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ESSAY



# God's Soldiers

## *Clerico-Fascism and the Deep History of Christian Nationalism*

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On a warm evening in October 1945, the Christian preacher and political activist Gerald L. K. Smith stood to deliver a keynote address at a local auditorium in Denver. Smith, already notorious for his antisemitism and demagoguery, spoke only a little over a month after hostilities had ended in the most sanguinary war in human history. Uncharacteristically listless, Smith attacked the Jews and called for a law guaranteeing that only Christians could be elected to political office. His latest desire, he told the audience of seven hundred, was for an amendment to the Constitution "acknowledging the power and the supremacy of Christ in America." Above all he pledged himself to continuing the fight for "a white Christian America," no matter the personal cost. This particular meeting had begun with a short speech by Kenneth Oliver Goff, whose own ideological trajectory from communist zealot to right-wing extremist exemplified the era's capacity for political reinvention. Goff's task was to prime the audience before introducing Wesley A. Swift, a proud racist who gave a "rapid-fire" talk assailing communism.[1]

Smith, Goff, and Swift represented the extreme edge of Christian nationalism in post-1930s America. These three men and their allies fused fundamentalist Christianity with paramilitary politics, forming a variant of what might be called, with caveats, American clerico-fascism. This ideological complex differed from mainstream American conservatism in its often explicit rejection of democratic processes, its overt racialization of religious identity, and its apocalyptic framing of political conflict. It similarly diverged from European fascist movements through its distinctive emphasis on Protestant biblical interpretation and antistatist conviction. The result, by the 1960s, was a uniquely American political theology.

Smith, Goff, and Swift's evolution is suggestive of the present state of American politics. The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, developed in 2023 for Trump's

1 Quotes from "Gerald Lyman Kenneth Smith–America First Party," November 8, 1945, Smith, Gerald L. K.–HQ 18, Ernie Lazar FOIA Collection, https://archive.org/details/lazarfoia (hereafter ELC).

anticipated restoration, represents the most ambitious—and most influential—theocratic intervention yet attempted by the counterrevolutionary right. This 900-page compendium, cloaked in the procedural innocence of a transition manual, in fact discloses a far more consequential enterprise: the translation of Christian nationalist theology into a comprehensive program of state reconstruction. In the intellectual genealogy of American reaction, never has the distance between right-wing religious doctrine and administrative practice been so clearly bridged.

Project 2025's lineage is more complex than its sponsors acknowledge. While they disavow the crude racism of Smith, Goff, and Swift, these preachers' concepts remain recognizable beneath the technocratic verbiage. What once circulated as countercultural eschatology now arrives in the measured tones of policy expertise. This transmutation—from the marginalia of theological extremism to the calculated pragmatism of governance—represents not a departure from the Christian nationalist tradition but its effective sublimation into more palatable forms of political practice. At its conceptural core, Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership* rests on what might be termed a decisionist foundation—a profound faith in the "unitary executive" and the systematic expansion of presidential authority—that reconceptualizes the American state in ways that transcend conventional constitutional boundaries. Here lies the most telling aspect of this transformation. The framework of legitimacy is articulated both in the familiar language of constitutional jurisprudence, and in the more elusive and potentially more potent vocabulary of theological imperative. Kevin Roberts, the Heritage Foundation's president, performs a characteristic sleight of hand in this respect, invoking "God-given individual rights" while simultaneously proposing an administrative apparatus calibrated to impose particular religious norms, to regulate women's bodies, and to dramatically reduce non-white immigration.[2] The rhetoric of liberty thus serves as cover for a substantive reimagining of the state's purpose and reach. This paradox—freedom conceived as submission to theological imperatives—was precisely the contradiction that animated earlier iterations of American Christian nationalism.

For these thinkers, the organized left figures not merely as political opposition but as ontological enemy, the concrete manifestation of what evangelical discourse has long termed "principalities and powers." This essentialization of political difference, transforming policy disagreements into an almost cosmic struggle, exemplifies the friend-foe distinction central to radical conservative thought since the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt. The adversary is no longer simply mistaken but demonic, a shift that renders compromise not merely difficult but fundamentally impious. While they avoid references to Schmitt, such formulations place the project squarely within the tradition

2 Kevin D. Roberts, foreword to *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (The Heritage Foundation, 2023), 3, accessed December 14, 2025, https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

of what might be called theological exceptionalism, wherein normal democratic procedures must be suspended to address a central civilizational emergency.

By interpreting contemporary political developments within an eschatological framework, Goff, Smith, and Swift—like their present-day heirs—encouraged a sense of urgent militancy among their followers, transforming political activism into participation in spiritual warfare. Far from representing a retreat from political engagement into otherworldly concerns, the theology articulated by these figures provided a framework for understanding and responding to the social world. While as fundamentalists they insisted that they were simply following the inerrant word of scripture, they possessed their own creative agency, selectively appropriating, adapting, and transforming received traditions rather than simply inheriting them intact.

