that the anti-communist crusade allowed white maternalist activists to "construct black activism as the result of outside agitation and infiltration, not home-grown organic political organizing." And McGirr (2015, 184) observes that these movements articulated Black liberation movements as "part of a communist plot to foster disorder." Frames like these presented civil rights movements, particularly for the integration of schools and curricula, as forms of foreign infiltration that threatened national security. By contrast, white maternalist activists

depicted themselves as the rightful guardians of the nation who could protect national values against these “outside agitators.” Translating demands for Black liberation into the language of communist infiltration thus offered white women a socially legible—and seemingly patriotic—way to defend white supremacist policies.

By the 1970s, the maternalist language of anti-communism gave way to warnings about “secular humanism,” a capacious framework that allowed activists to bundle together anxieties about feminism, civil rights, queer liberation, and student antiwar protest under the guise of protecting children’s moral development (Laats 2015, 205; Mason 2009, 104). Whereas “communism” in K–12 education was said to manipulate children into embracing collectivist ideologies, a relativistic secular humanism was said to erode young people’s sense of absolute right and wrong—encouraging them to question parental authority, accept “immoral” lifestyles, and adopt a worldview detached from God and country (Dowland 2015, 24). As McGirr (2015, 226) explains:

These new issues expressed the same general concerns over moral corruption and traditional values that previously had been subsumed under the rubric of anticommunism. . . . [V]arious forms of “domestic corruption”—obscenity, sex education, abortion, and, by the late 1970s, an ever more assertive gay liberation movement—became the new targets of attack. And the enemy responsible for such ills was no longer an international, public, and political opponent, but the secular humanists in one’s own community.

As with communist indoctrination, secular humanist indoctrination did not just refer to secular humanist philosophies themselves, instead acting as a coded referent that combined social movements for civil rights, queer liberation, and women’s rights into a singular threat, allowing maternalist movements to respond to these movements as one entity. While their political vocabulary may have shifted, the general strategy stayed the same: Maternalist activists used charges of indoctrination to explain away emergent social movements in the 1960s and the 1970s, hoping that control over school curricula would allow them to blunt progressive change and preserve existing racial and gender hierarchies.

Both the 1974 textbook controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia, and Anita Bryant’s 1977 Save Our Children campaign in Miami, Florida, reveal how white maternalist activists strategically disguised racial and sexual grievances in the language of child protection. During the Kanawha County textbook controversy, white maternalist activists led by Alice Moore organized mass protests against new curricular literature they claimed promoted secular humanism and undermined Christian and parental authority. Histories of the movement, however, have revealed that parents were primarily responding to a state mandate that required multicultural literature in school, mandates around school integration and bussing, and subsequent anxieties about miscegenation and racial mixing (Mason 2005, 366). Likewise, Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign

galvanized white mothers against a Dade County ordinance that would have banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, thus allowing openly queer teachers to teach in public schools. Insisting that “God gave mothers the divine right to reproduce and a divine commission to protect our children, in our homes, business, and especially our schools,” Bryant advocated for “[t]he civil rights of parents: to save their children from homosexual influence” (Frank 2013, 127). As Bryant’s rhetoric demonstrates, this campaign rearticulated political organizing working to secure the oppression of queer people as an effort to protect children and parental rights.

It is essential to note that these maternalist activists fought for not all children but for the perceived interests of white, middle-class, cisgender, and straight children. As Rand (2025, 15) argues, “the figure of the child is deployed to the detriment of actual children—to constrain the possibilities of public deliberation, to reinforce white supremacy and cis- and heteronormativity, to restrict the agency of youth.” Children of color and queer children stood to benefit from policies like school integration, inclusive textbooks, and nondiscrimination ordinances against queer teachers. The rhetoric of child protection thus did not serve the interests of children broadly but rather the preservation of a particular social order privileging white, cisgender, Christian, and heterosexual families.

The evolving transformation of what constituted the “indoctrination” of school children throughout the twentieth century demonstrates that maternalist movements forged a durable political tradition through which the specter of indoctrination could be regenerated to resist the work of social justice movements. Terms like communism and secular humanism allowed white maternalist activists to suture a wide array of progressive opponents into a cohesive and compelling threat to children, thus allowing maternalist activists to fight multiple issues at one time. These terms also offered maternalist activists a vocabulary of opposition against liberation movements that allowed them to express opposition to equal rights in politically acceptable terms. As I will demonstrate in the following section, maternalist activism continues to act as a powerful vehicle for resistance to progressive reforms.

### **Defining Threat: Moms for Liberty**

Mirroring the strategies of maternalist groups of the twentieth century, MFL packages disparate forms of progressive change into a singular force: “wokeness.” The purpose of almost every MFL event I attended was to teach mothers about a form of woke indoctrination in schools and train them how to challenge it. The events I attended were almost exclusively educational sessions focused on six distinct ideologies that were said to be used to brainwash children: gender ideology, critical race theory, social emotional learning, restorative justice, porn in libraries, and critical sex education. Each of these issues offered a direct response to recent progressive policy wins in education. “Gender ideology,” for instance, retitled LGBTQIA-affirming policies in schools—

such as using the names and pronouns of trans students, allowing trans athletes to play sports, using queer- and trans-affirming curricular materials, and having openly queer or trans teachers—as sinister forms of indoctrination that worked to “trans” students and eventually “sterilize and mutilate” them through gender-affirming care. Programs integrating mental health care in schools became sneaky forms of “social emotional learning” that worked to turn students against their parents and brainwash them into collectivist mentalities. Reforms attempting to combat racially biased discipline policies and white-washed curricula were reframed as nefarious forms of “restorative justice” and “critical race theory” that would put white students in both physical and psychological danger, forcing them to feel guilty and preventing them from making connections with children of different races. The presence of school library books featuring queer or trans characters became age-inappropriate “porn in the libraries.”

Each panel I attended on these topics was framed as the exposure of a vast conspiracy. Speakers insisted that these programs had been inserted into schools by leftist elites as part of a broader effort to restructure the consciousness of the American people. Like the referents communism and secular humanism, “woke education” transfigured the grassroots work of social movements for racial, gender, and sexual justice into vast conspiratorial plots. As Bethany Mandel, an MFL chapter member, explained during an episode of the *Joyful Warriors* podcast, “they would like to foment a revolution, but they’re not having the next generation. They can’t indoctrinate their own children because they’re not having them. And so we’re the breeders, where this is like *Handmaid’s Tale*.” Mandel warned that “[t]hey’re trying to subvert our parenting decisions in our parenting, everything, by trying to capture our children. . . . They’re trying to capture them via the schools, via media. Even at their pediatrician’s office. . . . [T]he end goal is to create little foot soldiers in this woke revolution” (Justice 2023). Mandel’s warnings were repeated across countless events: This shadowy “they” was the reason for social justice movements. The “revolution” (i.e., progressive reforms) was not organic but instead a deliberate, top-down conspiracy.

While all of MFL’s issue areas were colloquially subsumed under the category of “woke education,” the group simultaneously evoked echoes of past fears of communism and secular humanism. For instance, Robin Steedman (the Williamson County, Tennessee, MFL chapter chair) coordinated a year-long event called the “School Year for Parents” (SYP), which each month taught about a different danger in the local schools. She explained that gender ideology, critical race theory, restorative justice, social emotional learning, “porn” in school libraries, generative curriculum,<sup>3</sup> and critical sex education were the “six pillars of Marxist pedagogy.” As Steedman explained at the SYP’s May 2023 capstone “graduation” event, “Marxism in education is the strategy. That’s the strategic vision [that] has been going on for hundreds of years. The tactics

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3 Rather than packaged and delivered from the top, generative curriculum is co-created through information provided by teachers, students, and local community members.

have changed, as we're very 2023. . . . Girls can be boys and boys can be girls." Steedman's argument here demonstrates how the bogeyman of "communist indoctrination" allows for new concerns to be folded into old ones. Steedman did not say that gender ideology ("girls can be boys") had *replaced* communist indoctrination but instead insisted that the "tactics have changed." Through arguments like these, newer concerns like gender ideology were layered onto older ones like communist indoctrination, adding to an ever-expanding sediment of grievance.

MFL's concerns about social emotional learning (SEL) also echo older concerns about secular humanism.<sup>4</sup> Like the maternalist activists who crusaded against secular humanism in the 1970s, MFL events taught participants that SEL programs had replaced religious teachings, were designed to distance students from self and family, and would indoctrinate kids into progressive ideologies. As Deb Fillman, the group's primary trainer on SEL, put it during a breakout session at MFL's 2022 summit, schools are trying to "transform . . . the worldview of our children to this successor ideology" using SEL programs. According to Fillman, students "go in [to schools] as a little individual. And they're destabilized. It destabilizes them emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively . . . [s]o they'll passively accept this new world order." Whereas maternalist activists in the 1970s argued that secular humanism uprooted parental morals by teaching students about racial and gender equality, MFL panels warned that SEL was designed to make children psychologically vulnerable to "gender ideology" by teaching students to "question their individual perceptions of reality" and "attach new group labels to identify the self." As Fillman put it, "Have you known a lot of kids lately? [They're] saying, 'I have generalized anxiety disorder. Yes, I have gender dysphoria. I'm asexual.' You're *nine*. That's called being a child. . . . How could you possibly know that? Well, an adult put that idea in their head." Statements like these exemplified MFL's primary claim: When young people are queer, trans, aware of mental health, or supportive of racial justice, they cannot have come to these conclusions independently. They must have been brainwashed. Such statements further evoke a tenet of the group's politics—the idea that children are incapable of critical thought, mere putty in the hands of nefarious progressive educators.

MFL's framing of progressive educational policies as forms of "indoctrination" positioned queer, feminist, and racial justice movements as aggressors who threatened the physical and emotional wellbeing of a (presumptively white, straight, cis, and economically secure) child. And, just as maternalist activists of the twentieth century claimed that they were opposed to communism (*not* integration) or secular humanism (*not* multicultural textbooks), MFL members regularly insisted that their opposition to students learning about racial injustice or queer identities was about opposition to

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4 SEL programs, which became increasingly popular in schools throughout the 2010s, attempt to help students develop nonacademic abilities like relationship skills, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making.

“wokeness,” *not* racism or homophobia. MFL’s insistence that critical race theory had invaded American schools, for instance, echoed earlier crusades against integrated textbooks, which insisted learning about histories of racial injustice would depress students and turn them against America and one another (Zimmerman 2022, 107). One mother described Tennessee’s Wit and Wisdom curricula as nothing but descriptions of “the evil White people [who] victimize the black people,” arguing that curricula that describe racial injustice had permanently damaged her son: “In his world, he’s colorblind. . . . [T]hose nine weeks have destroyed his world, his identity. He hates to be American . . . [because of] the evil act that happened in the past, done from somebody else that has nothing to do with him.”<sup>5</sup> Claims like this furthered a central logic of white maternalist politics: the idea that learning about racial injustice harms white children. Sessions about “restorative justice” policies (adopted in many schools in an attempt to combat racially biased discipline policies) likewise argued that restorative justice allowed for chaos and disorder and, in many cases, led to school shootings.

Now as before, identifying social justice movements as sinister threats to children, parental rights, and American families allows MFL members to deflect accusations of hate or discrimination. As Vivek Ramaswamy joked with the crowd during his speech at the July 2023 summit, “I am here at . . . my favorite hate group in history that I am proud to join today. . . . It’s a hate group founded on the love of our children.” Or, as a New York chapter chair put it during a “We Don’t Stand Alone” webinar on January 18, 2023: “I’m a joyful warrior. I fight because this is a war. . . . And it’s not because you hate people. It’s because we care about our children and the future of our country.” As these examples demonstrate, MFL speakers and members repeatedly acknowledged accusations that they were a hate group, but rearticulated their work as love for children. And, like their predecessors, when MFL claimed that “children” are harmed by progressivism, they implicitly referred to a specific subset of privileged children. In reality, many children benefit from the types of inclusion programs that MFL targets: For example, queer and trans children benefit from queer- and trans-inclusive school policies, and children of color benefit from learning about their histories and from restorative justice programs that work to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

The term woke thus does much the same work that communism or secular humanism once did—it serves as a signifier that groups multiple social movements for racial, gender, and sexual liberation, allowing MFL to respond to them as a singular threat. These linkages mean that, once an activist arrives at an MFL event, they quickly learn to see not just one thing wrong with the school system but a host of interconnected issues to fight against. When activists are radicalized on one issue, they quickly become radicalized on issues like critical race theory, social emotional learning, and restorative

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5 This quote is from the May 2022 “Critical Race Theory” SYP event.

justice. MFL's practice of suturing together progressive reforms into one container of threat is thus an effective way of pulling mothers with a single grievance into a broader, ideologically cohesive movement.

### **Uprooting Threat: Maternalist Activists of the Twentieth Century**

From the 1950s through the 1980s, maternalist social movements tasked mothers with decoding hidden threats in schools and uprooting anything that strayed from "traditional" education. These activists constructed an image of the American mother as a frontline soldier in an ideological battle for the nation's youth, framing progressive changes as sneaky forms of indoctrination. Though maternalist concerns shifted over time—from communism in the 1950s to secular humanism in the 1970s and 1980s—their methods did not. Coordinated reviews of textbooks, classroom materials, and curricula, along with the public exposure of anything deemed "subversive," remained central tactics. The next section shows how this legacy shapes MFL's contemporary strategies: portraying the education system as a site of hidden danger, "decoding" school materials, and targeting progressive teachers or institutions for surveillance and discipline.

Maternalist activists of the 1950s did not assume that communist indoctrination was easy to recognize, instead structuring their activism around the assumption that mothers would need to be trained to root it out. Many activist groups provided a far-reaching program of political education intended to empower mothers to recognize communism in any of its many guises. According to Critchlow (2005, 82), this "emphasis on education—[the] know thy enemy approach—was typical in the grassroots anticommunist movement. The aim was to train average Americans to recognize communist propaganda. . . . Anticommunist activists spent hours in study—much of it extremely academic." Phyllis Schlafly's early activism, for instance, involved designing an "anticommunist study program for small groups," which took place over the course of ten weeks and asked participants to read and study congressional documents about communism (81). By 1962, there were three thousand of these study groups in forty-eight states. Schlafly was a passionate advocate for mothers entering grassroots politics, stating in one of her speeches that "[c]ommunism can only be stopped by the individual actions of little people," and calling on mothers to become "a Freedom Fighter in your own sphere of influence. You, too, can do big things if you have faith and dedication" (82).

Once mothers learned to recognize the many guises of communism, the logic went, they could use their newfound knowledge to become agents of surveillance in communities throughout the country. Women's organizations achieved national reach by mobilizing their vast member bases to read, review, and report on materials within their local schools. Groups focused on reviewing textbooks for subversive materials and disseminating their findings across the nation. Lucille Crane, for

instance, started a publication called the *Educational Reviewer*, which reviewed school history textbooks for evidence of communist infiltration and publicized the findings (Benowitz 2009, 94). Review efforts were often highly coordinated: Groups used rubrics to systemically assess US textbooks and provided reviewers with lists of suspicious watchwords. During a study the DAR conducted between 1958 and 1959, members assessed whether young people were “emphatically taught love of God and Country” or were “being corrupted to accept socialism and materialism.” The DAR found that only one in five textbooks met their standards (Benowitz 2015, 51). School districts often used reviews like these to find “patriotic”—and hopefully noncontroversial—textbooks to adopt.

Activists’ ideological investigations focused not only on textbooks but on potentially subversive teachers, administrators, and other school reading materials. DAR chapters, for instance, regularly sent their members to inspect history classes in their local communities. In 1951, DAR leaders in Texas “bragged that 1,695 of its members had visited history classes to investigate teaching” (Laats 2015, 157). Similarly, DAR members in Colorado forced teachers and school officials to take loyalty oaths. The DAR made a point of reviewing not just history books but literature anthologies, math and science books, and even music texts. In one notorious incident, the DAR reviewed an anthology that featured a story about a squirrel that raided a birdhouse for nuts. Their review asked: “Have you ever heard or read about a more subtle way of undermining the American system of work and profit and replacing it with a collectivist welfare system? . . . Can you recall a socialistic idea more seductively presented to an innocent child?” (Zimmerman 2022, 96).

Missions like these gave mothers a special role in the grassroots fight against communism: Engaged at the local level in their schools and communities, they became frontline warriors who had a unique ability to examine educational materials and spaces for subversive content. And, because mothers were involved in every school and community across the country, their work allowed the movement to have a reach that was simultaneously national and local. Through this networked, participatory, and *gendered* activism, maternalist groups ensured that their vision for American education was transmitted to communities throughout the country. As Nickerson (2012, 13) argues, “The collapse of the progressive education movement in the 1950s resulted directly from conservative protest, mounted in large part by women, linked through newsletters, who undermined the zeal of school reformers one district at a time.”

By the 1970s, maternalist activists had begun to focus on other forms of domestic subversion, fearing that educational experts were “imposing their own religion, a ‘secular humanism’ that supplanted God’s authority” (Zimmerman 2022, 172). While their focus might have been different, maternalist activists in the 1970s carried forward the techniques of review and surveillance pioneered by previous groups. Like their foremothers, many fought educational battles through the coordinated surveillance of local schools. Two of the era’s most notorious activists—Norma Gabler and Alice

Moore—dedicated their efforts to decoding textbooks, searching for hidden messages that might undermine American values. Norma Gabler and her husband, Mel Gabler, started a publication called *Educational Research Analysts*, which produced reports about indoctrination in American textbooks, disseminating critiques of allegedly subversive textbooks to a large mailing list of parents and education officials across the country (Laats 2015, 193). Alice Moore’s review of new textbooks that included “multiethnic and multiracial” curricula incited the infamous Kanawha County textbook controversy of 1974, which led to a school boycott, bombing of school buses, and a concurrent miners’ strike in the fall of that year (Mason 2005, 352). Both women also pioneered a new technique for revealing the “filth” in the American education system: making it visible through political performances in which the women read aloud sections of offending textbooks in front of crowds of concerned community members or legislators. These performances transformed review and surveillance into affective, theatrical practices, generating spectacles that could mobilize community outrage and attract media attention.

Maternalist activists linked vast networks of grassroots activists through national organizations, publications, radio programs, and lecture circuits, transmitting information about how to recognize indoctrination in its many guises. These activists served as cultural watchdogs, reviewing curricula and visiting classrooms to ensure ideological conformity. Though their focus morphed from rooting out communism to combatting secular humanism, both terms referred to similar progressive policies. In their view, progressive changes within education could never be organic and democratic but were instead insidious plots to poison the minds of schoolchildren with anti-American propaganda. Moms for Liberty carries forward these activist traditions of surveillance in the twenty-first century.

### **Uprooting Threat: Moms for Liberty**

Echoing maternalist activists of the 1950s and the 1970s, MFL insists that “woke” content has infiltrated the nation’s schools under the very noses of parents. The leaders of the organization, Tiffany Justice and Tina Desovitch, regularly explain that the pandemic allowed mothers to “see behind the education curtain” and realize that children are being indoctrinated. Like maternalist activists of yore, however, MFL assumes that this indoctrination will not be readily apparent to mothers. The organization thus focuses on providing a comprehensive program of political education. While MFL’s events often bill themselves as training for political organizing, very few events I attended focused on organizing mechanisms related to electoral politics, such as campaigning, fundraising, or lobbying elected officials. Instead, meetings took the form of seminars, lectures, and study groups that taught mothers to spot the “woke” content infiltrating the nation’s schools. At the 2023 summit, for instance, the group offered twenty-two speeches from political figures, religious leaders, or luminaries of the Christian Right

and sixteen breakout “strategy” sessions designed to train activists. Of these thirty-eight presentations, only four focused on concrete organizing strategies such as fundraising, winning elections, transitioning from campaigning to governing, or mastering effective messaging strategies. The rest focused on political education surrounding MFL’s issue areas, meaning that about 10 percent of the summit focused on training and 90 percent focused on political education.

This emphasis on careful study and research stayed consistent across every MFL event I attended. MFL’s national organization offered countless online training sessions, a book club, documentary watch parties, and libraries of resources from other organizations to help mothers learn about the threat posed by “wokeness.” In an echo of Schlafly’s anti-communist study groups, which examined the constitution, local MFL chapters hosted “Madison Meetups,” where members could study documents from America’s founding. The clearest example of the group’s educational focus was the abovementioned year-long event series called the 2022–2023 School Year for Parents (SYP). Robin Steedman explained at the “Gender 102” event: “As our kids progress through the school year, so are we as parents learning the crucial issues facing our children in schools. . . . [W]e’re trying to provide these resources to parents to help you understand what your child is up against, and what you are up against as their parent.” This event series eventually morphed into a program launched in 2025 called Moms for Liberty Academy, which made the lectures and resources from this event series into a formalized “academy” teaching parents about educational indoctrination.

As in maternalist campaigns against communism and secular humanism, MFL presented woke indoctrination as something cunning that needed to be expunged. Training sessions taught mothers how to “decode” (a word often used in training sessions) lessons about gender ideology, social emotional learning, or other woke content that might lurk in things parents initially thought harmless. Members of the group were regularly warned, for instance, that things as small as a lesson using Legos, a rainbow in the classroom, or word games could really be used to transmit “gender ideology” to kids. In a November 2023 event called “The Gender Ideology Pipeline Flowing into Williamson County” that was part of the SYP series, Steedman warned her listeners that rainbows were not as innocent as they appear:

Now what they are pushing is rainbow clubs. It’s a GSA [Gay Straight Alliance] for elementary kids. Now, my daughter, if she sees a rainbow in any form, right—shoes, you know, shirts, whatever—her eyes are just big as saucers. She loves it! Loves rainbows, sparkles, glitter. And if you put a “rainbow club” in an elementary school, she’d be all over it. And that’s the whole point! . . . The first rule of rainbow club is you don’t talk about rainbow club, not to the parents. And they give specific rules, resources for talking around the issue to the parents, because it’s all, “parents are the enemy.” We’re the gatekeepers. You got to get around us, outsmart us, because we’re not very smart.

Steedman's warning here was typical: Rainbows may *look* child-friendly, but they are really part of a sinister plot to trick children into joining queer groups in school. Throughout the rest of the session, Steedman took one thing that was real—the existence of a rainbow flag—and extended this reality to mean that school employees are part of a plot to “trans” children, that school nurses are allowed to put kids on hormone replacement therapy, and that “rainbow clubs” are taking over elementary schools. Although there is no evidence that any of those things are happening, Steedman's presentation worked to encourage parents to view teachers, administrators, and even peers as conspirators in a plot against their children.

As in previous maternalist movements, MFL's organizing is powerful because it is simultaneously national and local. Though information about supposed indoctrination is offered by MFL's national headquarters, it is designed to teach moms in local communities what to look for, how to challenge it, and how to eliminate it locally. Like their predecessors, members of MFL spread their ideology by appointing themselves as right-wing cultural watchdogs in communities across the country. Each event instructed members to use the information they learned to interview their children's teachers about what content was in schools, and why; review curricula and their children's assignments to search for traces of woke content; challenge progressive policies at school board meetings, which they were encouraged to attend; and interview their children after school to ensure that they were not exposed to anything “inappropriate” during the school day. Many chapters offer members online portals where they can report suspicious activities or teachers in their local schools for further investigation.

And, like maternalist groups of previous generations, MFL members read, review, and rate books and disseminate their reviews. Although their efforts focus primarily on library books rather than textbooks, they borrow many of the techniques of past maternalist groups. Like the DAR chapters that developed rubrics to evaluate textbooks, MFL disseminates a guide and rating system for library books called the “Book of Books.”<sup>6</sup> The document provides a content-based rating system for mothers to review books, a list of commonly challenged books featuring their problematic excerpts, and a list of what schools the books have been found in. The document reminds mothers that “[p]arents have ultimate authority over their children, and we are taking back control of our children's education.” And, in a direct echo of Gabler's and Moore's strategy of creating political spectacle by reading graphic excerpts from books aloud, MFL moms read aloud from books at school board meetings or in public settings. During the “Library 101” event that was part of the SYP organized by the chapter in Williamson County, Tennessee, a member of MFL, dressed as a grandmother, sat in a rocking chair and read sexually explicit sections of contemporary queer young adult books to the audience.

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6 MFL's rating guide is available online at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BNfax73kzqWwMMfk-jcopgEXMDDBD-fr4O/view> (accessed September 4, 2026).

Moms for Liberty's approach to activism is deeply rooted in the traditions of maternalist activism. Like past groups, MFL works to teach mothers what indoctrination looks like and how to stop it. MFL's efforts are thus deeply instructive, shaping the way their members understand the world and equipping them with a framework through which to interpret every aspect of their children's education. In doing so, they create a powerful weapon against progressive changes in the education system by creating cohorts of watchdogs in communities throughout the country who are prepared to respond to any instance of progressive encroachment.

### **Reconstructing Right-Wing Culture: Maternalist Activists of the Twentieth Century**

One of the primary achievements of white maternalist activism has been the construction of a right-wing cultural identity centered around patriotism, tradition, home, and family. Historians of maternalist social movements demonstrate that women played a uniquely gendered role in creating the grassroots right because of their role as cultural producers and performers (Nickerson 2012; McRae 2018; Morris 2022). I call this work of creating a cultural identity for conservatism "cultural organizing"—the kind of organizing that creates places for people to fit, articulates social identities, and polices moral boundaries within communities. I use "cultural organizing" not to create a false dichotomy between culture and politics but rather to draw attention to what historians like Nickerson (2012), McRae (2018), and Delegard (2012) identify as an undertheorized political space: a domain of white, feminine conservatism that translates the authority of the mother within the family to the political sphere. Maternalist activists conducted their cultural organizing by embedding political commitments into the fabric of everyday life, making ideologies like white supremacy and heteropatriarchy tangible and culturally enforceable. And, by performing the ideologies they sought to enforce through their dress and comportment, maternalist activists actively structured the cultural terrain upon which right-wing politics flourished.

White maternalist organizers in the twentieth century argued that they were uniquely suited to political work because of their position in the community as wives and mothers. Unlike men, who were busy with work and the obligations of the public sphere, women were "well equipped and well placed to stop brainwashing by virtue of their flexible hours, relationship to the family, and daily proximity to the community" (Nickerson 2012, 81). Lucille Crane (founder of the aforementioned *Educational Reviewer*), for instance, argued that "[t]he educational controversy is in a very real sense a woman's business. . . . [W]e women have a reputation for getting things done once we set our hands to them" (Benowitz 2009, 92). Like Crane, many white maternalist groups mobilized a strategic form of gender essentialism that reframed stereotypes of femininity as political assets. In the words of Lee Ague, a maternalist organizer in Georgia, "[a]s a gossipy, phone-happy, coffee drinking lot, [women] are innately better

equipped to spread the ‘good word’ more abundantly” (Morris 2022, 15). Through claims like these, maternalist activists naturalized the relationship between femininity and conservatism, arguing that they had a special role to play in the movement precisely *because* they were women (Kintz 1997).

This “women’s business,” however, was not the province of all women but rather the work of well-off white housewives. Nickerson (2012, 11) calls maternalist activists in the 1950s “housewife populists,” arguing that they were able to organize so successfully because of their unique ability to mobilize traditionally white, upper-class, and feminine domestic spaces to create a right-wing cultural movement. Likewise, Ague notes that conservative maternalists took “women’s traditional spaces and [made] them training grounds,” using their ample time and wealth as white housewives to construct a new public sphere of right-wing Christian culture (Morris 2022, 15). Activists started study groups in their living rooms, organized fundraisers from within Parent-Teacher Associations, sent out Christmas cards that raised awareness of right-wing issues, and hosted lunches, dinners, and other events for conservative causes. Nickerson (2012, 137) calls these new cultural constructions a “cult of wholesomeness that introduced nuclear family-style suburban domesticity into political performance.” And, according to Kintz (1997, 4), these cultural performances served to disengage “passion from the popular culture of the Sixties and associate it with the popular culture of traditional morality.”

An important part of this maternalist cultural organizing was the public performance of racialized gender roles. Activists performed the very communities and identities they claimed to protect, using their gendered positions to cultivate a specific image: a proper, ladylike, patriotic American wife and mother who fought for home and country. Brennan (2008), Nickerson (2012), Benowitz (2015), and Morris (2022) all note that maternalist activists adopted a style of dress that accentuated their gender, race, and class status, using these performances to garner media sympathy. These gendered performances were also intended to create a sharp contrast between their wholesome, traditional appearance and the sartorial choices of their opponents (Benowitz 2015, 205; Morris 2022, 8). Nickerson (2012, 138) argues that, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, “[o]utrage over shorter skirts, longer hair, and campus demonstrators inspired political style as counterdemonstration,” causing activists to perform right-wing ideals “in their bodily appearance, in their cheerful demeanor, and in the homey settings they created for politicization.” The concept of “traditional morality” was made real through performances like these. Housewife populists intentionally sharpened the sartorial differences between groups, thus bringing new cultural categories into being. McRae (2018, 112) further demonstrates that “white motherhood and womanhood had become a kind of racial performance,” highlighting how performances of femininity were inextricable from performances of whiteness.

If the public performance of traditional ladylike domesticity served as a vehicle for maternalists’ political and cultural influence, it simultaneously allowed them to operate

under the radar. McRae (2018, 10), for instance, notes that white mothers are often not included in histories of segregation and white supremacy because their activism was “so interwoven into daily life that it appeared unremarkable.” Activist groups “boiled down communism, the rise of the United Nations, and decolonization into the substance of daily life and then offered instruction in how to combat those forces by watching out for what their children learned, whom they married, and even how they trick-or-treated” (7). This technique of mobilizing the language of “women’s work” and everyday domestic life also allowed maternalist activists to make their messaging accessible and actionable to women within their communities. Ague, for instance, notes that maternalist activists in 1960s Georgia would explain political work to potential recruits using “the language of women’s domestic work such as laundry, gardening, and cooking,” comparing political organizing to growing flowers or baking apple pie (Morris 2022, 17). Yoking the political and the domestic further convinced many mothers of the righteousness of their cause. Fighting “radicalism” became care work, an extension of maternal duty.

Two interrelated themes emerge in historical literature on maternalist activists: first, that many women activists claimed to not be political operatives; and second, that these women claimed to represent home and family against elite reformers. These arguments relied on and strengthened each other, allowing maternalists to position their work as mothering rather than activism. Laats (2015, 189) notes that Alice Moore, the activist who sparked the Kanawha County textbook controversy, presented herself as a “non-partisan ‘mother’ hoping only to inject some common sense onto the school board,” and as a woman who had “somehow only stumbled into this textbook controversy.” Likewise, Norma Gabler claimed that she began her textbook reviews because her son was upset with some of the content, causing her to take a closer look and react in horror to what she saw (Dowland 2015, 38). This pattern of self-presentation extended beyond individual activists to broader maternalist movements. Verhoeven’s (2022, 775) analysis of maternalist letter-writing campaigns in response to the 1962 Becker Amendment—a proposal to amend the Constitution to permit prayer and Bible reading in public schools—describes how “writers began by declaring themselves to be wives, mothers (often listing the number of children they had), and even grandmothers. To counter any accusation of stepping beyond the bounds of their natural sphere, several stressed that they had never written to Congress before.”

This “just moms” rhetoric allowed maternalist activists to create a sharp divide between “ordinary” housewives defending their communities and “elite” reformers, who were portrayed as self-serving and dismissive of the needs of everyday families. According to Nickerson (2012, 17), maternalist activists argued that their “communities were under siege by political elites inciting turmoil that they, as women, needed to repel as housewives—the humblest, most self-sacrificial, and least pretentious members of American society.” Kintz (1997, 78) calls this a type of “purifying folkling” that helped to construct an idealized vision of a threatened “authentic” America rooted in traditional

family structures. By framing white housewives as authentic Americans and reformers as illegitimate outsiders, such rhetoric furthered maternalist arguments that civil rights reforms were forms of communism imposed by outside elites.

Maternalist cultural organizing created new categories of political legitimacy and new categories of belonging. Through their dress, ladylike behavior, and mobilization in domestic spaces, white maternalists created “traditional morality” and the “traditional family” as tangible, visible things to be protected. Ironically, the less political these mothers seemed, the more power they held, because to challenge them was to challenge the moral authority of motherhood. By positioning themselves as the common-sense moral voice of the nation, these mothers successfully advocated for the maintenance of systems of oppression while insisting they worked only to protect their children.

### **Reconstructing Right-Wing Culture: Moms for Liberty**

Moms for Liberty replicates the cultural organizing tactics pioneered by previous maternalist groups. MFL members describe themselves as “mama bears” who, although they were not interested in politics in the past, have come to realize that protecting the innocence of their children means they must fight. They identify the locus of their political power in childrearing, arguing that their roles as wives and mothers give them special authority over schools and other institutions pertaining to children. And, like their foremothers, the activists of MFL claim that they participate in their movement not as citizens, not as activists, not as Republicans, not as politicians, but as mothers. For them, motherhood is an identity that places them above the fray, a space from which they can reach for objectivity and claim an authority that cannot be challenged.

Like its predecessors, MFL channels its organizing efforts into resisting what members perceive as the left’s growing cultural and political influence in their communities. Members explicitly articulated the growing acceptance of LGBTQ people—alongside the encroachment of other progressive ideas—as a rapid, shocking, and unwelcome change. A common refrain among members was that, ten to fifteen years ago, progressive ideologies like LGBTQ rights and racial justice were entirely absent from schools and the broader society. Members vowed to use their roles as mothers and community members to stop these ideologies from, as they often said, “getting into the culture.” Robin Steedman put it as follows: “If we’re lucky, we’re five to seven years too late. It is a cement that’s already set. . . . [P]ay attention to what hasn’t set yet, because you have a better chance of fighting when the cement is still being rolled, right?”<sup>7</sup> For Steedman, this “cement” was the normalization and cultural acceptance of LGBTQ identities in American life. Steedman’s metaphor of unset cement reflects

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7 This quote is from “The Gender Ideology Pipeline,” a training event on November 29, 2022, that was part of the 2022–2023 SYP.

MFL's broader strategy: to control the cultural environment surrounding schools and children, believing that once progressive ideas about race, gender, and sexuality take root there, they become nearly impossible to remove.

Moms for Liberty's complaints about progressive cultural shifts are deeply intertwined with its own forms of cultural organizing. Like its predecessors in the twentieth century, the group uses women's spaces to cultivate right-wing parenting communities and rebuild the right-wing social world it believes has been lost. MFL events make right-wing values the very glue of community. MFL meetings are often not just meetings but an occasion to make friends and gossip, and, for many women, to have a night to themselves, free from their children and their husbands. Of the events I analyzed on the organization's webpage or received invitations to via chapter emails, many involved knitting circles, playdates, or movie nights about anti-trans politics. Chapters encourage members to maintain an active presence in their local communities, asking them to table with friends at holiday or community festivals, participate in local parades, or coordinate holiday toy drives. Events almost always opened with a prayer, rooting each gathering in a shared Christian faith that also framed activism as religious duty. As a South Carolina chapter chair put it during an episode of the *Joyful Warriors* podcast entitled "How to Engage Woke Ideologies":

We kind of wanted to make [MFL] like the cool fun place for parents to be where they can meet other people, and really get excited and engaged and feel a sense of community. . . . So we did a lot of social events. And then we kind of snuck in a little bit of, like, educating parents. . . . So we try to make it very fun and engaging, but also kind of teaching them how they can be empowered to make change. (Justice 2022)

Through creating warm, inviting community spaces rooted in white feminine domesticity, MFL both fostered a sense of belonging among activists and ensured that political action is woven into the fabric of everyday social life.

Like their twentieth-century predecessors, MFL also mobilizes strategic gender essentialism, taking traditionally feminine spaces and making them political training grounds. MFL training sessions often explicitly encourage mothers to feminize political organizing, calling on activists to recognize that women need to get involved in politics *as women*. In a November 2023 session entitled "Winning with Women Voters," the group's trainer, Ellen Walters, instructed the gathered moms to gender their activism, offering slides with gender essentialist statements like "Women like to be heard" and "Women are the ones who volunteer." She encouraged the group to put on specifically gendered events: sign waving for candidates in school pick-up lines, self-defense bonding classes where all the women wear high heels, political education events with popsicles in the park for kids, or holiday parades and cancer walks where attendees wear matching MFL T-shirts. She reminded moms that, to organize women, one needed to be welcoming and friendly, stating that meetings are "not a fashion show. It's

not a competition. . . . And if there is somebody new, reach out to them and invite them to join your group! . . . We never want to be the mean girl, we want to be the girl that builds up the other moms!” Instructions like these offered a twenty-first-century spin on Ague’s metaphors about gardening or laundry, framing activism in traditionally feminized ways.

And, like the Christian activists in the 1970s who embraced traditional sartorial choices to differentiate themselves from “gender-bending” hippies, members of MFL perform ideals of traditional femininity through their dress to differentiate themselves from queer and trans people. Across the events I attended, particularly events in Southern states like Tennessee and Florida, members of MFL self-consciously performed a distinctly white, female, and Christian style that accentuated gender conformity. MFL members were also regularly reminded at the beginning of meetings and throughout the summits that they were to be “joyful warriors,” channeling their rage at woke education into grace, poise, and warmth. These traditionally feminine appearances and styles of comportment were mobilized—as in Nickerson’s (2012) histories of conservative mothers after World War II—to draw a contrast between the moms and left-wing protestors. Near the end of MFL’s second summit in 2023, Tiffany Justice gave a speech about the protestors outside the event intended to galvanize the moms in the face of the intense criticism their Summit had garnered. Justice drew a contrast between the members of MFL and the protestors outside the event, saying: “You guys are beautiful. You’re smiling. You’re happy. You’re making friends. The protestors outside are very unhappy. . . . You’re exposing my plan! It’s just that the distance couldn’t be more stark. Hopefully, America is watching this. We could tell them, and tell them, and tell them. . . . But until they see it for themselves?” Justice referred directly to “her plan”—creating a striking juxtaposition between the queer and trans protestors hosting a dance party outside in the summer heat and the buttoned-up, well-dressed members of MFL advocating for their children. She wanted America to watch and understand a clear chain of associations: Gendered norms mean order, and the moms who perform them so well are simultaneously expressing their respect for other forms of hierarchy.

Like their predecessors, MFL members report their activism as emerging from traditional gender roles, often characterizing themselves as apolitical wives and mothers. The most common refrain I heard across my years of participant observation with MFL was “I was never involved in politics, but . . .” This phrase was used across countless promotional videos for the organization, most of which featured a mother who narrated her path from apolitical wife and mother to activist.<sup>8</sup> Megan Brock, for instance, began an event called “FOIA 101 with Megan Brock” with a typical opening statement: “I live

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8 See “If You’re Anything Like Me, You Probably Never Paid Much Attention to Politics,” posted August 26, 2022, by Moms for Liberty, YouTube, 1:45, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-J0Kmwvc\\_cg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-J0Kmwvc_cg).

in the suburbs of Philadelphia and I'm a mom. Three years ago, I didn't even know what a public records request was. And now I've submitted probably an embarrassing amount of public records requests!" Like maternalist letter writers of the twentieth century, almost every MFL speaker would introduce herself by listing her name, marital status, how many children she had, and their ages and genders. Through introductions like these, members rooted claims in a clear identity position: motherhood. These claims were reinforced by the fact that children were often present at MFL events. Many politicians that spoke at summits brought their children onstage with them, all of the summits offered daycare, and, at the 2023 summit, MFL members' children performed a play about the American Revolution.

Moms for Liberty's approach to political activism mirrors the maternalist organizing traditions of earlier groups. By positioning themselves as "just moms"—apolitical women drawn into activism out of maternal duty—MFL members claim a moral authority rooted in their roles as caregivers. This maternalist framing allows them to present their activism as instinctive rather than ideological, tied to the natural order of motherhood. The group's strategic mobilization of feminized spaces and activities weaves political engagement into the fabric of everyday life, bringing new activists into the fold and fostering a sense of belonging rooted in right-wing cultures. By positioning themselves as the moral counterpoint to what they perceive as a societal breakdown, MFL works to (re)create right-wing Christian cultures built around the nuclear family.

## **Conclusion**

Moms for Liberty continues a longstanding tradition of white maternalist political organizing. I have identified three features of this tradition. First, maternalist activists suture a variety of progressive policies into a single bundle of menace that is said to threaten family, child, and parental rights. While the name of this threat has changed throughout the years—first communism, then secular humanism, now "wokeness"—the response to it has not. In each era, maternalist activists have organized by teaching mothers to recognize the threat and uproot it in their local communities. Mothers then act as agents of cultural surveillance, working to undo the "infiltration" of progressivism into right-thinking American communities. These organizing tactics are powerful because they connect national or global issues to the everyday decisions of local teachers and school districts, offering mothers clear directives for combatting progressivism. Maternalist activists then use cultural organizing to make real the vision of home, child, and family that the right claims to defend, securing the political innocence of their movements by claiming that they fight not for the oppression of other groups but for the protection of the family.

Understanding the resonance between MFL's work and the work of maternalist activists of the twentieth century is important because these histories reveal how white maternalist activists have created a durable vocabulary of opposition against social

justice movements. By positioning themselves as apolitical protectors of children and families, MFL taps into a familiar, emotionally charged narrative that has historically been used to justify opposition to civil rights, queer liberation, and social welfare programs. Recognizing this ideological lineage helps us see that MFL's fight against so-called indoctrination in schools is not simply about age-appropriateness or parental rights but about reinforcing broader systems of racial, gender, and sexual hierarchy. It also reveals that MFL's localized campaigns, such as challenging books in school libraries or pressuring school boards to ban discussions of race and gender, cannot merely be understood as the isolated acts of concerned parents. Instead, they are part of a coordinated, ideologically driven effort to use the education system to fortify white, heteronormative, and patriarchal conceptions of family and nation.

Understanding white maternalism as a political tradition calls into question the "just moms" defense with which MFL has long responded to charges of extremism or hate. This rhetoric plays on the misogynistic idea that women are inherently apolitical, implying that their activism is merely an extension of natural maternal instincts rather than a long-standing political strategy. This framing works to obscure the group's ideological goals by presenting their actions as nonthreatening and rooted in care, rather than in a broader reactionary agenda. By unmasking this narrative, we can see how MFL weaponizes motherhood to advance a deeply political project aimed at retrenching systems of oppression. We can also resist the temptation to dismiss the group's activism as overprotective parenting or mindless hysteria. Instead, we must take seriously the historical continuity of white maternalist organizing and its ongoing impact on educational policy, civil rights, and social justice movements.

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## Appendix

### *Moms for Liberty National Summits, In-Person Attendance*

7/14/2022–7/17/2022: Tampa, FL  
 6/29/2023–7/2/2023: Philadelphia, PA  
 8/29/2024–9/1/2024: Washington, DC

### *Moms for Liberty Chapter Events*

*School Year for Parents Event Series, Williamson County, TN, MFL Chapter (Franklin, TN), Virtual Attendance*

5/19/21: "Critical Race Theory," <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/news/crt101-event-williamson-tn-chapter/>  
 10/17/22: "SEL 101—Social Emotional Learning," <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/sel101/>  
 11/7/22: "Gender 101—Gender Ideology," <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/gender-101/>  
 11/10/22: "Gender 102," <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/gender-102/>

11/29/22: “The Gender Ideology Pipeline Flowing into Williamson County,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgeHXbJQfQM>

1/24/23: “Restorative Justice 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/rj101>

2/13/23: “Comprehensive Sexuality Education 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/cse101/>

2/21/23: “Comprehensive Sexuality Education 102,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/cse102>

3/20/23: “Library 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/library-101>

4/10/23: “Library 102,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/library-102>

4/17/23: “Marxism 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/marxism-101/>

5/8/23: “Capstone,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/capstone-101/>

*America First Patriots Club, “Empower” Event, Broward County, FL, MFL Chapter, In-Person Attendance*

3/14/23: Broward County, FL

*Feed My Sheep Foundation, “We Don’t stand Alone” Event, Erie County and Wayne County, NY, MFL Chapters, Virtual Attendance*

1/18/23: Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmDelCH0Eyc>.

### ***National Training Events, Virtual Attendance***

#### *Zoom or Online Trainings*

1/16/24: “Gender Ideology: What It Is & How to Defeat It,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2117/>

12/1/23: “Campaign Conversations—Are You Ready to Run?,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2033/>

11/28/23: “Winning with Women Voters,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2032/>

11/16/23: “The WSCC Model: Community/Healthy Schools,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2032/>

11/9/23: “FOIA Training,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2017/>

5/10/23: “FOIA 101 with Megan Brock,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/1680/>

#### *All-Member Meetings*

9/7/2023: event webpage unavailable

12/7/2023: event webpage unavailable

*"Constitutional Conversations" Series with KrisAnne Hall*

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1/31/2023: "Rights vs. Benefits," <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/1384/>

2/22/2023: "The Pursuit of Happiness," <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/1461/>

3/21/2023: "Legislating Liberty: Questions Every American Should Ask Before Supporting Legislation," event webpage unavailable

4/25/2023: "In Their Footsteps: Lessons from Our Founding Mothers," event webpage unavailable

6/7/2023: "State Sovereignty," event webpage unavailable

## ARTICLE

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## A Short History of Nazi-Satanism

SPENCER SUNSHINE

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**Abstract:** *Starting in 1966 with the founding of the Church of Satan, modern Satanism has established itself as a religious and philosophical tradition that continues to this day. And as part of this, Nazi-Satanism has also established itself as a subcurrent within both modern Satanism and neo-Nazism. This article outlines the history of this current, which is often downplayed or ignored by scholars. Profiled groups and organizations include Nazi-Satanist groups proper (Order of the Black Ram, Joy of Satan, Order of Nine Angles); Satanist organizations that have had connections to neo-Nazis (Church of Satan); neo-Nazis who have embraced working with Satanists (James Mason, George Eric Hawthorne, Atomwaffen Division); and new online forms that include Nazi-Satanist ideas (764, Maniac Murder Cult). This article seeks to create a baseline account of Nazi-Satanism in order to show that it is not a recent or isolated phenomenon, as well as to spur further study.*

**Keywords:** Satanism, neo-Nazis, Anton LaVey, Church of Satan, Order of Nine Angles, Atomwaffen Division, Nikolas Schreck

Nazi-Satanism—the combination of neo-Nazism and modern Satanism—has existed for over a half century. But curiously there is not a single stand-alone article, much less a book, on this phenomenon as a whole, despite its influence on contemporary global terrorist networks.

Somewhat surprisingly, scholars of postwar fascism also have not given it much attention. The main exception is the Order of Nine Angles (O9A), which, especially in recent years, has received coverage because of its influence on neo-Nazi terrorism. However, these investigations are almost always exclusively focused on O9A and do not position it within a larger Nazi-Satanist tradition.

The situation is hardly better among most scholars who study modern Satanism. Since the 1970s there has been scattered material on the topic. There is substantial academic work about medieval conceptions of Satanism, as well as on the 1980s folk panic dubbed the “Satanic Panic.” But a body of academic work on modern Satanism has only emerged in the last fifteen years or so, and now there are about a dozen books dedicated to it. Yet most fail to address Nazi-Satanism with the attention it deserves.

Today, Satanism is quite visible among neo-Nazis—which is not to say it is always welcomed. The same is true for how Satanists see neo-Nazis. In 2009, James R. Lewis

conducted a survey of Satanists, half of whose respondents were in the United States. It found that 10 percent of Satanists viewed National Socialism positively, while 70 percent saw it negatively. (While this is a clear minority, it should be noted that a 2018 poll of Americans in general found that only 5 percent supported neo-Nazism, while 75 percent opposed it.)<sup>1</sup>

If, as some scholars suggest, modern Satanism constitutes a “Satanic milieu” within the larger “occult milieu,” then one could see a “Nazi-Satanist milieu” nestled within that. And if that term feels too maximalist, then at the *very* minimum Nazi-Satanism must be recognized as a long-standing *current* within modern Satanism.