Their messianic view of social change was fundamentally opposed to Burkean conservativism's view of history, which viewed historical change as an organic sequence from prehistory to the present. Instead, the Christian far right understood theological and political change as a series of violent ruptures, each both reflecting and reorganizing the past while confronting the social world with something fundamentally new. Ironically, they shared such a conception with their archenemy: Marxism, or dialectical materialism. The worldview of Goff in particular embodied from his youth to old age the Manichean logic of the Stalinist apparatchik. In Goff's writings, Christ versus Antichrist wholly supplanted the struggle between communism and capitalism.

The intricate interplay between religious consciousness and national identity has long lain at the heart of American political culture. Post–World War II Christian nationalism cannot be understood merely as a straightforward reaction to liberal modernity or a cynical political strategy. Instead, this ideology contained within it a sophisticated, if anomalous, attempt to articulate a particular vision of American identity and purpose in theological terms. The most significant element of this ideological mélange was the belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that its political institutions and national identity were inextricably linked to Protestant Christianity. This thesis had deep historical roots, dating back to Puritan concepts of covenant theology, but it gained renewed significance in the early twentieth century as traditional Protestant hegemony faced mounting challenges from immigration, secularization, and theological modernism.

World War I precipitated a crisis of confidence in progressive ideas of social reform and human perfectibility, creating intellectual space for religious frameworks that emphasized divine sovereignty, human sin, and a coming apocalypse. The fundamentalist-modernist controversies that fractured American Protestantism in the 1920s provided crucial theological resources—above all a critique of liberal theology as a profound misreading of scripture—for subsequent expressions of Christian nationalism. By the late 1940s, the basic contours of postwar Christian nationalism had emerged: a fusion

of old-time religion with extreme ethnonationalism that became a significant force on the fringes of American political life.

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Goff and his allies' integration of traditional anticommunism with fundamentalist Christianity, conspiracy theories, survivalism, and elements of white racial nationalism anticipated significant developments within the American far right during the late twentieth century. In America, fascism expressed itself chiefly as a biopolitics of racial purity, a mania for untainted blood. This racism extended far beyond abstract theorizing. It required the construction of tangible manifestations of racial hierarchy, the strategic deployment of stereotypes to render visible differences that were believed to be inherent and immutable.

Goff himself never committed any acts of violence. But on some level his whole being seemed to yearn for the moment when the violence would begin. In opposition to liberalism and traditional conservatism, Goff and his allies embraced the primacy of emotional authenticity and transformative action, establishing an alternative worldview centered on affective experience, violent expression, and spiritual connection. The violence of fascism was not incidental to this political program but constitutive of its very core. First emerging in Europe, the fascist glorification of violence developed into something unprecedented—a politics that viewed violence not as a regrettable necessity but as a regenerative force. This politics took root in America, manifesting as a kind of indigenous fascism. Thus, Wesley Swift spoke of the need to exterminate the Jews as the precondition of millennial transformation. Violence was valued not despite its destructive consequences but because of them—because it destroyed the old order and cleared the way for the new.

The endless depravities that Goff ascribed to the communists were, for the most part, the product of a fervid and unstable mind. As a reporter profiling Goff remarked of his obsession with violence, "Again and again he tells of the Spanish Civil War and of Loyalist 'raids on convents, when every nun would be repeatedly raped by alternating Red beasts until dead. Then their bodies would be piled high like cordwood . . . the stench of burning flesh became a sweet odor to the nostrils of these half-crazed Communists.'"[3] If the nation was understood to be in a state of decay, then violence became not merely permissible but necessary. As Swift remarked in a sermon: "you can never appease the Reds by negotiation; the only remedy is bullets."[4]

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3 Nathan Perlmutter, "Evangelist Demagogue, 1952 Model: Both Sides of the Coin," *Commentary*, October 1952, 7.

4 Harvey B. Schechter to Justin Finger, memo, "Wesley Swift," November 27, 1964, Klan Anti-Defamation League (ADL) File. These files were provided for me by the ADL, but they have not been formally cataloged and lack a finding aid.

It is important to distinguish between Goff and his allies' clerico-fascism and the interwar European phenomenon of the same name. The European movements that earned this designation during the interwar period were products of a specific confluence of circumstances. The rise of ultranationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, with its emphasis on cultural unity and an organic conception of the body politic, had created, along with other factors, an unlikely but durable bridge between religious traditionalism and an emerging fascist corporatism. This corporatist vision, which advocated for the organization of society into functional, vertical corporations or guilds rather than horizontal class divisions, represented a fundamental reimagining of social order. Both Catholic social teaching and fascist ideology shared a certain critique of liberal modernity, though they proceeded from fundamentally different philosophical premises. The Catholic critique emanated from a theological understanding of the human person as inherently social and oriented toward transcendent ends. Fascism similarly rejected liberal individualism but did so primarily in service of a centralized state conceived in quasi-mystical terms. Goff and his allies' clerico-fascism differed most importantly in its antistatism. While there are no hard-and-fast definitions of clerico-fascism, their theological and political legitimation of paramilitary violence illustrated the fascistic mode through which they approached politics—a mode that transformed religious conviction into a weapon of political combat.