What follows is an investigation into Nazi-Satanism from the perspective of postwar fascist studies. It is a political analysis, and not a look at theology or ritual practice. It focuses specifically on National Socialism, and not on the fewer cases where Satanists embrace other kinds of white supremacist politics. This study is also focused on the actual presence of Nazi-Satanists, as well as where Satanist and neo-Nazi individuals and structures have entered into collaboration with each other. (It should be noted that in some cases, the political ideologies discussed as “Nazi-Satanism” may include ideas and relationships that are not completely National Socialist but have significant elements of that ideology.) This is neither a polemic against, nor a study of, Satanist ideas. And it does not explore Satanist views on National Socialism, Jews, gender, or race—with the exception of where these beliefs are part of groups that have direct connections with neo-Nazis.

This article hopes to focus attention on this phenomenon, and it seeks to accomplish four things:

1. To convince readers that Nazi-Satanism needs to be recognized as a current that has been part of modern Satanism almost since its origins, and which appears to be only increasing in prominence.
2. To argue that Nazi-Satanism needs to be taken seriously by scholars, particularly those who study modern Satanism.
3. To supply a thumbnail history as the first step in a larger investigation that others can expand on.
4. To provide an academic study that can resonate beyond the university and raise awareness among not just journalists and researchers, but also Satanists and other occult practitioners who are opposed to fascism. Many of them have *some* knowledge of Nazi-Satanism, and hopefully this will, as one Satanist told me after listening to one of my talks, help to “put the pieces together.”

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1 The Satan Survey Two (SS-2) is discussed in Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aagaard Petersen, *The Invention of Satanism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. 9, 137, 165, 173, 191. For the US poll, see “Reuters/Ipsos/UVA Center for Politics Race Poll,” *Ipsos*, August 8, 2018, [www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-08/2018\\_reuters\\_uva\\_ipsos\\_race\\_poll\\_08.08.18.pdf](http://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-08/2018_reuters_uva_ipsos_race_poll_08.08.18.pdf).

## Defining Satanism

Modern Satanism emerged in the 1960s, and as with all objects of social analysis, academics have offered several definitions of it, although they broadly agree and differ only in details. The definitions are often driven by a desire to define Satanism as a real religion and philosophy, as opposed to the fantasy religion of medieval Christians and Satanic Panic advocates.

Massimo Introvigne offers a three-part definition: “Satanism is 1) the worship of the character identified with the name of Satan or Lucifer in the Bible, 2) by organized groups with at least a minimal organization and hierarchy, 3) through ritual or liturgical practices.” Per Faxneld says it is “a system in which Satan is celebrated in a prominent position.” Similarly, Ruben van Luijk defines Satanism as the “*intentional, religiously motivated veneration of Satan*.” Noting that some groups also venerate additional deities, he adds that Satan must have “a clear dominance.” Meanwhile, Jesper Aagaard Petersen defines it as a “self-religion, antinomianism, the use of certain ‘S’-words and a formulated ideological genealogy, often in the form of some relation to Anton Szandor LaVey.”<sup>2</sup>

Satanism is also typically divided into three different types. In 2016, Petersen, Dyrendal, and Lewis labeled these as rationalist, esoteric, and reactive. Rationalist Satanism refers to a coherent ideology that is “atheistic, skeptical, materialistic, and epicurean.” It views Satan not as a literal deity but as “a symbol of rebellion, individuality, carnality, and empowerment” (the position held by the Church of Satan). Esoteric Satanism is “more explicitly theistically oriented” and promotes “a religion of self-actualization.” While Satan is “often spoken of as a literal entity, it is not a god to be worshiped, but rather a being or principle to be emulated or understood” (the position of the Temple of Set). Reactive Satanism is an inverted Christianity, “a transgression from culturally accepted norms, without necessarily having much of an idea of what to replace them with, other than ‘the opposite’” (the view of teenage cemetery vandals and the occasional serial killer).<sup>3</sup>

This study will use the same three categories as Petersen, Dyrendal, and Lewis, but will instead refer to them by the names commonly used by Satanists themselves: atheist, theist, and folk Satanism.

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2 Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Brill, 2016), 3; Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 25; Ruben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 2, 6 (original italics); Jesper Aagaard Petersen, “Introduction: Embracing Satan,” in *Contemporary Religious Satanism*, ed. Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Routledge, 2009), 7.

3 Dyrendal et al., *Invention of Satanism*, 5–6.

## Existing Literature on Nazi-Satanism

The literature on Nazi-Satanism is uneven. The earliest and best is from nonacademic Satanists and scholars of fascism. Later, a circle of academics, largely based in Scandinavia, made modern Satanism a field of scholarship. However, they had problematic views about Nazi-Satanism, almost always downplaying or dismissing it. But more recently, other scholars who take the current seriously have done better.

Two nonacademic books from the 1990s have no qualms about covering Nazi-Satanism. Linda Blood, previously an acolyte of Satanist Michael Aquino, published *The New Satanists* in 1994. Despite being marketed as a Satanic Panic exposé (she was sued by Aquino), her chapter on Nazi-Satanism, while marred by some inaccuracies, was the best overview at the time. Gavin Baddeley's 1999 *Lucifer Rising*, which documented the Satanist milieu in general, mentioned many of the major Nazi-Satanist figures, plus the Church of Satan's internal debates over Nazi-Satanism, although he also allowed a number of figures space to issue dishonest denials. It was written for a popular audience and understandably lacked some of the rigor expected of academic work.<sup>4</sup>

The first serious academic look at Nazi-Satanism was Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *Black Sun* in 2002, which includes a chapter profiling Anton LaVey, David Myatt, the Order of the Jarls of Bælde, and Kerry Bolton. Goodrick-Clarke's conclusion is that Nazi-Satanism is defined by being anti-Christian, transgressive, elitist, and "a tableau of ritualized transgression and exclusion from the rest of society," which it harnesses to funnel people into fascist politics.<sup>5</sup> The next year Mattias Gardell's *Gods of the Blood* came out. It has a chapter that is in part about Nazi-Satanism, although much of it is focused on Satanist-influenced groups and nonpolitical theology. Gardell is strong on showing Nazi-Satanism's controversial status and crossover with Heathenism, a revival of pre-Christian Northern European pagan beliefs. But he downplays some of modern Satanism's politics—for example, refusing to name O9A founder "Anton Long" as David Myatt, which allows Gardell to ignore his deep neo-Nazi background.<sup>6</sup>

In 2009, philosopher Chris Mathews released *Modern Satanism*, much of which was a damning critique of LaVey's far-right views, emphasizing their overlaps with National Socialism. However, Mathews's tone, focus on LaVey, and some of his conclusions

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4 Linda Blood, *The New Satanists* (Warner Books, 1994), chap. 8; Seth Rosenfeld, "S. F. Temple, Couple in 'New Satanists' Sue Author for Libel," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 29, 1994, [www.newspapers.com/article/the-san-francisco-examiner-linda-blood-s/27607973](http://www.newspapers.com/article/the-san-francisco-examiner-linda-blood-s/27607973); Gavin Baddeley, *Lucifer Rising* (Plexus, 1999).

5 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun* (New York University Press, 2002), 213–31, quote at 231.

6 Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood* (Duke University Press, 2003), 284–323, O9A at 292–95.

opened him up to criticisms from other academics. James R. Lewis in particular sought to delegitimize his critique and downplay the existence of a Nazi-Satanist current.<sup>7</sup>

About a half dozen books from between 2008 and 2016, mostly by Scandinavians, started the academic study of Satanism in earnest, and much of their work is of significant value. But where they addressed Nazi-Satanism, almost all of them whitewashed it.

Lewis, a controversial (non-Scandinavian) academic who has been accused of problematically partisan scholarship, dismissed the advocacy of violence by the Nazi-Satanist O9A in his 2001 encyclopedia *Satanism Today*—despite the fact that Myatt had just been accused of inspiring a British terrorist. In 2008, Lewis coedited, with Petersen, *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*. In it, Lewis briefly mentions Nazi-Satanism—but only to give space to other Satanists condemning it. His 2010 review of Mathews’s book is a full-court push to delegitimize it. Lewis cites the 2009 survey to debunk Mathews’s claims—although in fact it appears to show that Satanist sympathy for National Socialism is higher than in the general population—and he even criticizes Mathews for not citing *unpublished* work by scholars working in different disciplines.<sup>8</sup>

The 2009 anthology *Contemporary Religious Satanism*, edited by Lewis’s collaborator Petersen, also downplays Nazi-Satanism. For example, an article by Gry Mørk says black metal musician Varg Vikernes sees the “Jewish-Christian tradition as a spiritual plague”—but never identifies him as a white supremacist. Petersen’s 2011 essay, “Smite Him Hip and Thigh’: Satanism, Violence, and Transgression,” analyzes the role of transgression and ambiguity in Satanism—but spends the article dismissing the idea that, aside from a few teenage black metal fans, almost any Satanists could *possibly* entertain a serious interest in neo-Nazism. *The Devil’s Party*, an anthology Lewis coedited with Per Faxneld in 2013, again attacks Mathews and brazenly whitewashes direct neo-Nazi involvements. But the book does have a solid, often-cited chapter on O9A by Jacob C. Senholt—who from 2010 to 2011 was the director of Arktos, the leading English-language publisher of fascist intellectual books. Given that scholars of these topics are involved in or adjacent to fascist politics, make of that what you will.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Chris Mathews, *Modern Satanism* (Praeger, 2009).

8 Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America* (Syracuse University Press, 1997), 139–40; James R. Lewis, ed., *Satanism Today* (ABC-CLIO, 2001), 196; James R. Lewis, “Who Serves Satan?,” in *The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of Satanism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Prometheus Books, 2008), 552–53; James R. Lewis, review of *Modern Satanism* by Chris Mathews, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 1, no. 1 (2010): 103–4.

9 Gry Mørk, “With My Art I Am the Fist in the Face of God’: On Old-School Black Metal,” in *Contemporary Religious Satanism*, 180; Jesper Aagaard Petersen, “Smite Him Hip and Thigh’: Satanism, Violence, and Transgression,” in *Violence and New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford University Press, 2011), 351–76; Per Faxneld and Jesper Aagaard Petersen, eds., *The Devil’s Party: Satanism in Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 176–78; Jacob C. Senholt, “Secret Identities in the Sinister Tradition,” in *Devil’s Party*, 250–74; “Jacob Christiansen SENHOLT,” Gov.UK, accessed August 7, 2025, <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/officers/G1IXUBUbOtzW9Uj05nAk8abGgz8/appointments>.

*The Invention of Satanism*, authored in 2016 by Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen, contains Lewis's 2009 survey, and continues to attempt to delegitimize Mathews. In 2023, Faxneld and Johan Nilsson published *Satanism: A Reader*, an important collection of Satanist primary texts from 1850 to 2017, with accompanying commentaries. Again, there is a good section on O9A, but others are inadequate. For example, the section by Hans Thomas Hakl and Michele Olzi identifies Julius Evola as a philosopher, artist, and esotericist—but conveniently fails to note that he is best known as a “super-fascist” and one of the most important intellectual influences on contemporary neo-Nazism.<sup>10</sup>

Massimo Introvigne's 2016 *Satanism: A Social History* was easily the best academic book addressing Nazi-Satanism in over a decade. Although the current rightfully occupies only a small portion of his six-hundred-page tome, Introvigne acknowledges and documents the presence of a variety of Nazi-Satanist groups. And Ruben van Luijk's *Children of Lucifer: The Origins of Modern Religious Satanism*, released the same year, is also a good treatment of the subject. Although the relevant parts are mostly limited to LaVey, van Luijk does a thorough and incisive job analyzing his far-right views.

### Satan and the NSDAP

Satanism started as an imagined religion conjured up by Christians in the late medieval period, and this fantasy version continues to this day. In the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets, including Shelley and Byron, incorporated Satan as a symbol of rebellion against the present order, while socialists, anarchists, and feminists later invoked Satan as the ultimate rebel against a capitalist, theocratic, and patriarchal society.<sup>11</sup> Proponents of philosophical systems based around Satan started with Stanislaw Przybyszewski's *Die Synagoge des Satan* in 1897, and scattered individuals and groups emerged and disappeared through the 1930s.

While this study limits itself to modern Satanism and National Socialism, it should first be noted that there were many early twentieth-century occult traditions connected to far-right politics, including Ariosophy, Anthroposophy, and Traditionalism. The role of occultism in Hitler's NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei / National Socialist German Workers' Party) has been the subject of much discussion. The party arose in the context of the German folkish (*völkisch*) movement. In *Mein*

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10 Dyrendal et al., *Invention of Satanism*, 171–73, 191–92, 232n1 for chap. 7; Fredrik Gregorius, “The Order of the Nine Angles, *The Black Book of Satan* (1984),” and Hans Thomas Hakl and Michele Olzi, “Maria de Nagłowska, *La Lumière du sexe* (1932) and ‘Satanisme masculin, Satanisme féminin’ (1933),” in *Satanism: A Reader*, ed. Per Faxneld and Johan Nilsson (Oxford University Press, 2023), 252–255 and 136, respectively. Hakl's whitewashing of Evola is analyzed in several articles in a special issue of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 25, no. 2 (2025).

11 Per Faxneld, “The Devil Is Red,” *Numen* 60, nos. 5–6 (2013): 528–58; Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*.

*Kampf*, Hitler says that “the basic ideas of the National Socialist movement are *folkish*, and *folkish* ideas are *National Socialist*.”<sup>12</sup> But it is the Thule Society, a far-right group led by occultist Rudolf von Sebottendorff, that is the best-known connection between these circles and the NSDAP. While some in the Thule Society would join the NSDAP, Hitler was never a member, and this loose relationship is frequently exaggerated.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of outsiders, as early as 1940 Lewis Spence connected the NSDAP and Satanism in his *The Occult Causes of the Present War*. But it was in the 1960s and 1970s that books came out claiming a strong connection between the party and occultism, including Satanism. Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier’s influential *The Morning of the Magicians*, published in English translation in 1963, was followed by others like Trevor Ravenscroft’s *The Spear of Destiny* in 1972 and Francis X. King’s *Satan and Swastika* in 1976. About these, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke says most had “[a] complete ignorance of the primary sources” and that “inaccuracies and wild claims were repeated by each newcomer to the genre until an abundant literature existed.” Chris Mathews’s analysis is that “Nazi occult beliefs’ more often denotes occult beliefs *about* the Nazis than occult beliefs *of* the Nazis.”<sup>14</sup> Regardless, these books helped popularize the linkage between the Nazis, the occult, and Satanism in the popular mind—and among Satanists themselves.

The truth is far more prosaic. The NSDAP did not like competition and implemented a series of bans on occult groups and practices. The only German group of note in the 1920s and 1930s connected to Satanism was Fraternitas Saturni—and even then, there is debate over whether there was enough Satan in their theology to classify them as such. But the NSDAP banned the group in 1937: Regardless of whether they were Satanists or not, the Nazis had no use for them.<sup>15</sup>

## Church of Satan

All scholars agree about the importance of the Church of Satan to modern Satanism. Summarizing Introvigne, van Luijk writes, “Genealogically speaking, every known Satanist group or organization in the world today derives directly or indirectly from LaVey’s 1966 Church of Satan, even if they are dismissive of LaVey or choose to emphasize the other real or alleged forerunners of Satanism.”<sup>16</sup> And key to LaVey’s

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12 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Mariner, [1925] 1999), 461 (original italics).

13 Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 114, 116–17.

14 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (New York University Press, [1985] 2002), 219, 222, quote at 225; Mathews, *Modern Satanism*, 111.

15 Introvigne, *Satanism*, 283–85.

16 Van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, 305.

influence is his 1969 work *The Satanic Bible*, which today is the world's most famous Satanist book. It advocates a self-centered individualism, unhampered by Christian morality, and decked out with Satanic regalia and even (atheist) ceremonial magic. LaVey himself called it "Ayn Rand with trappings."<sup>17</sup>

The Church of Satan was founded in San Francisco in 1966 when LaVey, who had been hosting occult and supernatural talks in his home, shaved his head, put on devilish clothes, and announced the new group.<sup>18</sup> It attracted both media attention and a healthy attendance for its rituals. Many have commented that it was hard to tell where LaVey the carnival showman ended, and LaVey the committed Satanist began.

The late 1960s were a time of great social, sexual, political, and spiritual change. San Francisco was the epicenter of the spread of Eastern religions like Buddhism, but there was also a revival of interest in Western traditions of occultism and paganism. The Church of Satan both drew from this energy and pushed against it. Van Lwijk writes that it "fitted neatly into these trends of anti-Christianity, occult attraction, sexual liberalization, and general rebelliousness." But on other issues there were clashes. While on the surface LaVey was a libertarian individualist, his Satanism turned out to be an oddly far-right affair. The hippies, sporting long hair and colorful clothing, embraced mysticism, community, drugs, left-wing politics, and peace. Meanwhile, LaVey, with a shaved head and black suit, promoted rationality, individualism, and "law and order" (which included supporting drug laws), and embraced interpersonal violence.<sup>19</sup>

Mathews says that "[f]ar from being an occult-obsessed order that aims to summon demons, LaVey's version of Satanism is materialistic, Darwinian, and atheistic. It is a body of beliefs that is more philosophical in flavor than religious, although it incorporates a religious, ritualistic aspect, primarily for its psychological potency." And while overall *The Satanic Bible* has an individualistic and libertarian feel, close observation reveals a bit more. Mathews emphasizes LaVey's "Nietzschean condemnation of pity and compassion as weakness, suspicion of and hostility to any majority positions, frequent use of violent imagery, . . . ubiquitous contempt for egalitarian values, and . . . constant focus on negative emotions such as anger, hatred, and revenge."<sup>20</sup> One reason for this is that *The Satanic Bible's* first section, "The Book of Satan," is plagiarized from Ragnar Redbeard's 1896 *Might is Right, or Survival of the Fittest*, a vulgar social Darwinist text combining white supremacy, antisemitism, and deep-seated misogyny. LaVey removed the explicitly bigoted references, but the frame—and mindset—remained intact.

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17 Kim Klein "Witches Are Back, and So Are Satanists," *Washington Post*, May 10, 1970, 20.

18 Introvigne, *Satanism*, 306.

19 Van Lwijk, *Children of Lucifer*, 298–99.

20 Mathews, *Modern Satanism*, xvi, 63.

The Church of Satan was accused of fascist tendencies almost from the beginning. In 1968, Isaac Bonewits noted that while some people were bringing “authentic Ku Klux Klan robes and Nazi uniforms for the [Church of Satan] ceremonies . . . [he] was assured that the clothes were merely for ‘Satanic shock value’—but upon talking to them, he realized “they were not pretending anything.” LaVey later said he voted for segregationist presidential candidate George Wallace that year.<sup>21</sup> The next year, LaVey wrote to his trusted lieutenant, Michael Aquino, “We do not advocate or even approve of denial or desecration of such sacred American traditions as home, family, patriotism, personal pride, etc. but instead **champion** these things. . . . [C]onservative organizations will find . . . Satanism far more compatible with their doctrines than they now think it to be.”<sup>22</sup>

Others took notice of LaVey’s politics. A 1971 *Newsweek* article reported, “LaVey describes his goal as the creation of a police state in which the weak are weeded out and the ‘achievement-oriented leadership’ is permitted to pursue the mysteries of Black Magic.” In fact, “If there is anything fundamentally diabolic about LaVey, it stems more from the echo of Nazism in his theories than from the horror-comic trappings of his cult.”<sup>23</sup>

In *The Satanic Bible*, LaVey had written, “Satanism condones any type of sexual activity which properly satisfies your individual desires—be it heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or even asexual.” But in 1971, LaVey’s wife Diane, who helped run the organization, wrote to Aquino, “We’ve really had it with Satanic fairy godmothers—a new specification in the requirements for the Priesthood: Applicants **must be straight!**”<sup>24</sup>

LaVey also gained a reputation as a misogynist. Aquino says LaVey “appears to have been uncertain of women and thus reluctant to grant them the full dignity of humanity.” In 1984, Diane LaVey’s divorce filing accused LaVey of beating her and even choking her unconscious.<sup>25</sup> LaVey had already argued against abortion, at least in most cases. In 1971, he said, “Satanically speaking, I am against abortion. Yet I **do** consider a *problem* of overpopulation. Therefore, I advocate compulsory birth control” for those deemed unfit.<sup>26</sup>

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21 Isaac Bonewits, “My Satanic Adventure, or I was a Teenaged Satanist! (Version 2.3),” *Neopagan Net*, first published 1975, updated 2005, [www.neopagan.net/SatanicAdventure.html](http://www.neopagan.net/SatanicAdventure.html); Klein, “Witches,” p.23.

22 Michael A. Aquino, *The Church of Satan*, 6th ed. (pub. by author, 2009), 47, [https://web.archive.org/web/20130723004847/https://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/religion/occult/new\\_age/Satanism/The%20Church%20of%20Satan%20\(2009\).pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20130723004847/https://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/religion/occult/new_age/Satanism/The%20Church%20of%20Satan%20(2009).pdf). All Aquino citations for this book are to the sixth edition, and all bolded text in quotes is in the original.

23 “Evil, Anyone?,” *Newsweek*, August 16, 1971, 56.

24 Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (Avon Books, 1969), 67; Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 174.

25 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 19, 434.

26 LaVey, “The Third Side,” *The Black Flame* 5, nos. 3–4 (1994): 2, republished in *Satan Speaks!* (Feral

While most of the Church of Satan's 1960s membership was local, some out-of-towners came for events.<sup>27</sup> In 1970, the group started to expand nationally, establishing chapters, dubbed "grottos." The inevitable splinter groups emerged, too, starting with Wayne West's First Occultic Church of Man, founded after his 1971 expulsion.<sup>28</sup> His group would be followed by many others; they took what they liked from LaVey and added other elements. And these new Satanists would include neo-Nazis.

### National Renaissance Party

The earliest documented interaction between the Church of Satan and neo-Nazis was with the National Renaissance Party (NRP). Founded in 1949, the NRP was the first major US postwar group based around National Socialism, although it publicly downplayed this. Its ideology was unorthodox, embracing Communist dictatorships and black nationalism. Additionally, the group's second leader, James Madole, was an occultist whose views combined Theosophy, Hinduism, and Aryan mysticism—but also Satanism.<sup>29</sup>

In letters to Aquino in 1974 discussing how to deal with a new Nazi-Satanist group, the Order of the Black Ram, LaVey recounted his dealings with Madole, who had cross membership in both the Church of Satan and NRP. LaVey said, "I know Madole personally and have been to N.R.P. headquarters. Even have a card. They would do anything for us. So would the Klan, for that matter. I do not endorse either, but acknowledge camaraderie from any source." Mocking the NRP's members, LaVey said, "Their racist ideals are also worn on their sleeves and, I believe, are as removable as their armbands," as they only needed "a symbol and a scapegoat."<sup>30</sup> Regardless, he made it clear that neo-Nazis were welcome in the Church of Satan.

Madole played LaVey's *Satanic Mass* album at several party meetings. The Church of Satan's New York City grotto leader, Lilith Sinclair, told Aquino that Madole's residence was "practically overflowing with Baphomet emblems," and that he asked another Church of Satan member for recommendations of people who could help

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House, 1998), 30. According to van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, 541n204, this was originally published in 1971. Bold and italics in original.

27 Dyrendal et al., *Invention of Satanism*, 59.

28 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 143–44, 578–79.

29 For an overview of Madole's beliefs, see Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 72–87, and Jeffrey Kaplan, "The Post-War Paths of Occult National Socialism: From Rockwell and Madole to Mason," *Patterns of Prejudice* 35, no. 3 (2001): 45–53.

30 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 378, 380. Unfortunately, Aquino does not specify when LaVey's interactions with Madole occurred.

instruct NRP officers in occult ideas.<sup>31</sup> In 1977, the NRP's *National Renaissance Bulletin* identified Bruce Ithier, a member of the group's "Security Echelon," as the "High Priest of the Temple of Baal which is a branch of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan." In 1978, Madole attended a "May Eve" celebration with the Temple of Baal; the NRP bulletin ran a picture from the event.<sup>32</sup>

### Order of the Black Ram

Although the Church of Satan had overlapping members with the NRP, apparently its first interaction with an actual Nazi-Satanist group was with the Order of the Black Ram, which was the catalyst for a discussion between Aquino and LaVey. This started when Aquino was told that Michael Grumbowski (a.k.a. "Shai"), a third-degree member (priest) in the Church of Satan, was stepping down from that position, although he remained a second-degree member. Grumbowski had been a favorite of Aquino, who had called him one of the potential "prime movers" of a "satanic renaissance" in the eastern United States.<sup>33</sup>

It came out that Grumbowski—who was now working under a third name, Reverend Blackshire—had founded a new group, the Shrine of the Little Mother. Grumbowski also cofounded a second group, the Order of the Black Ram, which was led by Seth Kliphoth (né John T. Amend, and later Seth Typhon).<sup>34</sup> Kliphoth, a first-degree Church of Satan member, was also the Michigan state NRP organizer. The *National Renaissance Bulletin* reported that in 1974 he attended an Odinist Movement gathering in Toronto, where the speakers included an NSWPP member. (In 1967 the American Nazi Party was renamed the National Socialist White People's Party.) The Order of the Black Ram was described as having formed to "revive the Sacred Rites of our Aryan forefathers."<sup>35</sup>

In December 1974, Kliphoth sent his group's publications to LaVey. A reply written on LaVey's behalf said that since the Order of the Black Ram explicitly acknowledged his influence, the Nazi-Satanists were recognized as a fraternal group. Five dollars was

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31 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 379, 381; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 83. Baphomet is a goat-headed figure, holding up two fingers on his right hand and holding two down on his left. While preceding modern Satanism, Baphomet has become closely associated with it, and the Church of Satan includes a goat's head in its symbol.

32 "NRP Reaches 100,000 Americans in New Jersey on Radio Station WCTC!," *National Renaissance Bulletin* 28, nos. 6–8 (June–August 1977): 4; "NRP Gives Celebration for New SE Commander," *National Renaissance Bulletin* 29, nos. 4–6 (April–June 1978): 1.

33 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 208, 374–78.

34 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 377–78.

35 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 383; "NRP Activity in Michigan and Canada," *National Renaissance Bulletin* 25, nos. 3–4 (March–April 1974): 3.

included for a subscription to the Order of the Black Ram's publication, *Liber Venifica*. This meant that the Church of Satan now went further than just accepting neo-Nazis as members: It recognized a Nazi-Satanist group as a counterpart in good standing.<sup>36</sup>

The Order of the Black Ram's reading list shows its influences. *Liber Venifica* #9 includes several LaVey books, Pauwels and Bergier's *The Morning of the Magicians*, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and white supremacist Ben Klassen's *Nature's Eternal Religion*.<sup>37</sup> The next issue had a special plug for the *National Renaissance Bulletin* and noted periodical exchanges with *The Odinist* and the *NS Mobilizer*. (The latter was the publication of the National Socialist League, highly unusual for being an explicitly gay neo-Nazi group, and described as "friendly to Satanic World-view.")<sup>38</sup>

Modern Satanism and open US neo-Nazism each emerged from single organizations—the Church of Satan and the American Nazi Party, respectively—and in the mid-1970s both spun off new groups founded by disenchanted and expelled members. Kliphoth himself moved on from the NRP to other groups. In 1977, he led a local unit of the National Socialist Liberation Front, which promoted guerrilla warfare and terrorism (and in which the neo-Nazi James Mason was a leading figure); in 1980, Kliphoth claimed he was the Grand Dragon of the Michigan Klan.<sup>39</sup> So while the Order of the Black Ram apparently only lasted a short time, it was a harbinger of things to come. And the most important of these things was the O9A, which emerged at the same time in Britain.

## Unhealthy Fascinations

In 1975, Aquino left the Church of Satan and formed the Temple of Set, which became the most important splinter group. Commentators said this was caused by LaVey's retreat from the grotto model and Aquino's turn to theistic Satanism, but the reason Aquino gives in his monumental history, *The Church of Satan*, is that LaVey started selling membership degrees.<sup>40</sup>

The Temple of Set has been called "post-Satanist" because its central figure is not Satan—at least, not exactly. Kennet Granholm describes it as believing in "one central mythological being . . . the Egyptian god Set," who is "the ageless Intelligence of this

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36 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 383–84.

37 *Liber Venifica* 1, no. 9 [1975?]: 6–7, uploaded May 31, 2024, [https://archive.org/details/bim\\_early-english-books-1641-1700\\_liber-venifica\\_1973\\_1\\_9](https://archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_liber-venifica_1973_1_9).

38 *Liber Venifica* 1, no. 10 [1976?]: 18, 31, uploaded May 31, 2024, [https://archive.org/details/bim\\_early-english-books-1641-1700\\_liber-venifica\\_1\\_10](https://archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_liber-venifica_1_10).

39 Spencer Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Countercultural Fascism* (Routledge, 2024), 283n7.

40 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 885–86.

Universe' and the only god with independent existence." He "is not worshipped" but instead "regarded as a teacher and guide, as well as a model on which to base one's own deification."<sup>41</sup> The Temple of Set would also act as a new home for those disenchanted with LaVey.

While much ink has been spilled about Aquino's views of National Socialism, his links with actual neo-Nazis are limited. Overall, Aquino had what could be called an "unhealthy fascination" with National Socialism. In 1970, he had been very negative about it, saying fascism was "irreconcilable with Satanism, which advocates unrestrained enjoyment of human freedom."<sup>42</sup> But he came to change his mind.

In 1974, Aquino said that "all avowed neo-Nazi groups are pariahs in the eyes of the Church of Satan." But at the same time he was fascinated by the NSDAP's symbols and uniforms, and he admired some of Hitler's ideas. He claimed that "*Mein Kampf* is a political *Satanic Bible*," which showed how to "control . . . mass movements" by exploiting people's "crude and bestial emotions." Furthermore, Aquino claimed that *Mein Kampf*'s antisemitism was merely "a personal quirk of Hitler's" that should be ignored, as it was "essentially unimportant to the main points."<sup>43</sup> The Temple of Set reading list included *Mein Kampf*, works by NSDAP ideologue Alfred Rosenberg and Holocaust denier David Irving, and Nazi occult books like Pauwels and Bergier's *The Morning of the Magicians*.<sup>44</sup> In 1982, Aquino went to Wewelsburg Castle to perform a ritual, which was published and became an important Temple of Set text.<sup>45</sup> (Wewelsburg was SS leader Heinrich Himmler's castle, and is the focus of many Nazi occult pseudohistories.)

Regardless of Aquino's rejection of neo-Nazism, more than one person moving either away from, or further into, fascism found their way into his group—including Nikolas Schreck, Zeena LaVey, Stephen Edred Flowers, and Kerry Bolton—and more than one person left over Aquino's positions. The latter included Aquino's own brother-in-law, William T. Butch, and Butch's fiancée, Lynn Johnson. They departed in 1985 over what they saw as the Temple of Set's "authoritarian, anti-feminine bias, as well as its increasing emphasis on Nazi occultism," forming the Temple of Nephthys.<sup>46</sup> But

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41 Kennet Granholm, "Embracing Others than Satan," in Petersen, *Contemporary Religious Satanism*, 93–94.

42 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 75.

43 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 379, 380, 612.

44 Michael A. Aquino, *Black Magic* (pub. by author, 2010), 181, 235–36, 238, uploaded December 9, 2010, [https://archive.org/details/BlackMagic\\_ct/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/BlackMagic_ct/mode/2up).

45 Michael A. Aquino, memo (November 8, 1982), and "The Wewelsburg Working" (October 19, 1982), uploaded October 24, 2012,

46 Arthur Lyons, *Satan Wants You* (Warner Books, 1988), 131. In *The Church of Satan*, Aquino denounced the description as "inexcusably gullible" (889).

the most famous defector was Linda Blood, whose book *The New Satanists* attacked Satanism in general and Aquino in particular. By 1992, the neo-Nazi presence had gotten so out of hand that the Temple of Set purged followers of O9A and associated groups like the Order of the Jarls of Bælder.<sup>47</sup> So while Aquino may have believed that his fascination with the Nazis was not political, this seems to have been lost on at least some of his followers.

### The 1980s Satanic Panic

The 1980s changed the landscape of modern Satanism as a folk panic swept the United States. The media was filled with wild stories of Satanic cults abusing children and engaging in ritual murder. Fueled by the popularity of “recovered memories”—many people, guided by therapists, suddenly “remembered” being abused by Satanic cults—what became dubbed the Satanic Panic was championed by an alliance of evangelical Christians and law enforcement.

All good conspiracy theories have a kernel of truth, and there have been a small number of murders by Satanists. In 1985, in the middle of the Satanic Panic, Satanist serial killer Richard Ramirez, a.k.a. the “Night Stalker,” was arrested. At the same time, Satanist imagery was rife among heavy metal bands, from Mercyful Fate to Mötley Crüe. By then, LaVey had withdrawn from public life, but the Satanic Panic thrust the Church of Satan back into the spotlight. His daughter Zeena LaVey stepped up and was the group’s spokesperson from 1985 to 1990, appearing on talk shows to defend the good name of Satan.<sup>48</sup> She also married musician and fellow Satanist Nikolas Schreck, one of four members of the Abraxas Foundation, an “occult-fascist think tank,” albeit one that mostly existed on paper. And it would be the Abraxas Foundation that brought the Church of Satan into a much deeper connection with neo-Nazism.

The Abraxas Foundation members were participants in the “extreme culture” of the 1980s and 1990s. Branching off from punk rock, these writers, artists, publishers, and musicians wallowed in caustic and negative themes, including serial killers, cult leaders, pedophilia, conspiracy theories, and Satanism; unsurprisingly, Nazi imagery was also widespread. And while those who used it inevitably claimed it was for the sake of transgression and provocation, in fact some of them were collaborating with neo-Nazis—if not adherents themselves.

In 1987, Abraxas Foundation founder and industrial musician Boyd Rice met LaVey and joined the Church of Satan, and was made a priest before becoming an unofficial spokesperson and member of its advisory board, the Council of Nine. Rice

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47 Introvigne, *Satanism*, 364.

48 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 277–78.

introduced LaVey to two other Abraxas Foundation members. (While 1987 is typically given as the founding year of the Abraxas Foundation, Schreck has said it was 1988.) In 1987 or 1988, LaVey met Adam Parfrey, who was quickly becoming an important countercultural book publisher. In 1989, LaVey met musician Michael Moynihan, who would also become a Church of Satan priest.<sup>49</sup> Parallel to the Satanic Panic, neo-Nazism was in full swing in the 1980s as terrorist groups like The Order committed murders and robbed banks, and the Nazi skinhead movement exploded. Abraxas Foundation members were in direct contact with the leaders of the most violent wing of neo-Nazism, including James Mason, Tom Metzger of the White Aryan Resistance, and Bob Heick of the American Front, a Nazi skinhead gang.

### Meeting James Mason

James Mason is today's most important neo-Nazi terrorist ideologue. Mason self-published the newsletter *SIEGE* between 1980 and 1986, in which he argued it was pointless for neo-Nazis to engage in traditional political work. (Mason's newsletter was rendered as *SIEGE*, while the 1993 edited anthology made out of it is often stylized *Siege*.) Instead, he advocated random but high-profile terrorist acts, assassinations, serial killings, and civil unrest in hopes of destabilizing "The System."

It is hard to overstate the influence of *Siege* on the current wave of neo-Nazi terrorism that emerged in the 2010s and since then has been linked to dozens of murders. Members of the most important group, the Atomwaffen Division, were all required to read *Siege*, and the book influenced the politics of other groups around them (some of which would also become intertwined with Satanism). These ideas later became the basis for Terrorgram, a series of shifting Telegram channels promoting ideas based on Mason's politics.

Despite years of disavowals, especially from Rice and Parfrey, their private correspondence with Mason shows how deep their connections to this end of the neo-Nazi milieu went. In fact, they spent years promoting Mason to their audiences, and the Church of Satan would help with this.

In 1986, Rice contacted Mason, suggesting the *SIEGE* newsletters be turned into a book. Soon after, he went on Metzger's cable access TV talk show, and Rice would remain embedded in the cloistered world of neo-Nazism for many years. He sent Mason letters emblazoned with swastikas and 88s—*H* is the eighth letter of the alphabet, thus code for *Heil Hitler*—and mentioned how he was reading neo-Nazi literature. In 1991, Rice was on Christian preacher Bob Larson's radio show, which featured a phone-in appearance from Mason. (Larson was an important figure in the Satanic Panic and

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49 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 177, 215, 234, 244. Schreck gave the 1988 date in an email to the author, April 2, 2025.

would debate Satanists on his show, including Rice, Schreck, and Zeena LaVey—thus gaining publicity for all parties involved.) When Mason had his own slot on Larson's show in 1993, itself billed as "Neo-Nazi Satanism," Rice accompanied him in the studio. Rice also befriended Heick, appearing in American Front uniforms in both a magazine photo and a TV interview.<sup>50</sup>

Parfrey became the first person outside of neo-Nazi circles to publish Mason when he put the neo-Nazi in his art magazine, *EXIT*, in 1987. That year, Parfrey met Metzger and published a piece in the latter's newspaper, *White Aryan Resistance*. Parfrey also became the first person to put Mason in a book, his cult classic *Apocalypse Culture*. Later, Parfrey would publish several books by LaVey.<sup>51</sup>

Schreck, despite being a theistic Satanist, was made an honorary member of the Church of Satan in 1988 by Anton LaVey, and soon after he married his daughter Zeena LaVey. Schreck went on Metzger's show to denounce "Race mixing" and "genetic suicide," and he put out the anthology *The Manson File* (published by Parfrey), which included several pages of material from Mason.<sup>52</sup>

This Nazi-Satanist crossover peaked with the 8/8/88 performance in San Francisco, which featured the coded 8 theme and included Rice, Parfrey, Schreck, and Zeena LaVey. While scholars of postwar fascism have recognized the event's importance, nonexperts often dismiss it. Petersen, though uncomfortable with some of the content, still claims the participants (and those around them) were engaged in a "play with gray." But Rice, Schreck, and Parfrey were directly helping out Mason at the time and also in contact with both Metzger and Heick. A photo taken at 8/8/88 shows Rice, Moynihan, Zeena LaVey, and Heick all Sieg Heiling. Petersen and others cannot bring themselves to admit that some of these transgressive Satanists may have been serious about neo-Nazism—or at least that, even if for their own reasons, they provided substantial assistance to committed neo-Nazis.<sup>53</sup>

That year, LaVey reaffirmed his elitist views, saying, "There can be no more myth of 'equality' for all—it only translates to 'mediocrity' and supports the weak at the expense of the strong." It was at this time that US far-right monitoring groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center took notice of Nazi-Satanism.<sup>54</sup> (In Britain, because of David

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50 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 171–72, 174–76, 194n2, 179–81, 189.

51 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 162, 213–14.

52 However, future editions of Schreck's book made it clear that he did not agree with Mason's ideas. Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 161, 277; Nikolas Schreck, phone interview with the author, March 26, 2025.

53 Petersen, "Smite Him," 352, 365, 368; Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 178–79.

54 Anton Szandor LaVey, "Pentagonal Revisionism: A Five-Point Program," *Cloven Hoof* 21, no. 2 (1988): 1–2, <https://churchofsatan.com/pentagonal-revisionism>; Steve Daniels, "Racists, Satanists Share Ideology of Evil," SPLC Klanwatch, *Intelligence Report* no. 43 (April 1989): 5.

Myatt and O9A, the antifascist magazine *Searchlight* had already taken note of the current by 1975.<sup>55</sup>)

In 1989, Parfrey talked to Mason about publishing a book on George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party. However, this came just as Parfrey was starting a new press, Feral House. Worried about being tagged as a neo-Nazi publisher, he said he needed a financially lucrative title to get the new press off the ground. So in place of Mason's proposed book on Rockwell, in 1989 Parfrey published LaVey's *The Satanic Witch*, a new version of 1971's *The Compleat Witch*. This was followed in 1990 by Blanche Barton's *The Secret Life of a Satanist: The Authorized Biography of Anton LaVey*, and then two more LaVey books, *The Devil's Notebook* in 1992 and the posthumous *Satan Speaks!* in 1998.<sup>56</sup>

In 1989, Schreck released the documentary *Charles Manson Superstar*, which was narrated by Zeena LaVey and included an interview with James Mason. But that year Schreck and Zeena LaVey fell out with the other Abraxas Foundation members, and the next year cut ties with Mason and Anton LaVey himself, leaving the Church of Satan.<sup>57</sup>

In 1988, Schreck had told Metzger that "we are strictly concerned with the western European tradition . . . we have no concern for any other," and that "[y]oung people are caught up in a nightmare of racial confusion, and we seek to end that." Zeena LaVey's December 1990 letter to Aquino reflects a milder version of these views. She says that the "Western European magical tradition" is "of more personal importance to me than the largely Eastern and negative Judaeo-Christian imagery" of the Church of Satan. She denounced Barton, and by extension her father, Anton LaVey, for trying "to attract cash from 'economic power brokers'; what other reason could justify the sickening repetitive flattery she (he) extends to Zionism, Bolshevism, and the State of Israel while safely negating any Norse or Teutonic mythology?"<sup>58</sup> In 1995, Zeena LaVey and Schreck joined the Temple of Set; in 2002 she was briefly its high priestess, although the two quickly left and formed the Sethian Liberation Movement.<sup>59</sup>

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55 Myatt is mentioned specifically as a Satanist in numerous *Searchlight* articles, starting with "A Very Trying Man" in May 1975. Twenty years later, he received a feature article ("David Myatt and the Occult-Fascist Axis," no. 241, July 1995, 6–7) and then his own cover story ("Disciples of the 'Dark Side': The Satanist Infiltration of the National Socialist Movement," no. 274, April 1998, 4–8).

56 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 214–16, 279.

57 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 278. However, Schreck, in his 2025 interview with the author (note 52), still talked about the influence of fascist intellectual Francis Parker Yockey and said he is philosophically against miscegenation—although specifying that he has no desire to impose his views on others.

58 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 277; Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 900.

59 Schreck interview with author; Introvigne, *Satanism*, 355.

### Nazi-Satanists in the 1990s

As a Church of Satan member, Moynihan became an important link between the group and the white supremacist movement. When he met LaVey, Moynihan was already working on turning the *SIEGE* newsletters into a book. And he would leverage his Church of Satan connections during the four years it took to edit the book, write the introduction—where Moynihan said the “book is meant to serve as a practical tool”—and publish it himself.<sup>60</sup>

In 1988, Rice said he showed LaVey a videotaped interview with Mason. According to Rice, LaVey said “he was very much impressed” and that Mason’s views were “surprisingly close to his own.” In 1991, Moynihan asked LaVey for permission to quote him in *Siege*. According to Moynihan, he replied that “[t]here needs to be a lot more people like James Mason in the world!” and that he would be “honored” to be quoted. LaVey later sent Mason a copy of *The Satanic Bible*, inscribed “To James Mason—a man of courage and reason—a rare combination. Rege Satanas!” A picture of the inscription appears in the second edition of *Siege*.<sup>61</sup>

When Moynihan finally self-published *Siege* in 1993, the book thanked LaVey, Parfrey, and future Church of Satan priest Thomas Thorn, of the band Electric Hellfire Club. It also thanked *The Black Flame*, a Church of Satan periodical that Peter Gilmore started in 1989, which largely replaced *The Cloven Hoof* newsletter. (Gilmore would later take over as Church of Satan leader after LaVey’s death.) Gilmore wrote a glowing review in *The Black Flame*, calling *Siege* a “monumental achievement” and saying that Satanists who want to see how their “movement fits into American Society” should “look at this account of the American National Socialist movement and learn. Mason’s writing is clear and filled with clarity.” And in 1994, Gilmore and his wife, future Church of Satan high priestess Peggy Nadramia, took pictures with Mason during a visit. Afterward, Gilmore wrote him and said, “It is a rare pleasure to contact others who are fully alive.”<sup>62</sup>

According to *The Satanic Bible*, “The true legacy of Satan . . . transcends ethnic, racial, and economic differences.”<sup>63</sup> But this was hard to square with the fact that, during its run from 1989 to 2005, *The Black Flame* ran white supremacist content. It was selective, however, and focused on the projects of the Abraxas Foundation members and those close to them, including George Eric Hawthorne, the singer of the white supremacist band RAHOWA (Racial Holy War), and the occult fascist Kerry Bolton, who published

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60 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 237.

61 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 274–75.

62 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 279–80.

63 LaVey, *Satanic Bible*, 104.

one piece in *The Cloven Hoof* and five in *The Black Flame*.<sup>64</sup> It in turn ran reviews of other periodicals like *The Rational Racist*, several of Bolton's publications,<sup>65</sup> and albums by Abraxas Foundation members and their friends. A 1996 issue included a gratuitous interview with Hawthorne—who was not even a Satanist—while Nadramia reviewed Hawthorne's music magazine, *Resistance*, and Gilmore recommended a RAHOWA album.<sup>66</sup>

This content supplemented the less extreme far-right views of the Church of Satan leadership. These included anti-feminism; belief in social hierarchies, eugenics, and a Satanist master race; and social Darwinist-driven attacks on equality. Positive reviews in *The Black Flame* of books with little to do with Satanism included those by white supremacist Jared Taylor and far-right disinformation peddler Dinesh D'Souza.<sup>67</sup> LaVey, who praised Ronald Reagan after his 1980 presidential victory, turned more conservative in the 1990s—or at least more public about his views. But perhaps this was unsurprising for a man who once said, "I believe our culture reached its creative apex in 1939."<sup>68</sup>

In 1992, LaVey said that, since Satanists were "discriminated against," they had the right to offend "any ethnic, religious, or social group." Indeed, in an outtake for a 1993 Nick Bougas documentary, LaVey used slurs against at least five different ethnic and racial groups.<sup>69</sup> (Bougas was a white supremacist artist who drew for Metzger's newspaper and created the infamous antisemitic "Happy Merchant" meme.) LaVey's official 1992 biography quoted him saying, "Satanism is the first time in history where a master race can be built of genetically predisposed, like-minded people"—although specifying that this was not based on race but rather on "the genes that make them Satanists."<sup>70</sup>

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64 K. R. Bolton, "LaVey," *Cloven Hoof*, no. 130 (1998): 28. The *Black Flame* articles are "Breaking Down the Stereotypes," 1, no. 3 (1989): 13–14; "Friedrich Nietzsche—Satan's Hammer," 2, no. 1 (1990): 2–3; "Exploding the Myth of 'Satanic Communism,'" 2, no. 1 (1990): 15–16; "Eugenics and Dysgenics," 4, nos. 3–4 (1993): 43; and "Satanic Dialectics," 5, nos. 1–2 (1994): 31–32.

65 The *Rational Racist* review is in *Black Flame* 6, nos. 1–2 (1996): 27. Bolton's publications reviewed include *The Watcher* in 3, nos. 3–4 (1991): 16; and 4, nos. 1–2 (1992): 29. *The Heretic* is reviewed in 4, nos. 1–2 (1992): 29; 4, nos. 3–4 (1993): 17–18; and 5, nos. 3–4 (1994): 27. *The Nexus* is reviewed in 6, nos. 3–4 (2005): 35–36.

66 *Black Flame* 6, nos. 1–2 (1996): 27, 31, 40–42.

67 *Black Flame* 5, nos. 1–2 (1994): 24–25; 6, nos. 1–2 (1996): 38.

68 Aquino, *Church of Satan*, 346; Baddeley, *Lucifer Rising*, 132.

69 LaVey, "Politically Incorrect Manifesto," *Black Flame* 3, nos. 3–4 (1992), 3; "Anton LaVey Was Worse Than You Think," *Queer Satanic*, September 5, 2023, <https://queersatanic.com/anton-lavey-was-worse-than-you-think>.

70 Quoted in Barton, *The Secret Life of a Satanist* (Feral House, [1990] 1992), ebook, chap. 19; Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 234.