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Among the intellectual artifacts of the Victorian age, few rival the peculiar doctrine that animated Goff and his circle: British-Israelism, or Anglo-Israelism as it came to be styled. This was religious speculation of a particularly ambitious sort, one that sought to collapse the distance between the remote biblical past and the immediate imperial present. In the teeming ecosystem of nineteenth-century British religious thought, where evolutionary theory jostled with scriptural literalism and imperial triumphalism mingled with missionary zeal, Anglo-Israelism carved out its own distinctive niche by offering something that more conventional denominations could not: a direct genealogical link between the British nation and the ancient people of God. Basic to Anglo-Israelism was the assertion that after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, the ten tribes described in the Bible did not vanish but rather migrated through the Caucasus into western Europe. Proponents argued that these Israelite tribes eventually settled in the British Isles, where they established new kingdoms while maintaining their special covenant with God.

The Anglo-Israel movement was grounded in a distinctive approach to historical and linguistic evidence. Its thinkers drew parallels between Hebrew and English, identified supposed Israelite symbols in British heraldry, and interpreted archaeological findings through the lens of their theological presumptions. Their elaborate systems of "proof" were a misguided attempt to adapt religious thinking to the evidential standards of modern science. Central to Anglo-Israelism was a Christian fundamentalist understanding of eschatology—namely, dispensationalist premillennialism. At its

conceptual core, dispensationalism presented a particular understanding of divine revelation structured around distinct "dispensations," or periods in God's relationship with humanity. Goff and his collaborators understood themselves to be living through the sixth dispensation—the age of "grace"—which they conceived as a preparatory epoch oriented toward personal salvation through faith, culminating in the rapture of the church. At the same time, the dispensationalist emphasis on biblical literalism, doctrinal precision, and rigid separation from theological liberalism aligned with many mainstream fundamentalist concerns.

Anglo-Israelism's relationship with antisemitism and racial theory presents a more complex problem. While followers generally expressed philosemitic sentiments and supported the Jewish people as fellow Israelites, their system often incorporated contemporary racial theories that conceived of Anglo-Saxons as a master race. S. A. Ackley, a notable exponent of Anglo-Israelism in America, noted in 1945—the year is significant—that because "Hitler based a part of his Nazi ideology upon the race question . . . a feeling has grown up in some quarters that any attempt to recognize and face these race differences is a form of Nazism. The mere fact that a madman misuses and misrepresents a truth does not in any way destroy that truth or reduce its importance."[5] That "truth," such as it was, consisted of the belief that the Anglo-Saxon peoples were racially superior to all other human groups.

The confluence of Anglo-Israel theology with American white supremacist thought found its first systematic expression in the figure of Reuben Herbert Sawyer, a preacher whose unremarkable origins belied the noxious influence he would eventually wield. Born in 1866 in the river town of Paducah, Kentucky, Sawyer was ordained at age twenty-five as a member of the Churches of Christ, a small fellowship that spurned denominational creeds and sought to restore the purity of primitive Christianity. For Sawyer, like his Anglo-Israel allies, the significance of all earthly events could be explained by scripture. History itself, he told his congregation, was simply "fulfilled prophecy."[6]

Sawyer joined the second Ku Klux Klan in the middle of its early 1920s expansion. Initially a philosemite, his views underwent a significant transformation at the beginning of 1920s, leading him to believe that it was possible to differentiate between the true Israelites—ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons—and "false" Jews. As he wrote to a friend shortly after joining the Klan, "This institution [the Klan] is being antagonized by the worst and most dangerous elements of American society. The Roman Catholics, Jews, Negroes and Japs are especially active in the warfare made against it."[7] Sawyer's

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5 [S. A. Ackley], *The Bible Answers the Race Question* (Kingdom Gospel Institute, 1945), 5.

6 "Biblical Prophecy Fulfilled in Great War, Says Pastor," *Sunday Oregonian* (Portland), January 21, 1917, 10.