In 1993, LaVey said, “If a neo-fascist look—and outlook—makes for men who look like men and women who look like women, I’m all for it.” In 1994, he said that society was “an inept and counterproductive fascist state” in the form of “politically correct” liberalism. However, he added, “There is nothing inherently wrong with fascism”; what was needed was a “more sensible and truly progressive” one.<sup>71</sup> Around the same time, he also said, “The aesthetics of Satanism are those of National Socialism,” which had “drama, coupled with the romance of overcoming such incredible odds.”<sup>72</sup>

Around 1995, Shane Bugbee, a countercultural publisher who dealt with particularly extreme material, was hired to promote RAHOWA, and Hawthorne gave Bugbee a copy of *Might Is Right*, which he would go on to reprint several times. Bugbee contacted LaVey and in October 1996 got the aging Satanist to write a new foreword to *Might Is Right*; he also made Bugbee a Church of Satan priest. In Bugbee’s reprinted editions of the book, LaVey’s foreword is joined by afterwords from both Gilmore and Hawthorne, plus an editor’s note from white supremacist publisher Katja Lane.<sup>73</sup>

Despite their position on fascism, the Church of Satan was never a Nazi-Satanist group itself, and its members’ views varied. Alongside neo-Nazis were people of color (famously including Sammy Davis Jr.), Jews, LGBTQ+ people, leftists, and even antifascists. LaVey, himself from a Jewish family background, never embraced traditional antisemitism, although Mathews says that “LaVey’s relationship with Judaism and anti-Semitism is a confusing, often bizarre state of affairs.” In his authorized biography, Barton claims (improbably, to say the least) that LaVey helped run guns to Israel.<sup>74</sup> And in his posthumously published “The Plan,” LaVey said Satanists have affinities with both Nazis and Jews. Those from Jewish backgrounds, LaVey argued, should embrace antisemites’ association of them with the Devil.

They certainly won’t find acceptance among identity anti-Christian anti-Semites who use noble, rich, and inspirational Norse mythology as an excuse and vehicle to rant about the “ZOG” [Zionist Occupied Government]. The only place a rational amalgam of proud, admitted, Zionist Odinist Bolshevik Nazi Imperialist Socialist Fascism will be found—and championed—will be in the Church of Satan.<sup>75</sup>

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71 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 273.

72 LaVey interview in Michael J. Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos* (Feral House, 1998), 236–37.

73 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 414; Anton Szandor LaVey, foreword to *Might Is Right*, by Ragnar Redbeard (Shane Bugbee, [1896] 2014), 9.

74 Mathews, *Modern Satanism*, 150; Barton, *Secret Life*, chap. 5.

75 LaVey, “A Plan,” in *Satan Speaks!*, 22.

*The Black Flame* published antifascist Satanist voices, too, such as Elizabeth Selwyn's 1989 piece directly attacking Nazi-Satanism, including O9A. On this point at least, Selwyn was in tune with the magazine; it was generally hostile to O9A, claiming it embodied the Christian caricature of Satanism by advocating, among other things, murder. (However, van Luijk notes that O9A's obsession with brutality and neo-Nazism is "an extreme extrapolation of tendencies already present in LaVeyan Satanism."<sup>76</sup>) Jeffrey Deboo was one of the most vocal contributors who condemned fascism, although the magazine placed one of his 1994 articles next to one by Moynihan championing the compatibility of Satanism and fascism, and in the next issue Barton attacked Deboo. And so, as with the Temple of Nephtys, some split to the left. Frequent *Black Flame* contributor Tani Jantsang cofounded the Satanic Reds in 1997; they condemned Nazi-Satanism and assembled a collection of articles discussing the relationship between Satanism and fascism.<sup>77</sup>

Even at the time, the Church of Satan would not own up to what was going on. Although she had just posed for pictures with Mason, in 1995 Nadramia contemptuously dismissed criticisms that there was a "plague of Nazism," as it had come to be called. Gilmore would say that "[t]he Church of Satan is not a NAZI organization," even while reaffirming that neo-Nazis were welcome.<sup>78</sup>

### Kerry Bolton and NSBM

Until recently, anglophone fascists suffered from a lack of intellectuals. New Zealand's Kerry Bolton was one of the few exceptions. He incorporated O9A Satanism into his syncretic mystical beliefs, which reflected his time in fascist and pagan circles. In 1990, Bolton formed the Order of the Left Hand Path, although in 1994 the group changed leadership and became the Ordo Sinistra Vivendi. Bolton left and formed a new group that year, the Black Order, which proclaimed an "occult-fascist axis," but two years later he turned over its leadership to John Richardson. Because Richardson

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76 Elizabeth Selwyn, "The Right-Wing Left Hand Path," *Black Flame* 1, no. 3 (1989): 5–6; van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, 371.

77 Jeffrey Deboo, "Fascism and the Deity of Rebellion," and Michael Moynihan, "The Faustian Spirit of Fascism," *Black Flame* 5, nos. 1–2 (1994): 10–12 and 13–16; Blanche Barton, "Sycophants Unite!," *Black Flame* 5, nos. 3–4 (1994): 8–10; "Is Fascism Satanic? An Old Subject Rehashed Anew by Everyone on Here," *Satanic Reds*, July 1, 2000, [www.satanicreds.org/satanicreds/sat-fasc.html](http://www.satanicreds.org/satanicreds/sat-fasc.html).

78 Mathews, *Modern Satanism*, 226n18, gives the publication information as Peggy Nadramia, "Re: Boyd Rice, A Nazi?," posted at alt.satanism, May 6, 1995; for the full text, see [www.satanicreds.org/satanicreds/projectone-orig.html](http://www.satanicreds.org/satanicreds/projectone-orig.html); Peter H. Gilmore, "A Map for the Misdirected," *Church of Satan*, accessed August 7, 2025, <https://churchofsatan.com/map-for-the-misdirected>.

was bisexual, the US affiliate left and formed the White Order of Thule, whose mystical white supremacist politics pulled from different traditions, including Satanism.<sup>79</sup>

Bolton is a prolific writer. His many books include an edited collection of LaVey's friend Madole, and periodicals Bolton edited include *The Watcher*, *The Heretic*, and *The Nexus*. Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind, in their 1998 book *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, claim that Bolton had a significant influence on black metal musicians; Introvigne names the Polish band Xantotol specifically.<sup>80</sup>

Emerging in the early 1990s, black metal became fertile ground for Nazi-Satanism. The most influential figure is Varg Vikernes, who recorded solo as Burzum. He gained widespread notoriety not just for his part in a wave of early 1990s arson attacks on Norway's medieval stave churches, but also for killing the guitarist of his own band, Mayhem. The black metal scene he was part of is the focus of Moynihan and Söderlind's book, and Vikernes himself is interviewed. Although his beliefs later changed, at the time Vikernes was a Nazi-Satanist, and Satanism dominated the Norwegian black metal scene. Out of this grew the genre NSBM (National Socialist Black Metal). Satanist NSBM music includes the band Absurd and the label Satanic Skinhead Propaganda, which released albums like the (misspelled) 2006 *Satanic Skinhead: Declaration of Anti-Semetic Terror*.<sup>81</sup>

NSBM has since spread globally. While its trademark corpse paint is theatrical, black metal's influence on fascist politics is real. Giorgos "Kaiadas" Germanis, an MP in the Greek fascist party Golden Dawn, was in the black metal band Naer Mataron. The second leader of the Atomwaffen Division, John Cameron Denton, is a fan of the genre and was spotted at a show by Horna, another black metal band.<sup>82</sup>

Nazi-Satanism, especially O9A, has influenced other music genres as well. In 1990, Richard Moul, a.k.a. Christos Beest, took over O9A; his many music projects include

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79 Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 294, 321; Introvigne, *Satanism*, 365, 369; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 227. While Richardson was attacked for being gay, he clarified that he was bisexual. "A New Beginning," *Edra*, no. 1, p. 5.

80 K. R. Bolton, *James H. Madole*, (pub. by author, n.d.), uploaded May 16, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/james-h-madole-by-kerry-bolton>; Moynihan and Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, 312–13; Introvigne, *Satanism*, 493.

81 For an overview of NSBM written from within that scene, see Davide Maspero and Max Ribaric, *Wolves Among Sheep: History and Ideology of National Socialist Black Metal* (Tsunami Edizioni, 2015).

82 "Black Metal' Musician Elected to Greek Parliament with Anti-Immigrant Political Party," *The World*, August 15, 2013, <https://theworld.org/stories/2013/08/15/black-metal-musician-elected-greek-parliament-anti-immigrant-political-party>; Abner Häuge, "Hell for Horna: Antifascists Campaign Against Black Metal Band's U.S. Tour After Nazi Links Come to Light," *Left Coast Right Watch*, April 18, 2019, <https://leftcoastrightwatch.org/articles/hell-for-horna-antifascists-campaign-against-black-metal-bands-u-s-tour-after-nazi-links-come-to-light>.

the “Irish avant-folk band” United Bible Studies. There are other O9A musical projects as well, such as Hville I Kaos, who play “Black Ritual Chamber Musick.” Meanwhile, Martinet Press Audio is an offshoot of the press run by Joshua Caleb Sutter, the key figure in the Tempel ov Blood nexion (“nexion” is the name for local O9A groups) and a former member of the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division. The label’s acts include Archon, who are described as “harsh noise ambient intended and designed for the coming days of terror.”<sup>83</sup>

Burzum has not just become a household name to metal fans; it is now found throughout edgelord culture. For example, Solomon Henderson, who was influenced by both the neo-Nazi Terrorgram Collective and O9A before murdering one person in a Nashville, Tennessee, school shooting, posted seven social media pictures wearing a Burzum shirt, while antisemitic musician Ye (formerly Kanye West) was photographed wearing one as well.<sup>84</sup> The fact that both Ye and Henderson are black shows how today’s irony-poisoned online culture blurs the lines between shit-posting and political allegiance.

### The Schismatic Power of Nazi-Satanism

Beyond mainstream society, Nazi-Satanism is controversial among both neo-Nazis and Satanists. This is true not just for Satanists for whom National Socialism is an attack on their individual autonomy, but also for neo-Nazis who belong to other religious beliefs—especially Christian Identity.

There was already both interest in and opposition to Satanism in the early NSWPP. Mason, then in the party, bought a copy of LaVey’s *Satanic Mass* album from another party member in 1968. But the NSWPP’s Joseph Tommasi denounced a fellow neo-Nazi as a “devil worshipper” in 1970. Similarly, in 1996 Hawthorne said that while “there is a lot of resistance to Satanism amongst Racialists,” there was also support—especially from black metal fans—and that his “movement ultimately benefits from having Satanists involved.”<sup>85</sup>

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83 Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 222; Dylan Miller, “Beyond the Iron Gates,” *Quietus*, November 27, 2018, <https://thequietus.com/opinion-and-essays/black-sky-thinking/ona-fascism-nazis-folk-horror-underground-occult>; “New Audio Release Available Now: Archon–Undead Noise,” *Martinet Press*, December 13, 2016, <https://martinetpress.wordpress.com/2017/06/21/new-audio-release-available-now-archon-undead-noise>.

84 Marc-André Argentino, “Narrative Examination of the Antioch High School Shooter’s Manifesto and Diary,” *From the Depths*, January 23, 2025, [www.maargentino.com/narrative-examination-of-the-antioch-high-school-shooters-manifesto-and-diary](http://www.maargentino.com/narrative-examination-of-the-antioch-high-school-shooters-manifesto-and-diary); Ariel Koch, “Unite Against the Parasites’: How Do White Supremacists Exploit Antisemitism to Mobilize Non-White Groups?,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 19, no. 1 (2026): 23, 36.

85 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 274; “RAHOWA,” interview by Michael Moynihan, *Black Flame* 6, nos. 1–2 (1996): 42.

The increasing visibility of David Myatt and O9A also caused friction in Britain. In the mid-1990s, the violent neo-Nazi organization Combat 18 denounced him, saying, “Satanists are dirty scum who use this bullshit as a front for child molestation.”<sup>86</sup> In 1998, the British periodical *Final Conflict* published the booklet *Satanism and Its Allies: The Nationalist Movement Under Attack*. Despite some errors, it covered all the key players and was a comprehensive mapping of Nazi-Satanism.

White supremacist leaders also denounced Satanism, including *Turner Diaries* author William Pierce and esoteric Hitlerist Miguel Serrano, who said Satanists were “manipulated, psychotronically, in fact hypnotized, when not infiltrated by the CIA, Mossad, and other such secret organizations.” Addressing NSBM in 2008, Erich Gliebe—at the time running Resistance Records—said, “We are totally against that Satanic nonsense. There are many people in the NSBM scene that would like to see the whole scene cleaned out of all the Satanic stuff.” Conversely, some Satanists thought it was the black metal neo-Nazis who should be weeded out.<sup>87</sup>

### Joy of Satan

The most visible conflict, however, had ramifications for two important groups on both sides of the divide. In the mid-2000s, it came out that Joy of Satan leader Maxine Dietrich and Clifford Herrington, emeritus leader of the National Socialist Movement (NSM), were married, and furthermore that their respective groups shared a mailing address. When the news spread, it did not go down well with either group’s membership.

The Joy of Satan was founded in 2002, and Introvigne describes the theistic group as “a unique synthesis of Satanism, Nazism, and theories about UFOs and aliens.” They hold that two different kinds of aliens, who are at war with each other, created different types of humans: the “Nordic-Aryans” and the Jews. And they believe that Satan is real—but that he is an alien, not a deity.<sup>88</sup>

Reports of the neo-Nazi link seem to have reached the Joy of Satan members first. Despite the importance of antisemitism in their theology, for many members neo-Nazism was too much. Introvigne writes that some left and “started minuscule splinter organizations,” although most of them soon disappeared.<sup>89</sup> The reaction was more intense on the neo-Nazi side. Herrington, the NSM leader since 1983, had stepped

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86 “Disciples of the ‘Dark Side,’” 7–8.

87 Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 319–20; Benjamin Hedge Olson, “Voice of Our Blood: National Socialist Discourses in Black Metal,” *Popular Music History* 6, nos. 1–2 (2011): 142; Lewis, “Who Serves Satan?,” 552–53.

88 Introvigne, *Satanism*, 370–71.

89 Introvigne, *Satanism*, 371.

back into an emeritus role after handing control to Jeff Schoep in 1994. By the mid-2000s, Schoep had grown the group into the largest US neo-Nazi party. When the information about Herrington and the Joy of Satan made its way to party members in 2006, a raucous argument broke out—especially as many NSM members belonged to the Christian Identity movement. Both pro- and anti-Satanists left in a huff, and Schoep was forced to kick Herrington out in order to prevent the ship from sinking. Herrington then formed his own group, which listed the Joy of Satan as a “comrade organization.”<sup>90</sup>

### The Satanic Temple

The Satanic Temple (TST) has carved out a new space in modern Satanism. It promotes a liberal, atheist Satanism centered on reproductive rights and church/state separation, attracting a large feminist and LGBTQ+ base in the process. At odds with the approaches of earlier Satanist groups, TST is now easily the most visible Satanist group in the United States.

TST was first conceived in 2012, and chapters started forming in 2014. However, in 2018, many members were displeased after hearing about a First Amendment lawyer the group was using. Marc Randazza had not just defended neo-Nazis but had also attended alt-right events on his own. TST leader Lucien Greaves already had a track record of lambasting antifascists and defending alt-right speakers on “free speech” grounds. It was then that a 2003 radio show Greaves had cohosted became known, and this has been repeatedly brought up by the group’s critics, as it shows how Greaves was tied to earlier Nazi-Satanist circles.<sup>91</sup>

The incident involved Bugbee, whom Greaves had met while looking for a copy of *Might Is Right*. He illustrated Bugbee’s 2003 edition of the book and helped host an episode of Bugbee’s radio show promoting it. Guests included Hawthorne (by then going by Burdi), Gilmore, and Metzger. Numerous racist and antisemitic statements were bandied about by the hosts, with Greaves even arguing with Metzger that a eugenicist program based on “intelligence laws” would make a racially based one redundant.<sup>92</sup>

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90 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 281.

91 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 412–14.

92 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 414–15.

Emails and court documents show Greaves expressed interest in promoting and making new editions of *Might Is Right* as late as 2013—after TST was underway. At a 2015 book release for *American Grotesque* at the new (though as yet unopened) TST headquarters in Salem, Massachusetts, many of the same people around Mason popped back up. The book was on photographer William Mortensen, who had influenced LaVey. It was coedited by Moynihan and published by Parfrey, who spoke at the event. Mason fan James Porrazzo, who had replaced Heick as the American Front leader, also attended. (Greaves says he was present but did not see Parfrey’s talk.) Apparently, TST had not completely left the gravitational pull of those who had taken part in the Nazi-Satanist nexus.<sup>93</sup>

Both Parfrey and Bugbee have apologized for their past statements and associations. But these far-right connections—along with accusations involving financial questions, internal authoritarianism, and lawsuits against critics—have led to constant attrition from TST and a number of splinter groups forming. And some of these, cognizant of the history of Nazi-Satanism, declared themselves antifascist from the very start.<sup>94</sup>

### Order of Nine Angles

In recent years, the influence of the Order of Nine Angles on neo-Nazi terrorist circles and child abuse cults has become widespread. This form of theistic Satanism dates back a half century and has ended up returning full circle to folk Satanism—advocating murder, rape, and pedophilia. Needless to say, it has always remained controversial.

O9A’s following has exploded in the last decade. Dylan Miller says it “was once jokingly referred to as ‘The Order of No Members,’” and in 1994 Christos Beest said there were “ten people with a few hangers-on.” But in 2023, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Emelie Chace-Donahue cited one source that estimated there were up to two thousand O9A followers, and they were able to “relatively quickly” identify fifty “nexions” worldwide.<sup>95</sup>

Despite denials, today O9A founder “Anton Long” is recognized by almost all scholars as David Myatt; according to Introvigne, O9A has “more or less acknowledged” this. Although not corroborated by scholars, Myatt claimed he took

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93 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 415–17.

94 Sunshine, *Neo-Nazi Terrorism*, 417.

95 Miller, “Beyond the Iron Gates”; Baddeley, *Lucifer Rising*, 164; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Emelie Chace-Donahue, “The Order of Nine Angles: Cosmology, Practice & Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 48, no. 11 (2025): 1224.

over an existing pagan cult in Britain in 1973, and Goodrick-Clarke says he published the first O9A book in 1976. By that time, Myatt had already been involved in violent neo-Nazi circles for several years. In 1969, he joined neo-Nazi Colin Jordan's British Movement, and in 1974 formed a splinter group, the National Democratic Freedom Movement.<sup>96</sup>

Myatt's political journey paralleled that of Mason and the American Nazi Party / NSWPP. Rockwell started his party in 1959, and in 1962 went to Britain, where he and Jordan cofounded WUNS, the World Union of National Socialists. Mason joined the American Nazi Party in 1966, three years before Myatt joined Jordan's.

In the 1980s, O9A came to the United States. In 1984, Myatt's "Vindex" essay was published in the White Supremacist periodical *Liberty Bell*—the same time Mason was publishing the *SIEGE* newsletter. In 1989, *The Black Flame* acknowledged the current by printing a short O9A explainer by "Algar Langton."<sup>97</sup> That same year work on the *Siege* anthology started.

Myatt withdrew from direct political organizing for a time, but Goodrick-Clarke says his "sudden re-emergence . . . in the mid-1990s as the spiritual rector of the far-right fringe in Britain was linked to its transformation into a highly radicalized, militant underground." Myatt published the periodical of an umbrella group run by the ultra-violent Combat 18, and then in 1997 helped found another splinter group, the National Socialist Movement (not to be confused with the US group of the same name).<sup>98</sup>

Other Satanists were involved in the political circles around Myatt. Victor Norris, a.k.a. Father Raoul Belphegor, of the Anglican Satanic Church—described by *Searchlight* as a "close political and satanic friend of Myatt"—went to prison for prostituting his own children. In 1977 he started the periodical *Dark Lily* and recruited Magdalane Graham, a.k.a. Mother Lilith, to run it. In the end, however, she broke with Norris, repudiated his views, and continued her publishing efforts.<sup>99</sup>

In 1998, Myatt left the National Socialist Movement and converted to Islam. But in 1999 he gained attention when his *A Practical Guide to Aryan Revolution* was found in the home of National Socialist Movement member David Copeland, who was arrested

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96 Introvigne, *Satanism*, 358; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 217–18.

97 D. Myatt, "VINDEX: The Destiny of the West," *Liberty Bell* 11, no. 5 (January 1984): i–iii, 1–43 (interior content page numbering), uploaded February 22, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/david-myatt-vindex-destiny-of-west>; Algar Langton, "Order of Nine Angles: The Meaning of Satanism," *Black Flame* 1, no. 2 (1989): 11–12.

98 Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 223; "Disciples of the 'Dark Side,'" 4, 6.

99 "Disciples of the 'Dark Side,'" 7; Introvigne, *Satanism*, 356.

for a London nail-bombing spree that killed three and injured 139. While a Muslim, Myatt promoted Holocaust denial and defended 9/11 and suicide bombings.<sup>100</sup>

Organizationally, O9A has both nexions and individual followers, and its brand of Satanism has been dubbed the “Sinister Tradition.” It also has a complicated theology, which incorporates esoteric Nazism and paganism along with Satanism. It is theistic, and Goodrick-Clarke says followers can contact “sinister forces in the cosmos.” Ideologically, there appears to be an “inner core” of writers, including Myatt and Beest—although others write texts as well.<sup>101</sup> According to Clive Henry, “Myatt diagnosed the world as fundamentally decadent and degenerate: it was inauthentic, and now existed on the verge of apocalyptic cataclysm.” The Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG)—the white supremacist name for the supposed Jewish control of the US government—“had utilised Christianity, liberalism, Marxism, capitalism, and multiculturalism to weaken and destroy Aryanism.”<sup>102</sup>

But all is not lost. Gartenstein-Ross and Chace-Donahue say that O9A believes “Satanic forces will manifest in the physical world through *Vindex*, a person or entity that will emerge in the West to lead a pagan empire, dubbed the *Dark Imperium*.” After the corrupt contemporary world is destroyed, humanity can move to a new aeon, “the next stage in human evolution.”<sup>103</sup> (The aeon concept was popularized by Aleister Crowley, although Myatt’s version is heavily influenced by Oswald Spengler’s conceptualization of “civilizations.”)

In the meantime, adherents are to engage in a series of physical endurance tests as a kind of self-improvement regimen, as well as commit heretical and taboo acts to negate the present age. Infamously, this includes “culling,” a euphemism for murder, but also acts of terrorism. Followers are also supposed to take on an “insight role” by joining a movement, usually neo-Nazism or Islamism, that is opposite their own beliefs.<sup>104</sup> But in practice, it is typical for neo-Nazis to become Nazi-Satanists, with the insight role concept providing plausible deniability. At the same time, some adherents appear

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100 Gerry Gable, “25 Years On: The Hunt for the London Nailbomber,” *Searchlight*, April 17, 2024, <https://searchlightmagazine.com/2024/04/25-years-on-the-hunt-for-the-london-nailbomber>; *State of Hate 2019—People vs the Elite?*, Hope Not Hate report, February 17, 2019, 84–85, <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2019/02/17/state-hate-2019>.

101 Gartenstein-Ross and Chace-Donahue, “Order of Nine Angles,” 1217, 1224; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 218.

102 Clive Henry, “David Myatt’s Imagined Emotionology, His Striving for Authentic Aryan Emotional Communities, and the Dishonourable Wulstan Tedder,” *Family & Community History* 27, no. 1 (2024): 53–54.

103 Gartenstein-Ross and Chace-Donahue, “Order of Nine Angles,” 1220, 1219 (original italics).

104 Ariel Koch, “The ONA Network and the Transnationalization of Neo-Nazi-Satanism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47, no. 10 (2024): 1180.

sincere in saying they are not neo-Nazis, and observers do not agree whether—or at least to what degree—O9A is intrinsically National Socialist.

### **Atomwaffen Division and Accelerationism**

The late 2010s brought an astronomical surge of interest in O9A as it penetrated into the new wave of neo-Nazi terrorist circles. The most important group that emerged from these circles initially was the Atomwaffen Division (AWD). Founded in 2015, it was centrally based on Mason's ideas, openly advocated terrorism, and its US members and affiliates have been linked to five murders. In addition to influencing contemporaneous groups like The Base and National Action, AWD inspired new groups such as the Feuerkrieg Division. Later, a series of Telegram channels, dubbed "Terrorgram," arose to promote these ideas.

The Atomwaffen Division became deeply intertwined with Satanists—but of a different kind from those Mason was around. The group's second leader, John Cameron Denton, had apparently been promoting O9A since 2014. He linked up with Joshua Caleb Sutter's O9A nexion Tempel ov Blood, which became essentially integrated into AWD. Sutter had been in touch with Myatt since at least 2004, and his Martinet Press published books like *Iron Gates*, a novel that became required reading for AWD members. Koch describes it as containing "graphic descriptions of child rape, cannibalism, torture, genocide, and sadistic rituals." Those in AWD opposed to O9A began leaving by early 2018, and other neo-Nazis like *Daily Stormer's* Andrew Anglin also denounced AWD's Satanist turn.<sup>105</sup> After AWD disbanded in 2020, former members continued to follow Satanism, some of them eventually forming the National Socialist Order of Nine Angles (NSO9A). They have the dubious distinction of putting out a sixth, Satanist-themed edition of Mason's *Siege* and then promptly getting into a fight with Mason, who condemned them particularly and O9A generally.<sup>106</sup>

Of the dozens of people arrested from this global neo-Nazi network, many follow, or at least have promoted, O9A. These include AWD's Denton and the group's graphic designer, Patrick Gordon MacDonald (a.k.a. Dark Foreigner); Sarah Beth Clendaniel, who was working with the first AWD leader, Brandon Russell; members of Sonnenkrieg Division and System Resistance Network, including Andrew Dymock;

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105 Kelly Weill, "Satanism Drama Is Tearing Apart the Murderous Neo-Nazi Group Atomwaffen," *Daily Beast*, March 21, 2018, [www.thedailybeast.com/satanism-drama-is-tearing-apart-the-murderous-neo-nazi-group-atomwaffen](http://www.thedailybeast.com/satanism-drama-is-tearing-apart-the-murderous-neo-nazi-group-atomwaffen); Koch, "ONA Network," 1181; Ali Winston, "The Satanist Neo-Nazi Plot to Murder U.S. Soldiers," *Rolling Stone*, June 5, 2022, [www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/the-satanist-neo-nazi-plot-to-murder-u-s-soldiers-1352629](http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/the-satanist-neo-nazi-plot-to-murder-u-s-soldiers-1352629).

106 Mack Lamoureux, "The Grandfather of Modern Neo-Nazism Is Fighting with Satanic Neo-Nazis Now," *Vice*, July 28, 2023, [www.vice.com/en/article/neo-nazis-james-mason-fighting](http://www.vice.com/en/article/neo-nazis-james-mason-fighting).

former National Action leader Ryan Fleming; several Feuerkrieg Division members and affiliates, including Jarrett William Smith; and RapeWaffen affiliate Ethan Melzer. Charges against them have included rape, child pornography, and terrorism offenses. Topping this is Nikita Casap, who was sentenced to life in prison for a 2025 double parricide, after which he planned to assassinate Trump.<sup>107</sup>

### Nihilistic Violent Extremism

More recently, O9A has spread beyond mere neo-Nazi terrorists and into online child abuse circles, especially the 764 cult. Marc-André Argentino, Barrett G, and M. B. Tyler describe it as such:

764 does not only leverage the sextortion of minors but also animal torture, incest, rape, self-harm, and bestiality. 764 force victims to carry out four key types of harm that may be recorded and shared on social media platforms or disseminated internally. These include forced drug use and self-harm, such as non-suicidal self-injury with blades or needles, asphyxiation or burning. They also regularly encourage people suffering from mental health problems to kill themselves on camera or commit mass shootings. New members are also encouraged to engage in animal abuse, being forced to injure or kill personal pets or other animals. Sextortion and CSAM [child sexual abuse material] are also key dimensions of 764; victims are groomed to share intimate images to be used to subsequently sextort and doxx them.<sup>108</sup>

Some 764 members are O9A, some are neo-Nazis, some are both, and some are neither. Luca, a teenager in Romania, had a swastika tattoo and 764 affiliation when

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107 “Dangerous Organizations and Bad Actors: Order of Nine Angles,” Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC), Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, September 29, 2023, [www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/publications/dangerous-organizations-and-bad-actors-order-nine](http://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/publications/dangerous-organizations-and-bad-actors-order-nine); “U.S. Army Soldier Charged with Terrorism Offenses for Planning Deadly Ambush On Service Members in His Unit,” US Department of Justice press release, June 22, 2020, [www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-army-soldier-charged-terrorism-offenses-planning-deadly-ambush-service-members-his](http://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-army-soldier-charged-terrorism-offenses-planning-deadly-ambush-service-members-his); Marc-André Argentino, “Mortis Covenant & the Order of Nine Angles: An Analysis of the Nikita Casap Case,” *From the Depths*, April 17, 2025, [www.maargentino.com/mortis-covenant-the-order-of-nine-angles-an-analysis-of-the-nikita-casap-case](http://www.maargentino.com/mortis-covenant-the-order-of-nine-angles-an-analysis-of-the-nikita-casap-case); Ryan Mancini, “Man Who Killed Parents to Fund Trump Assassination Plot Sentenced to Life in Prison,” *The Hill*, March 6, 2026, <https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/5772117-trump-assassination-plot-wisconsin>.

108 Marc-André Argentino, Barrett G, and M. B. Tyler, “764: The Intersection of Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and Child Sexual Exploitation,” *GNet*, January 19, 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/01/19/764-the-intersection-of-terrorism-violent-extremism-and-child-sexual-exploitation>.

he filmed himself murdering a seventy-four-year-old woman, which he then shared online. Before being arrested for weapons charges and child pornography, prominent 764 member Angel Almeida posted on social media a photo with a Tempel ov Blood flag, and another picture in front of a Nazi flag while wearing a shirt saying “Kiddie Fiddler.” By September 2026, the FBI had opened over five hundred investigations into 764.<sup>109</sup>

O9A beliefs are also part of the Maniac Murder Cult (a translation of its original Russian name, Маньяки: культ убийства, or MKY), which has had connections with 764, NSO9A, and the Satanic Front—another O9A-influenced Nazi-Satanist group with links to the Tempel ov Blood. MKY embraces both Satanism and neo-Nazism, although in practice they focus on encouraging random apolitical violence against socially marginal people. In May 2026, MKY’s Michail “Commander Butcher” Chkhikvishvili was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for soliciting hate crimes and planning a mass casualty attack.<sup>110</sup> And neo-Nazi accelerationism, MKY nihilism, and 764 child abuse have cross-pollinated with the online True Crime Community, who fetishize—and encourage—school shooters.

These new forms of toxic online behavior—whether they are promoting terrorism, rape, child abuse, or random violence—have now melded together. Different names have been offered for this mixture, including “fused extremism,” “composite violent extremism,” and “hybrid ideologies.”<sup>111</sup> The FBI has created its own classification, Nihilistic Violent Extremism (NVE); the first known official use was in March 2025 in court documents related to 764 member Jack William Rocker. And while experts are

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109 Diana Meseșan, “‘O să fac o crimă în patru ore.’ Autoritățile au ignorat semnele radicalizării adolescentului german care a ucis o pensionară la Mediaș,” *Libertatea*, March 29, 2003, <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/o-sa-fac-o-crima-in-patru-ore-autoritatile-au-ignorat-semnele-radicalizarii-adolescentului-german-care-a-ucis-o-pensionara-la-medias-investigatie-libertatea-spiegel-4489935>; Ali Winston, “There Are Dark Corners of the Internet. Then There’s 764,” *Wired*, March 13, 2024, [www.wired.com/story/764-com-child-predator-network](http://www.wired.com/story/764-com-child-predator-network); FBI Boston, “Maine Teenager Is First Juvenile in the Nation to Be Federally Charged, Adjudicated, and Detained for Acts Related to Nihilistic Violent Extremist Groups in the 764 Network,” news release, September 1, 2026, <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/boston/news/maine-teenager-is-first-juvenile-in-the-nation-to-be-federally-charged-adjudicated-and-detained-for-acts-related-to-nihilistic-violent-extremist-groups-in-the-764-network>.

110 Marc-André Argentino, “PART 1. Maniacs, Murder and Misanthropy: What is M.K.Y.,” *From the Depths*, June 27, 2024, [www.maargentino.com/part-1-maniacs-murder-and-misanthropy-what-is-m-k-y](http://www.maargentino.com/part-1-maniacs-murder-and-misanthropy-what-is-m-k-y); “Georgian National Sentenced to 15 Years in Prison for Soliciting Hate Crimes and Planning Mass Casualty Attack in New York City,” US Department of Justice, press release, May 13, 2026, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/georgian-national-sentenced-15-years-prison-soliciting-hate-crimes-and-planning-mass>.

111 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Plant, “Composite Violent Extremism: A Radicalization Pattern Reshaping Terrorism,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 18, 2023, [www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/04/18/composite-violent-extremism-a-radicalization-pattern-reshaping-terrorism](http://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/04/18/composite-violent-extremism-a-radicalization-pattern-reshaping-terrorism).

increasingly criticizing this category, and its misuse, it does catch the *mood* of the time.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, Canada banned 764, MKY, and Terrorgram; New Zealand banned O9A and Terrorgram; and Australia banned Terrorgram.<sup>113</sup>

Here, what is political, what uses the symbolism of politics but is *not* politically focused, what uses the symbolism of Satanism but *is* politically focused, and what authentically combines the two, have all dissolved into a thick fog where it is not clear where things start and end. But what *is* clear is that Nazi-Satanism remains an integral part of it.

## Conclusion

While Satanism has existed as a made-up religion in the minds of Christians since the Middle Ages, it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that scattered thinkers and groups started making belief systems out of it. Modern Satanism as an unbroken religious and philosophical tradition was inaugurated in 1966 with the founding of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, and since then it has developed in different directions. And one of these is Nazi-Satanism.

Scholars have traditionally ignored modern Satanism. Only in the last fifteen years or so, primarily in religious studies, has a body of work developed—but within it, Nazi-Satanism has received comparatively little attention. Scholars of fascism have paid even less attention, the main exception being several articles specifically on O9A. However, there are no books or full articles dedicated specifically to treating Nazi-Satanism as a long-standing current.

The Church of Satan was accused of having fascist elements almost immediately after its founding, and LaVey in fact did forge a relationship with the National Renaissance Party. By the mid-1970s, Nazi-Satanists, including the Order of the Black Ram and O9A, had emerged. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a clique of counterculturalists who were promoting the neo-Nazi terrorist doctrines of James Mason either joined or were

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112 US District Court, Middle District of Florida, Tampa Division, "United States of America vs Jack William Rucker," sentencing memorandum, Case 8:24-cr-496-VMC-AEP, March 12, 2025, <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.flmd.434650/gov.uscourts.flmd.434650.33.0.pdf>; "What M/NVE Is—And What It Isn't," *Revontulet*, May 3, 2026, <https://revontulet.co/insights/53q-9gi74aova8p3xn4iqp8ix5py1gu>.

113 "Government of Canada Lists Four New Terrorist Entities," Public Safety Canada, Government of Canada, December 10, 2025, [www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2025/12/government-of-canada-lists-four-new-terrorist-entities.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2025/12/government-of-canada-lists-four-new-terrorist-entities.html); "Designation of Two Terrorist Entities," *New Zealand Gazette*, December 10, 2025, <https://gazette.govt.nz/notice/id/2025-au7135>; "Terrorgram," Australian National Security, Australian Government, last updated June 27, 2025, <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing/terrorist-organisations/listed-terrorist-organisations/terrorgram>.

close to the Church of Satan, whose leaders gave their blessing to Mason's book, *Siege*. Parallel to this, O9A—a much more neo-Nazi version of Satanism—further developed in Britain, its influence eventually spreading around the world. But Nazi-Satanism took on real prominence when it became intertwined with a new wave of neo-Nazi terrorism that arose in the mid-2010s, especially around the Atomwaffen Division. Since then, using the new opportunities offered by social media and apps like Telegram, it has spread into many different groups and cross-pollinated with other movements.

The documentation of Nazi-Satanism in this study will hopefully open the door to further research. Sociologists and scholars of religion may wish to probe questions such as these: How extensive is Nazi-Satanism in the present day after O9A's explosion? What has been the dialogue between Nazi-Satanists and other Satanists, and how has O9A, in particular, developed side by side with them? In what ways do Nazi-Satanists differ from other Satanists, including in their ritual practice and conception of Satan? And what is Nazism-Satanism's role in modern Satanism—that is, what niche does it fill, and why has it embedded itself in a movement that centrally valorizes the autonomous individual?

The question of Nazi-Satanism's influence on neo-Nazism is also important. How extensive is Nazi-Satanism in terrorist networks, both today and in the past? And what is its likely role in the future? What kind of theoretical and practical impact has it had on these political networks? More broadly, there is a robust body of work on white supremacist politics in different religions, such as Christianity and paganism, and these should be expanded to cover Nazi-Satanism (in addition to other types of occult fascism that have arisen recently). Scholars of postwar fascism need to take heed of Nazi-Satanism as well. And, of course, the study of Nazi-Satanism should influence current scholarship on global terrorism, which fails to recognize it as a longstanding current within modern Satanism—especially as its adherents continue to espouse, and practice, terrorism, murder, and child abuse.

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## ARTICLE

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

### *The Sting Operation That Triggered Ruby Ridge*

FAITH LAZAR

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> Beyond periodization, other scholars have

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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,<sup>5</sup> as an outcome of a newly paramilitarized style of domestic policing,<sup>6</sup> or as a symptom of the inward turn of militarization and guerilla warfare in the post–Cold War era.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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

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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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> As the Valentino case suggests, these methods were already taking shape well before the post-9/11 War on Terror.

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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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup>

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

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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.<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup>

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

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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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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

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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.<sup>26</sup> 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).<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> And yet, these preemptive stings, which

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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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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

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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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> These private organizations handled their own informants and often worked in cooperation with the government to share information.<sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>36</sup> 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

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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.<sup>37</sup>

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."<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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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."<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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."<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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

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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."<sup>45</sup>

According to Valentino, he was "waiting for them to act and the FBI remained patient."<sup>46</sup> 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."<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> In his congressional testimony Kenneth Fadeley blamed Valentino for blowing his cover—a charge that Valentino would eventually admit to,

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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.<sup>53</sup> 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.”<sup>54</sup>

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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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

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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.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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

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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.<sup>60</sup>

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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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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.<sup>63</sup>

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.<sup>64</sup> 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

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

<sup>64</sup> *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!<sup>65</sup>

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.”<sup>66</sup> 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.”<sup>67</sup> What tends to fall away in retrospective accounts is how closely this escalation tracked the events of the disco sting operation,

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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.<sup>68</sup>

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."<sup>69</sup>

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."<sup>70</sup>

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

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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.”<sup>71</sup> 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.”<sup>72</sup>

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?”<sup>73</sup> 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?”<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup>

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.

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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.<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>80</sup>

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!!<sup>81</sup>

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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.<sup>82</sup> 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

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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.<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup>

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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.<sup>86</sup> 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.

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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).

## ESSAY

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## Birchers, Discordians, and Sex Education

### *The Libertarians in the Anaheim Sex-Ed Wars*

JESSE WALKER

*Reason Magazine*

Long before a certain sort of conservative took to casually calling his foes “groomers,” the Malibu-based record label American United released *The Child Seducers*.<sup>1</sup> The cover of the 1969 LP showed a frightened little girl bound to a chair and surrounded by images of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Castro, and Hitler (figure 1). On the disc, narrator John Carradine opined on everything from *Rosemary’s Baby* to “the flaming pornography of the nudity cults,” but his chief target was sex education. “The schools of America are sex-saturated,” Carradine warned, just three years before the always-game-for-a-paycheck actor appeared in Woody Allen’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its title and cover, the record mostly refrained from directly addressing the topic of pedophilia. But many people today who throw around the words “groomer” or “grooming” insist, however implausible it may sound, that they aren’t necessarily accusing their enemies of abusing kids either.<sup>3</sup> The parallels lie in the imagery, and in the underlying anxieties about a sexual threat to children. The sex-ed wars of the 1960s

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1 John Steinbacher, *The Child Seducers*, narrated by John Carradine, American United AU-14, 1969, 33⅓ rpm.

2 Carradine funded his Shakespeare company by taking whatever roles he could, including parts in such infamously bad motion pictures as *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula*. His willingness to narrate conspiracy LPs—not just this one, but *The Establishment: Council on Foreign Relations*, written by the John Birch Society’s Gary Allen—may have stemmed from the same incentive, much as Orson Welles narrated the crank documentaries *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *The Man Who Saw Tomorrow* to fund his independent films. Welles clearly did not believe a word he said in those movies; it is unclear whether the same is true of Carradine and these LPs.

3 Here, for example, is the right-wing activist Christopher Rufo on Twitter (now X): “Grooming’ does not necessarily mean ‘physical sexual abuse.’ Kids can be groomed into a sexual identity, groomed into an ideological system, and, in some cases, yes, groomed for abuse. It’s a spectrum of behavior in which adults isolate and sexualize kids for their own ends” (@christopherrufo, May 12, 2022, 7:04 PM, [x.com/christopherrufo/status/1524888386682531842](https://x.com/christopherrufo/status/1524888386682531842)). Rufo, of course, is playing a word game. But it’s a word game that makes it easier to raise the specter of the child molester without attempting to demonstrate that any specific person is a child molester.

and 1970s did not usually entail accusations of child molestation, but they did see plenty of rumors like this one, described by *The Sunday Oklahoman* when the Anaheim activist Jan Pippenger passed through town in 1969:

She told of another incident in which all the lights in the classroom were turned off, “wild African music” was played and colored lights were flashed around the room.

“Many of the students reported having experienced ‘strange sexual feelings’ while this was going on,” she said.<sup>4</sup>

That *Child Seducers* LP was produced by Anthony J. Hilder, a onetime nightclub entertainer and surf-rock producer who had been drawn into politics by Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign. A greatly expanded version of the record’s script was released under the byline of Myron C. Fagan, a Broadway and Hollywood writer-director turned anti-communist pamphleteer.<sup>5</sup> (In 1967, Fagan had written and narrated *Illuminati C.F.R.*, a series of Hilder-produced LPs that became an important vector in spreading the idea that the Bavarian Illuminati were the secret force behind Bolshevism, the United Nations, and the Federal Reserve.<sup>6</sup>) But as the record cover notes, *The Child Seducers* had in fact been scripted by John Steinbacher, a reporter at the *Anaheim Bulletin*.

As sex education became a focal point of political conflict in the late 1960s, Steinbacher was near the center of the opposition. Among other things, he and the *Bulletin* helped spread the idea that SIECUS, the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States,<sup>7</sup> was at the heart of a humanist-communist conspiracy to brainwash America’s youth. SIECUS was reluctant to respond to such attacks, and so others stepped into that role. When *Playboy* published a fierce rebuttal to some of the claims floating around, the head of SIECUS, Mary Calderone, took to recommending that reporters read what *Playboy* had to say.<sup>8</sup>

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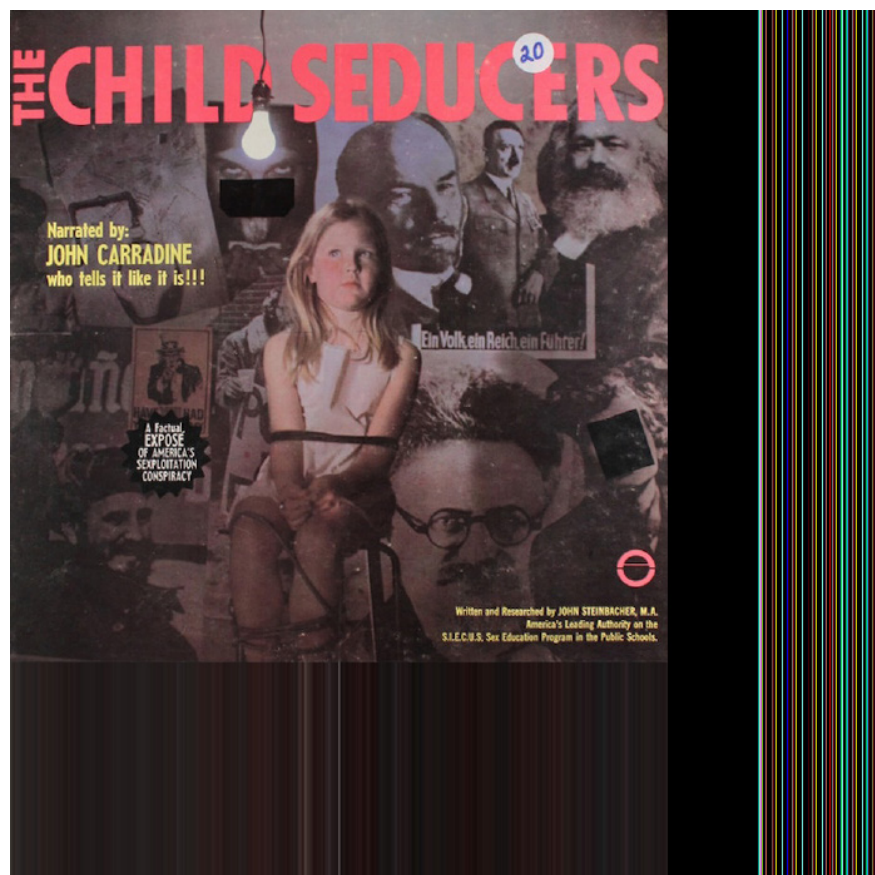
4 Jane Berryman, “California Woman Warns of Sex Education Woes,” *The Sunday Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), June 15, 1969.

5 Myron C. Fagan, “Our Youth Can Be the ‘Achilles Heel’ of Our Nation!,” *Cinema Educational Guild News Bulletin* no. 143, September–October 1969.

6 Fagan’s records were a direct influence, for example, on John Todd, who spent much of the 1970s and early 1980s traveling the Christian circuit claiming to be a defector from the Illuminati. For more on Todd, see Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (HarperCollins, 2013), 185–218. For more on Hilder, see pp. 200, 275–76, 285–89.

7 The group was later rebranded as the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Today it has been rebranded again and its name is no longer an acronym at all—the group is officially called “SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change.”

8 See Mary Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!* (Praeger Publishers, 1970), 216: “It should be mentioned that Dr. Calderone herself urged me to read the Playboy Forum columns.”



**Figure 1.** Cover of the 1969 LP *The Child Seducers*.

And here we encounter an interesting wrinkle. *The Anaheim Bulletin* was owned by Raymond Cyrus Hoiles, an eccentric newsman who controlled a chain of papers centered around the *Santa Ana Register*. The *Playboy* rebuttal appeared in a section of the magazine coedited by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea, and it was likely written by Wilson. And Hoiles, Wilson, and Shea had strikingly similar political views. Not *identical* views, but their most substantial differences involved topics, such as monetary theory and organized labor, that are not directly relevant to sex education.

Specifically: Hoiles, Wilson, and Shea were all radical libertarians—that is, they all argued that we should maximize individual liberty by greatly reducing state power. Indeed, all three believed that state power should be abolished altogether. The story of how they landed on opposite sides of the sex-ed fight reveals some underappreciated truths about libertarian politics in the United States, and about how those politics intersect with the more conventional left and right.

It also raises questions about what exactly we mean when we discuss the “left” and “right” in the first place. In one familiar model of the political spectrum, the right aims to preserve or restore traditional hierarchies while the left acts to eliminate them. That

approach offers one way to distinguish “left” and “right” libertarians, since some strains of libertarian thinking are highly sympathetic to washing away old rankings of race, gender, and/or economic class, while others are not.<sup>9</sup> In practice, of course, the situation often gets more complicated, as when one encounters a libertarian who mixes and matches those positions (for example, someone who is patriarchal but anti-racist) or who professes indifference to whether other people embrace or reject traditional values. Nor do observers always agree as to what constitutes a challenge to the old hierarchies in the first place. Both the political theorist Corey Robin and the late historian Leonard Liggio have proposed models of the ideological spectrum in which the right wing is defined by its commitment to tradition and caste. But Robin, a socialist, assigned libertarianism to the right, arguing that libertarians defend “the employer’s untrammelled power in the workplace.”<sup>10</sup> Liggio, a libertarian, put libertarianism on the left, seeing socialism as a centrist muddle that tries to fuse the goal of freedom with the hierarchical means of the state.<sup>11</sup> My point here is not to endorse either Robin’s position or Liggio’s—I am not convinced by either one—but to show how even a fairly straightforward and consistent conception of the left-right spectrum can leave enormous room for disagreement.