7 Sawyer to A. A. Beauchamp, February 8, 1922, box 1, Reuben H. Sawyer Papers, Oregon Historical Society, Portland, OR.

racialized logic drove him to attack non-whites as parasitical and their culture and beliefs as ultimately antithetical to republican self-government. "For three thousand years," he wrote in 1921, "a conflict for final supremacy has raged between this chosen white race and the dark skinned races of men." Equality of the races, Sawyer elsewhere added, was "contrary to the declared purposes of the Almighty God."[8]

One of Sawyer's incendiary pamphlets, *The Jewish Question* (1930), was distributed by an organization known as the Anglo-Saxon Federation of America, the central organizing body of Anglo-Israel doctrine in America. Its leader was an eccentric New England lawyer named Howard B. Rand. Born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1889, Rand represented a second-generation Anglo-Israel adherent, nurtured within the intellectual framework established by his father, who had immersed himself in Anglo-Israel literature. His founding of the Anglo-Saxon Federation of America in 1928 marked a significant milestone in the institutionalization of Anglo-Israel, and later clerico-fasicst, thought in the United States. What renders Rand's trajectory particularly instructive is the methodical precision with which he managed the ideological transformation of Anglo-Israelism itself. The basic architecture of the doctrine remained intact. But in the fraught atmosphere of post–World War I America, where nativist sentiment was hardening into something more bitter, Rand began the delicate work of introducing antisemitic elements into what had been a relatively benign form of religious nationalism.

By the late 1930s, Rand's contempt for the Jews was categorical. His publishing network disseminated a range of antisemitic literature, including the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The inclusion of the *Protocols* was particularly significant, not merely because of the document's fraudulent origins, but because its circulation represented a deliberate attempt to legitimize the most paranoid forms of antisemitic conspiracy theory. In 1938, he wrote that his "generation once more awakens to the fact that back of subversive activities . . . is the unseen hand of certain powerful Jews."[9] Equally telling was the geopolitical calculus that informed Rand's approach to World War II. Throughout the war years, he and his associates maintained that Stalin, rather than Hitler or Mussolini, represented the gravest threat to American security. They advocated for a negotiated peace that would likely have left the Nazis in almost total control of Europe. The parallels with Christian nationalists today, and their on-again, off-again infatuation with Vladimir Putin and Victor Orbán, are suggestive of one chapter in the long romance between the American and European far right. Suggestive too are the recent actions of far-right figures. Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke made several

8 Reuben H. Sawyer, "The American Idea," *Watchman of Israel* 3, no. 5 (March 1921): 85; Reuben H. Sawyer, *The Truth About the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan* (Pacific Northwest Domain, No. 5, Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1922), n.p.

9 "Memorandum," n.d. (ca. 1946), 1, box 302, Jewish Community Relations Council Records, Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives, Jewish Federation of Detroit.

lecture tours across Moscow in the mid-1990s, hailing Russia as "the key to white survival" and selling his books through Russian distributors.

Howard Rand was also allied, through mutual acquaintances, to another far-right preacher of considerable notoriety: Gerald L. K. Smith. Rand's connection to Smith, and to Smith's protégé Wesley Swift, would be critical to the development of Christian nationalism after 1945. What emerged from this milieu was not merely another variant of religious conservatism but something altogether more sinister: the crystallization of Christian Identity theology and the emergence of American clerico-fascism. Smith articulated a distinctive vision of American identity that merged fundamentalist Protestantism with fervent nationalism, racism, antisemitism, and apocalyptic anticommunism. Over decades, his ideology evolved from populist economic reformism to a virulently antisemitic and racist form of clerico-fascism, making him the most persistently fruitful of America's antisemitic propagandists and the most notorious American fascist.

Born in Wisconsin and educated at Valparaiso University, Smith began as a Disciples of Christ minister in the Midwest before relocating to Louisiana in 1929. In Shreveport, he gained a reputation as a magnetic speaker and gifted community organizer. Smith's first plunge into paramilitary demagoguery came in 1933 as a member of the Silver Legion—a homegrown American fascist organization—writing exultantly to its leader, William Dudley Pelley: "By the time you receive this letter, I shall be on the road to St. Louis and parts north, together with a uniformed squad of young men, composing what I believe to be the first Silver Shirt storm troop in America."[10]

Smith's burgeoning attachment to Louisiana senator Huey Long's Share Our Wealth movement in this period represented, in retrospect, merely the first act in a drama of ideological transformation that would see him traverse the entire spectrum of right-wing politics. Long's assassination in 1935 might have terminated a lesser figure's political ambitions, but for Smith it represented merely a strategic inflection point, precipitating a rightward trajectory that would eventually carry him far beyond the populist insurgency of his Louisiana years. The alliance he subsequently orchestrated with pension advocate Francis Townsend and the formidable Father Charles Coughlin—whose right-wing Catholic populism had garnered a gargantuan following—represented a sophisticated attempt to synthesize diverse currents of political discontent into a unified force, which they christened the Union Party. The alliance, though, quickly soured, with Townsend's board tellingly expelling Smith for his "Fascist ideas."[11] Despite the Union Party's electoral failure, Smith assiduously cultivated his movement, speaking to one million people weekly via radio and receiving three thousand letters daily from supporters.

10 "Gerald L. K. Smith: 1953," n.d. (1953), 5, American Jewish Archives Digitized Collections, accessed December 14, 2025, https://ajcarchives.org/Portal/Default/en-US/RecordView/Index/983.

11 "Gerald L. K. Smith," May 20, 1941, Smith, Gerald L. K.–HQ 62–43818, ELC.

In 1943, he founded the America First Party and, in 1947, the Christian Nationalist Crusade, collaborating extensively with industrialist Henry Ford.

Smith was an inveterate bigot and controversialist, and he perceived Hitler as the blameless casualty of a Jewish conspiracy engineered to annihilate the German people. The Jewish population harbored animosity toward the *Führer*, Smith argued, simply because Hitler embodied the principles of Christianity. The founding of his magazine, *The Cross and the Flag*, in 1942 provided Smith with a platform for these views, while his address to the 1948 Christian Nationalist Crusade convention offered him the opportunity to articulate a political manifesto, one that advocated the ethnic cleansing of African Americans and "Zionist Jews"—a program that laid bare the eliminationist logic underlying his religious rhetoric.

Beneath the seemingly coherent synthesis of Smith's ideology lay a set of contradictions that not only partially undermined the intellectual foundations of his worldview but also revealed broader tensions within the Christian nationalist tradition. Perhaps the deepest contradiction in Smith's worldview lay in its theological foundations—in the tension between Christian universalism and Smith's particularist, exclusionary vision of American identity. Smith's theology enacted a fundamental inversion of the Bible's universalist impulse, reconfiguring Christianity as the exclusive property of a particular national and racial community: white Protestant Americans. This contradiction was not merely incidental to Smith's thought but constitutive of his entire theological framework. Smith's *The Cross and the Flag* reveals the alchemy by which theological universalism could be transmuted into exclusionary nationalism. Throughout his magazine, Smith repeatedly asserted the special covenantal relationship between God and America, constructing an elaborate parallel between the United States and biblical Israel that positioned the republic as a chosen nation bearing its own divine mandate, a conceptual framework that bore a striking resemblance to Anglo-Israelism. While affirming the authority of scripture, Smith engaged in interpretive contortions that transformed universalist passages into support for exclusionary nationalism. This contradiction extended to Smith's ecclesiology, or his understanding of the church. While affirming the universal church as the body of all believers, Smith simultaneously advocated for a de facto national church—much like the Nazis—aligned with American interests. Smith, like many later activists, portrayed the American Revolution and the Constitutional Congress as explicitly Christian events, emphasizing the religious beliefs of certain founding figures while minimizing or ignoring the Enlightenment deism and principled secularism that characterized many of these men.

Smith's public persona mixed raw emotion, fierce ideological commitment, and calculated theatrics. "I know I am doing God's work," he declared in 1945, "and I know the reason I am hated so is because the children of Satan don't want Christian America to survive."[12] While economic themes remained a staple of his stump speeches, after

12 "Gerald L. K. Smith, America First Party," July 25, 1945, Swift, Wesley A.–San Diego 105-134, ELC.

the war the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism increasingly emerged as the central organizing principle of Smith's worldview. This shift reflected broader currents within American fundamentalism, as theological concerns about atheistic communism merged with geopolitical anxieties about Soviet power. Smith's abundant charisma and organizational abilities masked these contradictions. In isolation, Smith's followers could experience profound individual disaffection, resentment, and marginalization; collectively, however, they constituted a formidable political force.

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The most consequential preacher of Smith's entourage was a gifted California racist named Wesley Albert Swift. Swift's particular synthesis of forensic biblical exegesis, apocalyptic thinking, and extreme racism became the foundation of what is called Christian Identity theology, an American radicalization of Anglo-Israelism. This theology was founded on a set of beliefs that posited that the non-white races were created before Adam and were entirely separate from the Adamic race of white people; that reinterpreted the serpent in Genesis as a humanoid creature associated with the devil; and that identified two "seedlines" descending from Eve: one from Adam, representing God's chosen, and one from the serpent, representing Satan's offspring.[13]

Swift's racial theology emerged from a milieu in which the boundaries between religious doctrine and pseudoscientific speculation had grown increasingly porous. His reconstruction of Christian predestination as racial destiny reflected broader currents in early twentieth-century thought, yet he possessed an unusual talent for systematizing these influences into a coherent ideological framework. The traditional Christian narrative of salvation and damnation underwent, in Swift's hands, a curious metamorphosis. Election and reprobation were reimagined not as divine mysteries but as racial categories, transforming theological speculation into what amounted to a blueprint for ethnic cleansing. His eschatology envisioned a final racial conflict in which white Christians would eliminate non-white peoples from the earth. As he remarked, in a rare moment of clarity, "All Jews must be destroyed."[14]

In contrast to his scriptural exegesis, Swift's political activities were far from rarefied. A confidential source told the FBI that Swift "has a number of co-workers, male, who wear black shirts, go fully armed and seem to fancy themselves as coming leaders of a fascist-like movement."[15] In 1963, Swift founded the Christian Knights of the Invisible Empire (CKIE), a Klan offshoot that emerged as a nexus of theological innovation and

13 Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*, rev. ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 159.