And many people, of course, do not have a straightforward, consistent conception of the left-right spectrum. In public discourse, “right” and “left” have long been highly contingent categories, shifting in public meaning as different issues grow or shrink in salience. Though their argument oversimplifies some of the relevant history, I have sympathy for the claim by Hyrum and Verlan Lewis that a “conservative or liberal is not someone who has a conservative or liberal philosophy, but someone who belongs to the conservative or liberal tribe,” and that “the political spectrum does not model an essential value, but only tribes and what they stand for at a specific time and place.”<sup>12</sup> That would apply to the political spectrum within libertarianism as well as the one outside it: One can be tagged a right-libertarian by being socially conservative but dovish, by being socially liberal but hawkish, by being friendly to corporate interests,

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9 For an overview of these different strains, see Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi, *The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

10 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.

11 The most widely circulated argument for Liggio’s model was written not by Liggio but by his ally Murray Rothbard. (See Murray N. Rothbard, “Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty,” *Left and Right*, Spring 1965.) Rothbard later abandoned this position, returned to identifying libertarianism with the right, and pursued a political alliance with the paleoconservative movement.

12 Hyrum Lewis and Verlan Lewis, *The Myth of Left and Right: How the Political Spectrum Misleads and Harms America* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 3. For a critique of the Lewis brothers’ book (and of the book by Zwolinski and Tomasi cited in note 9), see Jesse Walker, “The Left-Right Spectrum Is Mostly Meaningless,” *Reason*, June 2023, <https://reason.com/2023/05/21/the-left-right-spectrum-is-mostly-meaningless/>.

or, lately, by being hostile to corporate interests, provided you dress up that opposition with words like “woke capital.”

Yet even if we accept the most radical form of the Lewis brothers’ argument, those tribes still would have histories, making it possible to discuss changes in “the left” and “the right” over time. And libertarians, in any event, are also a political tribe with a history. That history can intersect with left/right politics in unpredictable ways.

### Sex in the Shadow of Disneyland

Anaheim, California, was by no means the only community to be roiled by battles over sex education, but it has taken a central spot in later discussions of these conflicts. In part that’s because it generated much of the literature used elsewhere, not just directly but through indirect influence. In part it’s because the sex-ed fight intersects with another important historical story, the rise of Cold War-era Orange County conservatism. And in part it’s because two of the earliest books about the sex-ed wars, both published in 1970, zeroed in on the Anaheim fight.

One of those books is Mary Breasted’s *Oh! Sex Education!*, written by a liberal-minded *Village Voice* reporter and issued by a mainstream publisher. It was generally critical of the anti-sex-ed activists (known as the “Antis”), though as we’ll see it lobbed some criticisms at the other side of the debate as well. The other book is John Steinbacher’s *The Child Seducers*—a different text than the LP that came out a year earlier, even though they have the same title and the same author.<sup>13</sup> This book presented the Antis’ perspective, warning that sex ed was linked to sensitivity training, which Steinbacher saw as a brainwashing technique. Breasted and Steinbacher appear in each other’s books; read them simultaneously, and you may get the sense that you’re watching a story write about itself.<sup>14</sup>

Sex ed in Anaheim was initially a fairly quiet affair. After the school district added it to the curriculum in the 1940s, it periodically prompted debates, but not explosive ones. As Natalia Mehlman Petrzela observes in her study of the conflict, the chief dissenters in those earlier arguments saw sex education as a potential source of “impropriety,”

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13 John Steinbacher, *The Child Seducers* (Educator Publications, 1970).

14 While Steinbacher did not come off well in Breasted’s book, she did pay him some compliments, calling him “likeable” and “the brightest and most articulate of the Antis” (*Oh! Sex Education!*, 143–44). Steinbacher, by contrast, suggested that Breasted “felt sexually threatened” by Paul Dearth, a local sex-ed instructor, and that she generally “became very nervous around men who seemed somehow threateningly virile.” With uncharacteristic subtlety, Steinbacher refrained from underlining the fact that two pages earlier he had described her as “very nervous” when she interviewed him (*Child Seducers*, 299, 301).

not a “harbinger of communist revolution.”<sup>15</sup> Most families didn’t object to this sort of instruction: In the immediate wake of one 1963 clash over the issue, a poll showed 92 percent of local parents supporting the expansion of sex ed.<sup>16</sup> Nor did Hoiles seem likely to lead a crusade against the practice. In 1962, his Santa Ana paper published an article—a syndicated piece that various newspapers periodically reprinted from the 1930s through the 1990s—telling parents that it is better to “give your child too much information instead of too little” and that it is better to offer that sexual info “too early instead of too late.”<sup>17</sup>

So the district’s leaders did not expect much dissent when they introduced a more extensive program called Family Life and Sex Education (FLSE) in 1965. And there wasn’t much pushback at first. Indeed, their curriculum was soon touted as a model elsewhere in the United States.

But by the late 1960s, the region was feeling the impact of dizzying local changes. Anaheim was growing rapidly, thanks in part to the presence of Disneyland,<sup>18</sup> and that growth in turn brought more prostitution and petty crime. Broader cultural shifts were also being felt locally: The counterculture was blooming, and so was the backlash against it. Against that backdrop—and with the support of right-wing groups based outside the area, notably the John Birch Society and the Christian Crusade—opposition to sex education suddenly surged in 1968.<sup>19</sup> Odd rumors took off, such as that tale about “wild African music” and “strange sexual feelings.” Steinbacher and other writers started claiming that the classes represented the spear’s tip of communist brainwashing techniques. Local government meetings became the sites of long, combative arguments, and Anaheim activists took their struggle to the state capital as well.

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15 Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *Classroom Wars: Language, Sex, and the Making of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 134.

16 Petrzela, *Classroom Wars*, 134.

17 George W. Crane, “Newspapers Aid in Sane Sex Education,” *The Register* (Santa Ana, CA), January 17, 1962.

18 One interesting parallel between Anaheim’s sex-ed wars in the late 1960s and the fights over LGBT issues in Florida schools today is the looming presence of a Disney theme park in each fight. But today conservatives accuse Disney of taking the “woke” side of the controversy, whereas in Anaheim half a century ago Disney was seen as a socially conservative force. An earlier iteration of Petrzela’s Anaheim study illustrated Disney’s conservatism by noting its “grooming code”—a phrase that has acquired somewhat different connotations today. See Natalia Mehlman, “Sex Ed . . . and the Reds? Reconsidering the Anaheim Battle over Sex Education, 1962–1969,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 203–32.

19 There has been a recent spate of scholarly works on the John Birch Society. See Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (Basic Books, 2023); Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); and D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

Just as sex educators in the rest of the country drew on the FLSE curriculum, Antis in the rest of the country drew on what the Anaheim Antis were saying and doing. Gary Allen of the John Birch Society reportedly visited Eleanor Howe, one of Anaheim's most vocal opponents of sex ed, to draw on her files while writing an article.<sup>20</sup> He also interviewed Steinbacher, who gave him a juicy quote about the curriculum's alleged effects:

When newspaper reporter John Steinbacher asked a young Marine why so many servicemen congregated in Anaheim every weekend, the reply was: "Man, everybody knows that the high school girls here are 'available.'" The comment, Steinbacher found, was typical.<sup>21</sup>

The state eventually banned the use of SIECUS materials in the classroom, and the Antis won a majority on the local school board. The new majority then dropped FLSE. When the board brought back sex ed in 1970, the curriculum was essentially stripped down to covering the basic biology of reproduction.

The *Anaheim Bulletin* kept beating the drums. The two chief figures here were Steinbacher and the paper's editor, Sam Campbell. Campbell was a religious conservative with a Bircher background. And Steinbacher was no stranger to the conspiracist right: His last project before the sex-ed crusade had been a brief book called *Senator Robert Francis Kennedy: The Man, the Mysticism, the Murder*, which aimed to link the Illuminati to the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. (The text took in several other topics along the way, as conspiracy tracts often do. One aside casually declared, sans footnotes, that "Illuminist bankers" had engineered Lincoln's assassination to ensure that Reconstruction would be "brutal," thus "pav[ing] the way for permanent division of the races in the South . . . to create the climate for racial warfare in America in future generations."<sup>22</sup>)

Some readers may be tempted to write off Steinbacher as a fringe character who wouldn't have landed a newspaper job if his paper weren't owned by a man with extreme opinions. But his Kennedy book was blurbed by Walter Winchell, who took to touting Steinbacher's claims in his nationally syndicated gossip column.<sup>23</sup> At that point Winchell's influence was in decline, and his enthusiasm for Steinbacher's theories could be taken as a sign that he was drifting further from respectability. But he still appeared in

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20 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 75.

21 Gary Allen, "Sex Study: Problems, Propaganda, and Pornography," *American Opinion*, March 1969.

22 John Steinbacher, *Senator Robert Francis Kennedy: The Man, the Mysticism, the Murder* (Impact Publishers, 1968), 3.

23 For an example, see Walter Winchell, "Women of Evil Defended, Hit," *Durham (NC) Sun*, July 16, 1968. This column also includes a shoutout to one "A. J. Hilder"—the same fellow who produced the *Child Seducers* and *Illuminati C.F.R.* albums.

papers across the country—and I don't mean the Hoiles papers. The boundary between the fringe and the mainstream can be quite permeable.

### Anarchists and Birchers

Despite Hoiles's reputation as a right-wing extremist, he and his writers often took socially liberal positions. In the 1930s, the *Santa Ana Register* editorialized for bringing in refugees from Nazi Germany, arguing that the "United States can use a great many more Albert Einsteins."<sup>24</sup> During the war itself, a reader opening the *Register* might see Rose Wilder Lane praising a book by W. E. B. Du Bois,<sup>25</sup> or the black writer George Schuyler asking: "If we must suspend our complaints until after the war is over, what about white people suspending their Negro-phobia and jim-crowism until after the war is over?"<sup>26</sup> The *Register* was the rare West Coast newspaper to condemn the internment of Japanese Americans while the war was underway,<sup>27</sup> and in 1947 Hoiles denounced the Santa Ana school board for segregating Mexican students, a practice he called "un-American," "un-Christian," and a violation of the pupils' Fourteenth Amendment rights.<sup>28</sup> In the 1960s, the *Register* bucked conventional conservative views on such subjects as school prayer, military spending, and the decriminalization of drugs.<sup>29</sup> It even argued that "if some do not want to support a police force, they should not be forced to do so," as long as they also opt out of the police's services—and that the police themselves "should have no powers denied any individual."<sup>30</sup>

But as you might guess from his association with figures like Steinbacher, the story doesn't end there. If a 1940s reader might see a Hoiles paper publishing Lane's kind words for Du Bois, that reader might also encounter Upton Close's fiercely racist 1948 column calling Harry Truman's civil rights program an effort to destroy "the White Western races who had the energy, inspiration and courage to build this generous civilization." (The same piece suggested that the key element of communism was not

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24 "The Albert Einsteins," *Santa Ana Register*, April 7, 1938.

25 Rose Wilder Lane, "Laissez-Faire Means Unrestricted Rights to Full Production," *Santa Ana Register*, December 13, 1944.

26 "Calls Racialism America's Real Religion," *Santa Ana Register*, April 28, 1942.

27 "'The Evacuation of the Japanese in Retrospect,'" *Santa Ana Register*, October 14, 1942.

28 R. C. Hoiles, "Santa Ana School Board Severely Criticized," *Santa Ana Register*, April 16, 1947.

29 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 164.

30 "Our Belief in a Universal Single Standard of Right," *The Register*, August 7, 1964. Hoiles periodically reprinted this editorial, which went well beyond the question of policing to describe his broader views of a just social order.

its economic system but “dictatorship by inflamed racial minorities.”)<sup>31</sup> Conservatives of many kinds contributed to Hoiles’s opinion pages. And while Close-style racism was rare, it wasn’t unusual to see a writer take his anti-communism in a Birchite or McCarthyist direction.

So while the Hoiles papers had a libertarian ideological core, the opinions arrayed around that core were more of a mix.<sup>32</sup> This was especially true in the year and a half before the Anaheim sex war exploded, when the chain ran a regular column by the free-market economist Murray Rothbard. Rothbard had been a part of the McCarthyist milieu in the 1950s, but he now was pursuing an alliance with the New Left;<sup>33</sup> his newspaper column’s topics ranged from a celebration of the May 1968 uprising in France to an argument that black Americans are “an occupied and colonized people.”<sup>34</sup> A Texas reader opening Hoiles’s *Pampa Daily News* on April 7, 1968, would see an op-ed by the far-right oil tycoon H. L. Hunt immediately adjacent to a Rothbard piece praising a policy statement by the Viet Cong.<sup>35</sup>

Not every account of the sex-ed wars has really comprehended where the Hoiles papers were coming from. Here, for example, is a passage from Jeffrey Moran’s book *Teaching Sex*:

The winds of religious conservatism in the district were strengthened by the *Anaheim Bulletin*, one of a string of “Freedom Newspapers” that the conservative entrepreneur R. C. Hoiles had purchased around midcentury to warn “right-thinking Americans” of the threat from “Jewish conspirators

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31 Upton Close, “Communism Showing Its Racial Face,” *Santa Ana Register*, February 18, 1948. The article also called for immigration controls, warned that “the old New Deal Zionist-Communist crowd” could use minority voters to tip the election to Truman, and argued that Stalin wasn’t really white.

32 It is not unusual, of course, for a newspaper to run a variety of opinions, but given how many people have been inclined to see Hoiles’s newspapers as an extension of their owner—which, granted, they often were—it’s worth underlining this. On July 8, 1962, to give a telling example, the Hoiles-owned *Odessa American* ran a piece by the conservative columnist Thurman Sensing denouncing the Supreme Court’s decision against officially sanctioned prayer in the public schools; on August 1, the Texas paper itself editorialized in support of the decision.

33 Rothbard was not the only libertarian of this period to argue that the old individualist right had more in common with the New Left than with the new conservatives. An example of particular relevance to this article: In September 1969, *Playboy* published a letter arguing that “groups such as [Students for a Democratic Society] represent the American conservative-libertarian tradition, while the contemporary right wing is depressingly like the old left wing.” The missive was signed by “Hugh Crane,” a sockpuppet who appeared several times in *Playboy*’s letters pages while Robert Anton Wilson was employed by the magazine. Hugh Crane later resurfaced as a character in Wilson’s science fiction trilogy *Schrödinger’s Cat*.

34 Rothbard’s columns for the Hoiles papers are collected in Murray Rothbard, *Never a Dull Moment: A Libertarian Look at the Sixties*, ed. Justin Raimondo (Mises Institute, 2016).

35 Murray Rothbard, “What Does the Viet Cong Want?,” *Pampa (TX) Daily News*, April 7, 1968; H. L. Hunt, “Acceptance of Evil,” *Pampa Daily News*, April 7, 1968.

and other subversive enemies of the American nation.” The *Bulletin* soon took the lead in attacking the Anaheim curriculum and its creators.<sup>36</sup>

If that sounds odd in light of the material quoted above, it sounds even odder in light of the facts that Hoiles was known to praise “Jewish-Christian-American ethics” and that he published several Jewish columnists.<sup>37</sup> Moran cites Breasted, the *Village Voice* reporter, as his source. Here is the relevant passage in Breasted’s book:

Hoiles did with his newspapers what the temperance leagues and the Klansmen and the antievolution people had done with their rallies. He and his columnists prophesied various doom states that would emerge, they said, if the “Jewish conspirators and other subversive enemies of the American nation” (the words of David Baxter, a columnist hired by Hoiles in 1950) were not exposed or controlled or at the very least recognized for what they were by right-thinking Americans.<sup>38</sup>

So already we see two problems with Moran’s description: The words he attributed to Hoiles in fact came from Baxter and (with regard to “right-thinking Americans”) from Breasted herself. But the problems go deeper, because Breasted’s passage is misleading too. That quote about “Jewish conspirators” was not actually published in any of the Hoiles papers; it came from a tract Baxter had mimeographed in 1941.<sup>39</sup> Baxter’s columns for Hoiles, which appeared for about two years in the 1950s, explicitly repudiated those earlier views. (“There was a time, when I first began investigating Collectivism, that I, too, thought ‘the Jews’—not just some Jewish organization, but ‘the Jews’—were the flies in the ointment. . . . Most of us have had prejudices at one time or another. But prejudices are like growing pains, you out-grow them and develop a well-rounded philosophy.”<sup>40</sup>) Baxter’s pieces for Hoiles periodically attacked prominent antisemites, such as Gerald L. K. Smith.

That said, there are reasonable grounds to question just how sincere Baxter’s conversion was. He was prone to pairing his critiques of people like Smith with critiques

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36 Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

37 R. C. Hoiles, “A Corrupting School Book,” *Pampa Daily News*, December 24, 1950.

38 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 80.

39 The mimeo was reportedly called *Things You Ought to Know About the Social Republic Society*. I have not yet been able to locate a copy, but the quote is attributed to it in two reports by the Anti-Defamation League (“The Defendants in the Washington Sedition Trial,” *The Facts*, January 1948; “R. C. Hoiles,” *The Facts*, November 1952) and in Ralph Lord Roy, *Apostles of Discord: A Study of Organized Bigotry and Disruption on the Fringes of Protestantism* (Beacon Press, 1953), 52.

40 David Baxter, “What About Anti-Semitism: Part Two,” *Odessa American*, December 12, 1950.

of the Anti-Defamation League, in a ham-fisted on-one-hand / on-the-other-hand style—and he wrote a *lot* of columns on the general subject of Judaism and antisemitism, to the point where he could come across as obsessed even if he stopped short of saying anything overtly prejudiced. The civil rights activist Ralph Lord Roy later dug up some more explicit comments Baxter made in non-Hoiles publications, raising the possibility that he was merely trimming his sails when writing for Hoiles.<sup>41</sup> But it seems odd to extrapolate a newspaper chain's underlying politics from the views a long-departed columnist may have expressed when writing for other periodicals.<sup>42</sup>

My tentative assessment of all this is that Hoiles liked to publish anti-communist writers, that many anti-communists of the era were also antisemites, and that Hoiles could be tin-eared in discerning which writers crossed that line, especially if they camouflaged their contributions to his papers with praise for individual Jews. It may be fair to criticize his editorial judgment in hiring Baxter or in running Upton Close's syndicated pieces, but it's misleading to suggest his editorial mission was driven by anything so conventionally reactionary as antisemitism.

No: Hoiles held what was, in mid-twentieth-century America, a much more outré position. He believed in what he called the “single standard of conduct.” As the most thorough history of the modern American libertarian movement summarizes it, this was the idea that the “government shouldn't have the power or right to do anything an individual doesn't have the power or right to do.”<sup>43</sup> From this Hoiles concluded that taxation was immoral, since individuals do not have the right to go around taxing each other, and that what are now tax-funded services should be provided on the market instead.<sup>44</sup> He took to citing the nineteenth-century individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker, though Hoiles wavered on whether “anarchist” was the right term for his own views. The word was sometimes used, he wrote, to describe a state of chaos or a form of communism, and he could not support either of those. But it was also used to mean

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41 Roy, *Apostles of Discord*, 52–53.

42 In the same paragraph that quoted Baxter, Breasted wrote that in the 1940s Hoiles “hired a columnist whose theory it was that an international Zionist conspiracy was plotting evil things with the Communists.” This appears to be a reference to Upton Close, whose syndicated column ran in the Hoiles papers for a few years in the 1940s. Close had begun his career as a respected foreign correspondent who wrote for such venues as *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*, but by the time he died in 1960 he had descended to cranking out a nakedly racist and antisemitic newsletter. Most of his articles that appeared in the Hoiles chain were written in a way that kept his bigotries deniable—he made sure, for example, to praise individual Jews who opposed Zionism. His aforementioned column on civil rights was a notable exception.

43 Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (PublicAffairs, 2007), 173.

44 R. C. Hoiles, “A Good Question,” *The Register*, October 24, 1956.

the condition of “no ruler over anyone”—and by that standard, why, “it would seem that Jesus Christ was an anarchist.”<sup>45</sup>

In *Oh! Sex Education!*, Breasted noted that “Hoiles said he was against things that he considered ‘un-Christian.’”<sup>46</sup> She also wrote, elsewhere in the book, that Sam Campbell’s editorials for Hoiles’s paper “could be approximately described as constituting a philosophy of right-wing anarchy.”<sup>47</sup> She did not recognize that from Hoiles’s perspective, these were two ways of saying the same thing.<sup>48</sup>

And what part of the government did Hoiles hate the most? Tax-funded schools, which he regarded as institutions of compulsory indoctrination.<sup>49</sup> Hoiles distrusted *any* effort to promote values via government-sponsored schools, be it through organized prayer or through sex education. And if no school could be truly neutral in its values, Hoiles saw that as a reason to favor the separation of school and state. That surely helps explain why his operation amplified the Bircher critique of sex ed, playing up the idea that it was a brainwashing-style assault on students’ minds.

His writers, in turn, tried to bend that critique to support Hoilesian ideas about education, suggesting periodically that the underlying problem in the sex-ed debate was the very existence of tax-funded schools. (Or, in a more moderate formulation that Campbell sometimes but not always adopted, that families who prefer private schools should be exempted from the taxes that fund their government-run counterparts, “and let the best system win.”<sup>50</sup>) This broader crusade proved less successful than their efforts to offer the Antis ammunition against a specific school activity.<sup>51</sup>

### Math as a Communist Plot

The *Playboy* Forum—a section in *Playboy* dedicated to matters of social freedoms and public policy—published correspondence about sex education throughout 1969. The October edition was particularly packed, with fourteen missives on the subject, including

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45 R. C. Hoiles, “Anarchy—Good or Bad?,” *The Register*, May 3, 1955.

46 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 80.

47 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 137.

48 Hoiles isn’t the only figure relevant to this story whose religious views do not necessarily match people’s preconceptions. While there was plenty of room in the John Birch Society for theologically conservative Christians, Robert Welch himself—the chief force behind the organization from its founding until 1983—was a Unitarian.

49 But not, evidently, an insurmountable indoctrination. He sent his own kids to the public schools.

50 Quoted in Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 157.

51 Campbell followed his crusade against FLSE with a campaign against a bond issue to fund the school district. That time he lost and district officials won.

one from Anaheim warning that the “ultrarightists” there “seem bent on destroying *all* education.”<sup>52</sup> But the oddest of that month’s letters were the two that appeared under the headline “Math as a Communist Plot.”

The first of these, signed by one Arnold K. Ravenhurst of Chicago, declared that the author had encountered a leaflet titled *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Math?* This document argued that the “new math”—a much-maligned post-Sputnik shift in how math was taught—was a Marxist conspiracy. “Not one American in a hundred can understand the so-called new math,” the tract declared, “and yet we have all been so brainwashed by comsymps in Washington and in the news media that we allow this vile and foreign form of mathematics to be poured into the ears of innocent children by insidious teachers. . . . How many realize that the foundations of the pinko new math are contained in an infamous treatise called *Principia Mathematica*, co-authored by the notorious pacifist Bertrand Russell?”

A brief reply by the editors followed, identifying the leaflet as “a put-on by a group of young dissidents called the American Anarchist Association,” adding: “But see the following letter.” Then came some correspondence from James O’Malley of Brooklyn, who quoted a newspaper story about a preacher who had declared that sex ed would produce an “inevitable Communist take-over.”<sup>53</sup>

The leaflet wasn’t the only put-on here. There were, in fact, several layers of activity at work, some ironic and some not, starting with a satiric pseudo-church and culminating, a month after the math letters, with *Playboy* publishing an extended refutation of the Antis’ claims. Most of this activity came from the Discordians, a group whose politics weren’t so different from the politics of R. C. Hoiles.

I have related the history of the Discordians in detail elsewhere,<sup>54</sup> so I will give just the bare bones here. In the late 1950s, two high school pals in East Whittier, California—Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley—thought it would be funny if they claimed to be worshippers of Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos. The duo dubbed this faith Discordianism, and they revived it while trading letters in the early 1960s. Soon they were drawing various friends into the gag and printing literature for their faux faith. Some of this material was just absurdist humor, but some was pointedly satiric in ways that reflected the Discordians’ disdain for government and for organized religion.

The Discordians tended to be libertarian in their politics, though the nature of that libertarianism sometimes shifted over time. Thornley, the more politically active of the

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52 “The Townsend Plan” (letter), *Playboy*, October 1969.