14 Quoted in Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *The Troublemakers: An Anti-Defamation League Report* (Doubleday, 1952), 28.

15 "Gerald L. K. Smith, America First Party."

reactionary politics. By wedding the clandestine traditions of the Klan to the apocalyptic urgency of Identity theology, he created something genuinely novel. This was no mere revival of earlier forms but a hybrid adapted to the specific pressures of the civil rights era. Although their meetings were swiftly honeycombed with federal agents, Swift and his allies formulated an audacious campaign of racial violence. The FBI noted in 1963 that the CKIE was planning "the aerial bombing of a Jewish church, using the airplane of one of their members."[16]

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Among the various figures who articulated an American variant of clerico-fascism, none proved more consequential—or more psychologically revealing—than Kenneth Goff, the unlikely ally of Swift and Smith. In 1936, after witnessing communist leader Earl Browder speak, Goff joined the Communist Party, beginning a brief but intense period of radical left-wing activism. For Goff, communism offered not merely an economic program but a comprehensive worldview, a secular faith promising redemption from individual alienation as well as the iron logic of the capitalist order.

In 1939, Goff experienced what he described as a profound religious and political awakening, swiftly leading him to leave the party. His Damascene moment would become central to his self-presentation and public persona. Goff consciously fashioned an image of himself as a zealous soldier of Christ, and his narrative of conversion functioned as a powerful rhetorical device, lending authenticity and moral urgency to his anticommunist message. In his resignation letter he confessed that "I have come to the conclusion that joining your party was the greatest mistake of my life."[17]

Goff became obsessed with the purportedly subversive role that Bernard Baruch—a Jewish businessman and counselor to presidents, including Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman—played in American politics. As "head of World Jewry," Goff wrote, Baruch had promoted the Bolshevik Revolution and had been the hidden hand behind America's "foreign and domestic policy since 1914." Baruch had "railroaded" America "into three wars costing millions of lives" and yearned for the day when he might "destroy all of Christendom." He was, as such, an "evil man."[18]

In 1950, Goff founded the Soldiers of the Cross Training Institute in Colorado, an organization dedicated to preparing young Christians for spiritual warfare against communism. Goff's conspiracy theories broadened during this period, extending

16 *Paramilitary Organizations in California* (California Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation, April 1965), CR-1. This report was commissioned by Attorney General Thomas C. Lynch of California.

17 *Investigations of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States, House of Representatives*, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., vol. 9 (1939): 5,587–88.

18 Kenneth Goff, *From Babylon to Baruch* (Sons of Liberty, n.d.), 1–2.

beyond civil rights to encompass virtually all aspects of postwar social liberalism. He claimed that water fluoridation represented a communist plot to weaken American resolve through chemical mind control; that rock music was designed to incite sexual promiscuity among white youth; and that ecumenical movements within Christianity were fronts for communist infiltration of American religious institutions. Goff's evangelical Christian commitments provided a theological vocabulary for articulating opposition to communism and various forms of social change, while simultaneously embedding this opposition within a cosmic narrative that intensified rather than moderated political antagonisms.

Goff's preaching and writing from the middle decades of the twentieth century offer a window into one of the more unsettling phenomena of American religious life: the systematic infiltration of mainstream Christian discourse by the toxic racial mythology pioneered by Wesley Swift. Particularly significant was Goff's incorporation of a racial dualism that positioned white Europeans as literal descendants of God, while attributing non-white populations to separate pre-Adamic creations, or, in the case of Jews, to satanic origin. As Goff remarked in a radio interview in 1965, "Jesus could not be a Jew because Jesus was human and Jews aren't."[19]

The evolution of Goff's anticommunist thought coincided with the intensification of Cold War tensions and the early stirrings of organized civil rights activism. Goff, like many far-right figures of the era, interpreted the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision as evidence of communist influence within the federal government. The increasing racialization of Goff's anticommunist discourse coincided with the convulsions that gripped American society during the late 1950s and 1960s. Like his allies on the extreme right, Goff interpreted these developments as evidence of communist subversion rather than legitimate protest, attributing civil rights activism to communist agitation designed to foment racial conflict. Goff believed that "the negro will be used by the Communist Party in America to ravish and rape white women to develop a brown race for the future. Through this avenue, the Communist-Zionist-Jew proposes to erase all Christian heritage."[20]

As he aged, Goff's conception of communism and Jewish power grew even more paranoid. The trajectory was perhaps predictable. Like so many figures inhabiting the febrile margins of American politics, Goff found in advancing age not wisdom but an intensification of his most destructive impulses. By the early 1960s, his pronouncements had acquired a genocidal edge that would have been recognizable to the architects of European fascism. He told an audience in the early 1960s that "the forces of Antichrist [i.e., Jews] should be put into concentration camps, or sent on leaky boats to Russia, and

19 Mary Wood, "Joe Pyne's 'Guests' Get Acid Treatment," *Cincinnati Post*, September 21, 1966, 44.

20 Quoted in C. F. Langly, "Why All These Troubles? Recruit Sex Maniacs into Army of Terror—Shades of Red Revolution," *Common Sense*, May 1, 1960, 3.

that their children's throats should be cut so that they would not multiply."[21] In a 1960 speech, Goff claimed that "Hitler and Eichmann are both Jews," and asserted that "Six million Jews were never killed."[22] This was not mere contradiction but something more profound: the construction of an alternative universe in which the agents of genocide became its supposed victims. As early as 1948, he had begun elaborating detailed scenarios of communist conquest, visions that combined tactical specificity with elements of his own lurid imagination. The projected takeover would unfold through coordinated urban uprisings, the seizure of communications networks, and systematic sexual violence. "Goon squads of picked killers will round up the people in the business districts," he wrote. "The men will be held hostages in some of the larger buildings, while the women will be turned over to the sex-crazed mobs to ravish and rape to their heart's desire."[23] By the 1960s, these apocalyptic fantasies had crystallized into a program of militant preparation. Followers trained by Goff at the Soldiers of the Cross camp wore khaki military-style uniforms, and met weekly to study "Americanism, the Christian Faith, [the] necessity of salvation, the menace of communism, materialism and evolution."[24] An FBI informant who attended the camp reported that students were issued weapons and ammunition, along with Goff's own extensive literature. According to a confidential FBI source, Goff claimed in 1963 that he had "organized fifty thousand guerrillas to fight communism."[25]

By the early 1960s, Kenneth Goff was collaborating openly with violent racists. Yet it was through his relationship with the Minutemen that Goff's trajectory intersected most decisively with the emerging constellation of extreme-right paramilitarism. This curious organization, which emerged in 1960 under the leadership of Robert Bolivar DePugh—a veterinary pharmaceutical entrepreneur from the Missouri hinterland—represented a significant departure from the conventional pieties of conservative politics, adopting instead an explicitly violent methodology premised on guerrilla warfare training designed to counter an anticipated Soviet occupation. DePugh was a complex figure—intelligent, capable, and charismatic, yet deeply influenced by paranoid thinking. His followers emerged from the peripheral elements of the John Birch Society, militant anti-tax advocates, the Klan, and neo-Nazi organizations. The group first gained national attention in July 1961 with a publicity stunt near Shiloh, Illinois, where DePugh told reporters: "We don't want to influence anyone politically

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21 Kenneth Goff, speech at Denver Revival Tabernacle, April 30, 1961, Goff ADL File. These files were provided for me by the ADL.

22 "Soldiers of the Cross Conference: Kenneth Goff's Speech," April 11, 1961, Goff ADL File.

23 Kenneth Goff, *Confessions of Stalin's Agent* (pub. by author, 1948), 9.

24 Bob Whearley, "Change Noted in Conservatism Field," *Denver Post*, August 13, 1964, clipping in Goff, Kenneth–Denver 105-123, ELC.

25 "Oliver Kenneth Goff," n.d, Goff, Kenneth–Denver 105-123, ELC.

and we're not radicals. We're just loyal American citizens who are tired of being pushed around by the Communists."[26]

The organization's name deliberately invoked colonial militias, positioning the group as modern defenders of American liberty. DePugh developed an organizational structure of small, autonomous units linked through secure communication networks. Despite tactical innovations, the fundamental logic of quasi-fascist paramilitary mobilization against internal enemies remained consistent with earlier American organizations like the first Klan. Initially focused on external threats, the Minutemen gradually shifted toward preoccupation with domestic "enemies." DePugh consciously sought a strategy of almost Lenin-like accelerationism, reportedly stating, "The purpose is to provoke the government into taking harsh and repressive measures against the general population so people will be turned against the government."[27]

DePugh's 1966 manifesto, *Blueprint for Victory*, articulated a vision of America under imminent threat. The texts's conceptual architecture rested on what DePugh presented as an irreconcilable opposition between "individualism" and "collectivism," a binary that served not merely as analytical framework but as moral armature for the militant resistance he advocated. He constructed an image of communists as fanatical and amoral, while identifying government bureaucracy as the chief internal enemy. "Our nation has wealth, energy and opportunity but yet we are dying," he wrote. "Why? Because we are infested by parasites."[28] The resonance of this language with the contemporary right could hardly be more clear. As Charlie Kirk, the most influential youth activist of the MAGA movement prior to his assassination, remarked in February 2025, federal workers "operate as worthless parasites on the American taxpayer." "You are a leech on us," he warned the bureaucracy.[29] The decades separating DePugh's *Blueprint* from Kirk's pronouncement had witnessed the fall of the Soviet Union, the transformation of the global economy, the advent of the digital age, and the emergence of this radicalism in the mainstream of US politics. Yet the essential grammar of grievance remained remarkably unchanged.