53 “Math as a Communist Plot” (letters), *Playboy*, October 1969.

54 Walker, *United States of Paranoia*, 231–44, 257–59. I am by no means the only writer to tackle this topic; most notably, see Adam Gorightly, ed., *Historia Discordia: The Origins of the Discordian Society* (RVP Press, 2014).

two founders, began as a devotee of the novelist Ayn Rand, but as the 1960s progressed he was increasingly influenced by the counterculture and the New Left. By the middle of the decade, he was citing such texts as Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist* and Edmund Wilson's book *The Cold War and the Income Tax* to argue that libertarians had more natural allies on the left than the right.<sup>55</sup> By the dawn of the 1970s, he was writing for an Atlanta underground newspaper under the pseudonym Ho Chi Zen.<sup>56</sup>

One man who was drawn into the Discordian correspondence circle was a *Playboy* editor named Robert Anton Wilson. And while Wilson's politics evolved considerably over the years,<sup>57</sup> in the 1960s his chief influence was Benjamin Tucker—the same nineteenth-century anarchist who appeared periodically in the columns of R. C. Hoiles. Wilson promoted Tuckerite ideas in the alternative press (he invoked them constantly during his term as the editor of *Way Out*, a journal for the homesteading movement<sup>58</sup>), in the pulp press (he slipped an anonymous tribute to “the Yankee anarchists” into the porn mag *Foto-Rama*<sup>59</sup>), and in the mainstream (in the early 1960s, while writing ad copy for a living in New Jersey, Wilson touted Tucker in the letters page of the *Passaic Herald-News*<sup>60</sup>).

There were, to be clear, distinct differences between Hoiles's and Wilson's politics. Wilson was more sympathetic to labor unions.<sup>61</sup> Hoiles rejected Tucker's monetary ideas, which for Wilson were a core part of Tucker's appeal. And while Hoiles's anti-statism was embedded in a Christian outlook, Wilson associated his Irish Catholic upbringing with superstition and prejudice. In rejecting it, he was drawn to writers, such as Norman O. Brown and Wilhelm Reich, who saw a close relationship between sexual repression and political authoritarianism.

So strong was Wilson's concern with sexual repression, in fact, that he was initially suspicious even of *Playboy*, deriding the magazine in 1963 as one of the “merchants

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55 Thornley laid out this argument in *Opening Left*, a book that he started to write in either 1965 or 1966 but did not publish and, as best as I can tell, did not complete.

56 The underground paper was *The Great Speckled Bird*, and its politics generally tended toward Marxism, not libertarianism. But Thornley still considered himself a libertarian and an anarchist.

57 For an overview of Wilson's political evolution, see Jesse Walker, “Discordia Rising,” introduction to Robert Anton Wilson, *A Non-Euclidean Perspective: Robert Anton Wilson's Political Commentaries, 1960–2005*, ed. Mike Gathers and Chad Nelson (Hilaritas Press, 2025).

58 See, e.g., Robert Anton Wilson, “Files on Parade,” *Way Out*, November 1962.

59 “The Yankee Anarchists,” *Foto-Rama*, December 1965.

60 Robert Anton Wilson, “Living Without Government” (letter), *Herald-News*, September 21, 1961; Robert Anton Wilson, “Libertarian Viewpoint” (letter), *Herald-News*, October 4, 1961.

61 Campbell, interestingly, had a history of union activism, a fact that sparked some tensions with Hoiles early on. See Sam Campbell, “R. C. Hoiles—Ideas His Business,” *Anaheim Bulletin*, October 30, 1970.

of imitation sex.” In the same article, he mocked *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner for claiming “that America has achieved a ‘sexual revolution,’” responding: “If there were a genuine sexual liberation in America, parents who bring their children up in freedom would not be subject to vigilante attacks by their neighbors, a thousand girls would not die of abortions every year in chiropractor’s offices, homosexuals would not be subject to assault and battery by every sadist in and out of uniform from coast to coast, the noodles of NODL would not continue to harass book dealers, Dr. Leo Koch would still be teaching at the University of Illinois, and young men would spend their evenings loving and communing with young ladies instead of just gawking at them in Mr. Hefner’s Key Clubs.”<sup>62</sup> Sex, in short, occupied as important a position in Wilson’s ideological firmament as schooling did in Hoiles’s.

That article included a lot more invective against Hefner, to the point where it may be surprising that *Playboy* would be willing to hire Wilson a few years later. But it did, and by then Wilson either had mellowed enough or was hungry enough to take the job. His home base at the magazine was the *Playboy* Forum, where he worked alongside Robert Shea. (I am focusing on Wilson rather than Shea here, in part because Wilson is more likely to have penned the relevant *Playboy* passages and in part because Wilson’s ideological history is better documented. But Shea, like Wilson, was attracted to individualist anarchism.<sup>63</sup>)

Wilson’s and Shea’s stint at the Forum has a special place in the history of American conspiracy theories, because the more paranoid letters that they received there inspired them to write *Illuminatus!*, a satiric (and explicitly anarcho-libertarian) trilogy whose plot drew heavily on both left- and right-wing conspiracy theories—and which helped inject the idea of the Illuminati into popular culture. Though the saga was not published until 1975, Wilson and Shea started writing it in 1969, the same year the *Playboy* Forum tackled the sex-ed wars. The literature they received during this episode left a clear stamp on their work.<sup>64</sup>

There is a degree of uncertainty about who exactly did what when *Playboy* entered the sex-ed debate, as the exact chain of responsibility at the Forum is difficult to discern

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62 Robert Anton Wilson, “Negative Thinking,” *The Realist*, June 1963. NODL was the National Organization for Decent Literature.

63 For a selection of Shea’s writing, political and otherwise, see Robert Shea, *Every Day is a GOOD Day*, ed. Tom Jackson (Hilaritas Press, 2025).

64 *Illuminatus!* spoofed the Antis’ rumors and rhetoric by having a character spout exaggerated versions of them: “. . . children seven and eight years old, are talking about penises and vaginas—and using those very words! Now, is this an accident? Let me quote you Lenin’s own words.” “In Wyoming, after one sex-education class in a high school, the teacher was raped by seventeen boys. She said later she would never teach sex in school again.” “In Wilmette, Illinois, an 8-year-old boy came home from a sensitivity training class and tried to have intercourse with his 4-year-old sister.” Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *The Eye in the Pyramid* (Dell, 1975), 98–99.

half a century later. While Wilson and Shea are often described as the section's editors, they ultimately answered to the staffer who had created the Forum in the first place, Nat Lehrman. Lehrman certainly had a strong interest in sex education: When *Playboy* published an extended interview with SIECUS leader Mary Calderone the following year, he was the one asking the questions.<sup>65</sup>

But Wilson has said that his duties at the Forum included “writing the italicized replies in which the *Playboy* position was stated” (which was fine with him, he added, since he saw that position as “straight old-fashioned mind-your-own-business John Stuart Mill libertarianism”).<sup>66</sup> It is also clear, looking through old editions of the Forum today, that Wilson and his confederates sometimes planted fake letters among the real ones. For one thing, they were sometimes signed with names that Wilson also used for characters in his novels, or as pseudonyms when writing for other publications.

And that brings us back to that October 1969 issue of *Playboy*. The name “Arnold K. Ravenhurst” takes on additional significance if you know that Kerry Thornley sometimes wrote under the pseudonym Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst. *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Math?* was a real leaflet, written by Greg Hill—a parody of a widely circulated Anti booklet called *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?* The American Anarchist Association was a Discordian front group. (Maybe “front group” overstates it: It was one of several purported organizations that the Discordians put on letterheads when writing prank letters. Another one, naturally, was the Bavarian Illuminati.) Martin Wagner, the editor of an online archive of Wilson's writings, thinks it likely that letter-writer “James O'Malley” was one of Wilson's masks.<sup>67</sup>

The next month's *Playboy* Forum again turned its attention to sex ed, but this time no practical jokes were involved. Gordon Drake, the author of the aforementioned *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?*, wrote a letter.<sup>68</sup> So did Larry Herron of the Alert Citizens Forum, who made several charges against SIECUS, mostly drawn from the Birchite article that Gary Allen had written with John Steinbacher's input. There also was a letter from *Sexology* editor Isadore Rubin, coming from the other side of the issue.

*Playboy* issued a short rebuke to Drake and a much longer response to Herron, with the second reply debunking several claims that had been floating around Anti circles. For example, Allen had quoted SIECUS chief Calderone telling *Look* magazine, “I

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65 “Playboy Interview: Mary Calderone,” *Playboy*, April 1970.

66 Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati* (New Falcon Publications, [1977] 1986), 43.

67 Martin Wagner, email to the author, April 16, 2019.

68 *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?* was published in 1968 by the Christian Crusade, led by the evangelist Billy James Hargis. Hargis went on to found American Christian College, but he resigned after some students accused him of using his schoolhouse to teach them raw sex.

don't believe the old thou-shalt-nots apply anymore," and he had placed the quote in a way that suggested it was a response to the question, "What is your opinion of premarital sex relations among teenagers?" The *Playboy* writer responded:

The line about "thou-shalt-nots" is a part of another quote entirely, in which Dr. Calderone told the *Look* reporter, "I'm a religious person, but I don't believe the old 'thou-shalt-nots' apply anymore." The reporter carefully clarifies her use of the word "apply," explaining, "Hers is not a moral judgment, but a description of our society." Your source, then, not only misquoted Dr. Calderone but seems to have done so with deliberate malice and intent to deceive, rather than with carelessness.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to Wilson's comment that writing such replies was his job, there is another reason to suspect that he (or perhaps Shea) had a hand in this response: It questioned Allen's credibility by reporting that he had also authored a pamphlet packed with implausible allegations about the Bavarian Illuminati.

Two months later, "James O'Malley" showed up in the *Playboy* Forum again. After praising the magazine for debunking the Antis, he asked: "What can a concerned parent do when these baboons descend on his community and begin beating their tribal drums for a ritual book-burning?" *Playboy's* response zeroed in on the controversy in Anaheim, which it said "shows that an organized minority can ride roughshod over an unorganized (and apathetic) minority."<sup>70</sup>

### Visions of Freedom

How did these writers who shared a political philosophy end up on opposite sides of the sex-ed wars? An observer sympathetic to Hoiles might argue that no staffer at a girlie magazine was likely to take the purportedly prudish side of the debate, and that this surely influenced the *Playboy* Discordians' behavior. Someone more sympathetic to Wilson and Shea could retort that the literature *Playboy* was debunking really did misquote Mary Calderone and otherwise flub its facts, and that they can hardly be blamed if that makes the movement behind the literature look bad.

But two things are undeniable: Hoiles's libertarianism put a particularly strong stress on opposing the activities of tax-funded schools, while Wilson's libertarianism put a particularly strong stress on opposing public policies he considered puritanical. Jason Lee Byas has suggested that the "entire political spectrum outside of radical

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69 Editorial response to "Reds and Beds" (letter), *Playboy*, November 1969.

70 James O'Malley, "Fighting Back" (letter), *Playboy*, January 1970.

libertarianism is also replicated within radical libertarianism.”<sup>71</sup> So perhaps it just isn’t surprising that on an issue like this, which centers around how the government should conduct itself in a sphere it already controls, a “left-wing” libertarian would ally himself with the left and a “right-wing” libertarian would ally himself with the right.

That is a reasonably good model for what happened here. But again, “left” and “right” are tricky labels. For one thing, they do not apply perfectly to the libertarian writers we’re discussing. (Just a few months before those sex-ed letters appeared in *Playboy*, Wilson published an essay describing himself as “a right-wing anarchist.”<sup>72</sup>) More importantly, writers who almost everyone would agree were either left-wing or right-wing—writers who did not identify as libertarians at all—did not always come down cleanly on one side or the other of the sex-ed debate.

The most notable example is Mary Breasted herself. Though *Oh! Sex Education!* spends pages upon pages debunking the Antis’ claims and subjecting their leaders to barbed commentary, the *Village Voice* writer’s book isn’t always friendly to SIECUS either. In fact, she discovered that debunking the Antis ultimately made her cooler to the SIECUS set as well: As the author found evidence against the Antis’ belief that the sex educators had a radical agenda, she was also finding evidence that their agenda was, in fact, too conservative for Breasted’s taste. While Calderone “was in favor of open discussion and relatively permissive sexual behavior,” Breasted wrote, the SIECUS leader also favored “stressing to young people the possible unpleasant consequences of premarital sex. And although she deplored the exploitation of women inherent in the double standard, she seemed to subscribe to the almost Victorian notion that the male sex drive was generally more easily unleashed and more difficult to control than was the female’s.” Calderone’s rhetoric sometimes “betrayed a deeply Calvinist view of sex,” Breasted added.<sup>73</sup>

At a Sheraton in Washington, DC, to attend a convention of the National Council on Family Relations—the attendee list, she wrote, would have struck Steinbacher as “the master list of the Great Conspiracy itself”<sup>74</sup>—Breasted had an epiphany:

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71 From a post by Jason Lee Byas, writing as “Charles G. Koch” (@worst\_account), Twitter (now X), August 12, 2021, [x.com/worst\\_account/status/1425983470275284994](https://x.com/worst_account/status/1425983470275284994).

72 Ronald Weston [Robert Anton Wilson], “Why I Am a Right-Wing Anarchist,” *the rogerSPARK*, May 1969. Given that this article called for the abolition of land rent, dreamed of a future without the employer-employee relationship, and suggested that traditional Native American societies were preferable to the US government that displaced them, Wilson was clearly using a quirky definition of “right-wing”—likely one that associated the right with individualism and the left with collectivism. He eventually took to rejecting both “left” and “right” as labels, instead describing his politics as “non-Euclidean.”

73 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 233–34.

74 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 281. The fact that “Council on Family Relations” sounds so much like “Council on Foreign Relations” would have been the icing on the cake.

For three months I had been listening to the wild arguments of the Antis. I had heard their liars and their religious fanatics, and I had thought them absurd. Everything they had said and done had increased my sympathies for the supporters of sex education. Everything they stood for was the antithesis of what I revered. . . .

But those people at the Sheraton . . . had in one afternoon chilled all my eagerness to pursue the Antis. They gave off disheartening signals of people who had spent too much time behind desks and podiums and clinic doors. . . . [Y]ou could sense a sameness that ran through them all. It was their new faith in the power of the human relations professions. And whether they belonged to the sensitivity training sect or the strict Freudian school or some watered-down version of any of these, they were, all of them, members of that large and strangely humorless denomination whose priesthood dealt out the eucharist in small tablets. They had taken what was once considered sin and transformed it into something called neurotic behavior. . . .

And what haunted me, after that first despairing afternoon at the Sheraton, was the question that the Antis had raised so hysterically again and again and again. Which was: Who gave these people the right to tell us all how to raise our children?<sup>75</sup>

Breasted noted that while she was “prepared to accept the wisdom of certain social scientists,” she was “no longer able to trust the judgment of the considerably less objective health teachers and social workers and marriage counselors. I did not want to accommodate myself or my children to their particular standard of mental health. And if I didn’t want to, why should the Antis want to?”<sup>76</sup>

The author was not, in the end, fully converted to the Antis’ cause, but she came much closer than she expected. “The right-wingers had forced me to think about what it must feel like to belong to a philosophical minority,” she wrote. “And then, as I examined the various sex education programs, I realized that I belonged to a philosophical minority on the other end of the spectrum. And if the schools weren’t willing to deal with sex the way *I* thought they should, then I was almost willing to say they should just leave it out. Almost.”<sup>77</sup> Breasted backed down from that position only because so many of the kids she spoke with said they weren’t getting much information about sex from their parents.

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75 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 288–89, 291.

76 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 291.

77 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 335.

And so instead, unable to commit completely to either side of the debate, she imagined that perhaps someday someone could write a textbook that would answer those kids' questions frankly.

There was another libertarian writer who loved Breasted's book, and who deployed it while fashioning what amounted to a synthesis of the Hoiles and Wilson positions. He was Ralph Raico, a historian who began and ended his career on the right wing of the libertarian spectrum but in the 1960s and 1970s was associated with the libertarian left. After *The Humanist* interviewed Calderone, he wrote the magazine a letter that ultimately appeared not in *The Humanist* but in *Reason*. In it, Raico distanced himself from the Birchers, writing that he "share[s] very few values with them"; instead, he declared, he was critiquing "Calderone's views from a libertarian and anarchist position, seeing them as one more dreary and dangerous try at social engineering on the part of bureaucratic liberals."

Drawing on Breasted's book, Raico argued that Calderone's values were not as liberatory as their reputation. (In one part of her *Humanist* interview, he complained, she seemed to equate rape and "a homosexual experience" as events one can "survive.") He also argued, as Breasted did, that in practice sex education classes would frequently be conducted by people who weren't even as broadminded as Calderone, since "the graduates of our state teachers colleges" have "their own distinctive values, fears, etc." And where *should* kids learn about sex? From any book they please, Raico replied, but also "at parties, in bars, in johns, when their parents are out . . ."<sup>78</sup>

To complete the ideological horseshoe, which at this point looks more like an ideological pretzel, compare that last line to something Steinbacher told Breasted:

[H]e later stated that he saw "nothing wrong" in children's becoming sexually enlightened—as long as they got their information from each other.

"I have a lot of confidence in young people," he explained with a benign expression on his face. "I think they're able to sort these things out pretty darn well."<sup>79</sup>

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78 Ralph Raico, "Against Sex Education—A Letter to *The Humanist*," *Reason*, February 1974, <https://reason.com/1974/02/01/against-sex-education/>.

79 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 149. I should note that not everything in Raico's list of ways to find out more about sex entailed kids learning "from each other": He also suggested that teens learn sex "from older women and men," an idea that sounds utterly alien today but was not uncommon among the radicals of the 1970s. (That part of the passage presumably would not sit well with the author of *The Child Seducers*.) On the rise and fall of this sort of rhetoric, and the sociological reasons why it became more common in the 1970s before beating a retreat in the 1980s and 1990s, see Jesse Walker, "A Modern History of 'Groomer' Politics," *Reason*, February 2023, <https://reason.com/2023/01/14/a-modern-history-of-groomer-politics/>.

While we're noting rough parallels, here is an interesting observation from Petrzela:

One fairly stark conflict seems to have been FLSE's goal to promote a degree of moral autonomy versus the [religious and familial] indoctrination that Antis espoused. . . . Yet a linchpin of the individualist, libertarian Antis' argument was that the sex educators represented an encroaching totalitarianism that eradicated free thought. In a public debate between Steinbacher and [Superintendent Paul] Cook, which took place after the dismantling of the program, the vocal journalist revealed this contradiction. "Most people . . . will reject any attempts to indoctrinate their children . . . such coercive force is known as Fascism." Ultimately, Steinbacher called on the audience to "reject outmoded and irrational totalitarian concepts and to begin to think as free moral agents," invoking a goal sounding quite similar to FLSE's aim: "to develop a set of personal standards and ethical beliefs."<sup>80</sup>

Nonlibertarian readers may be wary of drawing a direct relationship between *libertarianism* and *liberty*. But it is fair to say that libertarians take an instinct that appears in many ideological contexts—a desire to be free from government interference—and magnify it, letting us see how that instinct can play out in different settings. And while libertarianism (let alone Hoiles- or Wilson-style radical libertarianism) is not exactly a widely held political position, that broader attraction to liberty *is* widely held, and it manifests itself in many ways: one day a fear of high-handed professionals telling parents how to raise their kids, another day a fear of puritans trying to suppress sexual information. Far from being confined to one portion of the political spectrum, these inchoate impulses can appear anywhere, to the point where Mary Breasted starts echoing the Antis on the dangers of psychiatric-bureaucratic power or John Steinbacher starts echoing FLSE on the importance of moral autonomy.

### Recurring Patterns

Similar stories have played out in other K-12 culture wars. A few years after the Anaheim clash, another curriculum battle made national headlines, this one starring parents in West Virginia who were violently upset about their schools' supplementary English textbooks.<sup>81</sup> Yet again, conspiracy theories circulated about the curriculum. Yet again, a liberal *Village Voice* reporter (this time Paul Cowan) found himself feeling sympathy for

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<sup>80</sup> Petrzela, *Classroom Wars*, 153.

<sup>81</sup> I mean "violently" literally. There was gunfire and dynamite.

families that others had caricatured as reactionaries.<sup>82</sup> Yet again, a left-libertarian writer (this time Karl Hess) wrote an anarchist extension of the *Voice* liberal's argument.<sup>83</sup> The pattern recurs because the underlying impulses are still there.

Some of those patterns have been recurring in the K-12 culture wars of today. Once again, both sides are deploying the rhetoric of liberty, with one alliance stressing the freedoms of young people (in this case, young LGBT people) while their opponents claim that government-sponsored indoctrination is afoot. And once again, it is possible to find self-described libertarians on each side of the debates. When, for example, the state of Florida passed a law in the early 2020s that limited classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity, one group of self-described libertarians was more likely to see this as an authoritarian purge of supposedly subversive ideas,<sup>84</sup> whereas another praised it as an attempt to resist officially sanctioned ideology.<sup>85</sup> One reason to revisit the libertarians' roles in the Anaheim sex education battle is to recognize that the current culture wars within libertarianism did not emerge from nowhere; they have a history that long predates the Trump era, even if they are now more visible than usual.

There are, of course, notable differences between the current fights and the 1960s sex-ed war. The topic of trans people was essentially absent from the Anaheim debates, and even homosexuality was just a small part of the argument. (Quaint as it may sound today, the Antis were much more upset that kids could be taught it's OK to masturbate.) More fundamentally, the contemporary conflicts involve not just curriculum decisions but intrusions into personal privacy: Among the subjects being debated now is whether teachers should be required to out trans kids to their parents. Nothing like that was under discussion in 1968.

One reason it wasn't under discussion, of course, is because the wider society was much less accepting of sexual minorities. If a student started adopting a different gender identity during school hours in 1968, everyone involved would expect a call home.

But think about how that transformation happened. Think about how *all* these transformations happened—why it would be virtually incomprehensible back then that a kid could start a gender transition without their parents knowing, and why it sounds

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82 Paul Cowan, "Holy War in West Virginia: A Fight Over America's Future," *Village Voice* (New York City), December 4, 1974.

83 Karl Hess, "Not Going by the Book," *Inquiry*, December 5, 1977.

84 See, for example, the August/September 2022 issue of *Reason*, dubbed "The Banned Books Issue."

85 In Florida, for example, the Mises Caucus—a right-wing faction within the Libertarian Party—expressed sympathy for the forces pushing for such bills, even as it argued that those laws could not salvage the schools: "Parents: Even if the Florida state forbids [its] educators from teaching degeneracy, there will be rouge [*sic*] groups who will seek opportunities to mold your children. Get your kids out of government schools. It is not worth the risk." Post by Florida Mises Caucus (@FLMisesCaucus), X, March 7, 2023, [x.com/FLMisesCaucus/status/1636725790808088577](https://x.com/FLMisesCaucus/status/1636725790808088577).

strange today that a tolerant attitude toward masturbation could cause a political scandal. Think about the fact that even Mary Breasted, the *Village Voice* feminist, was taken aback when a man told her his “private theory” that “rape was not merely accomplished by violence but occurred whenever a woman was taken against her will. It was possible, he thought, for a man to rape his wife.” That is an entirely mainstream view today, but back then it prompted Breasted to write, “An interesting notion, no doubt, but not strictly semantically correct.”<sup>86</sup> Think of all the changes in sexual mores between 1968 and now, in areas from divorce to lesbianism. How many of them were driven by school sex-ed classes?

I would not claim those classes played no role *at all*. But they look like a lagging indicator—not a force that launched big social changes, but a place that eventually came to reflect the social changes happening elsewhere. In the theater of politics, they were the main event; in the grander sweep of social change, they were a sideshow.

Sex education classes were a convenient scapegoat for people concerned about the changes swelling across the country, and the alleged communist-humanist-SIECUS conspiracy was a convenient scapegoat for people concerned about sex education classes. But the culture outpaced the schools rather than the schools setting the pace for the culture. We’ll see how this era’s battles resolve themselves, as different Americans gradually adjust their visions of what freedom demands.

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86 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 86.