By the mid-1960s, the Minutemen had established the Patriotic Party as its public-facing political arm. This institutional expansion coincided with—and was perhaps precipitated by—DePugh's encounter with Kenneth Goff, a figure whose own trajectory through the demimonde of American extremism embodied the fluid boundaries between ostensibly distinct ideological camps. Goff and DePugh quickly

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26 J. Harry Jones Jr., *A Private Army*, rev. ed. (Doubleday, 1969), 2.

27 John George and Laird Wilcox, *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, & Others* (Prometheus, 1996), 239.

28 Robert B. DePugh, *Blueprint for Victory* (n.p., 1966), 71.

29 Charlie Kirk, host, *The Charlie Kirk Show*, podcast, February 24, 2025, https://www.iheart.com/podcast/1119-real-americas-voice-232242864/episode/the-charlie-kirk-show-february-24-268876535/.

struck up a close bond, with Goff joining the Patriotic Party and DePugh using Goff's facilities in Colorado to train members in guerrilla warfare. The collaboration deepened in 1967 when DePugh proposed that the Minutemen and Goff's Soldiers of the Cross amalgamate entirely. FBI informants reported that while Goff maintained the pretense of running a religious institute, the actual curriculum was dominated by paramilitary training. One informant noted: "The backbone of S.O.T.C. was the amalgamation of right wing 'Hate Groups' such as Bob DePugh's Minutemen/Patriotic Party, the American Nazi Party, K.K.K. members, old Silver Shirts, America Firsters."[30] This interpenetration of far-right groups created a complex network transcending narrow ideological boundaries. As an FBI informant observed in 1969: "The 'Militant' element (lunatics) in the various 'far right extremist' groups are taking over control and yearning to spill blood. . . . They can hardly wait until 'blood will flow in the streets.'"[31] Violence, indeed, was not incidental to these organizations but their operative principle.

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The Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, and the contemporary Christian nationalist movement represent not a sudden rupture in American political life but rather the culmination of ideological currents that have flowed beneath the surface of American politics for nearly a century. Understanding these events requires recognizing their deep historical roots, particularly the distinctive fusion of fundamentalist Christianity with paramilitary politics that emerged in the post–World War II era.

The theological framework that animated January 6 participants echoes patterns established decades earlier. When rioters carrying wooden crosses and Christian flags stormed the Capitol, they operated within a perspective that renders compromise not merely difficult but fundamentally sinful. The same logic that once justified calls for violent purification of American society now sanctions resistance to electoral outcomes not merely deemed politically illegitimate but contrary to God.

The Public Religion Research Institute's 2024 survey data reveal how thoroughly this apocalyptic framework has penetrated mainstream political consciousness. Eighty-four percent of those who believe America is a uniquely Christian nation—the essence of Christian nationalism—think that "the final battle between good and evil is upon us, and Christians should stand firm with the full armor of God."[32] More troubling, these same Americans prove roughly twice as likely as others to believe political violence may

30 "Soldiers of the Cross, Dr. Kenneth Goff, Founder, Director," August 31, 1972, Goff, Kenneth–Denver 5, ELC.

31 Untitled memo, October 29, 1969, Goff, Kenneth–Denver 4, ELC.

32 "One Leader Under God: The Connection Between Authoritarianism and Christian Nationalism in America," Public Religion Research Institute, September 10, 2024, https://prri.org/research/one-leader-under-god-the-connection-between-authoritarianism-and-christian-nationalism-in-america/.

be justified. Such findings suggest that what was once on the margins of American political life has penetrated the mainstream. The institutional landscape has evolved dramatically since the crude paramilitarism of the Goff era. Where mid-century Christian extremists organized training camps and militias on society's periphery, today's movement operates through sophisticated political networks embedded within mainstream institutions. Texas exemplifies this transformation, where billionaire donors have constructed integrated networks of think tanks, media organizations, and political action committees advancing Christian nationalist objectives. This represents the sublimation of radical theology into more acceptable forms of political practice.

What distinguishes contemporary Christian nationalism from its historical predecessors is not its ideological core but its mainstream positioning. More than half of Republicans support Christian nationalist beliefs according to recent polling, indicating a successful migration of this ideology from society's margins to its political center. The January 6 defendants' continued portrayal as persecuted Christian patriots—even religious martyrs—rather than criminal actors reflects this theological reframing of political resistance. When 44 percent of Christian nationalism supporters view convicted rioters as "patriots being held hostage by the government," they demonstrate how successfully this movement has maintained its narrative of righteous resistance across generations.[33] Understanding these developments requires recognizing that American democracy faces not merely a political challenge but a theological one—a sustained assault by movements that view pluralistic governance as fundamentally illegitimate when it conflicts with perceived divine imperatives.

The apparent contradiction between fascist tendencies and antistatism that runs like a thread through these movements highlights the distinctive character of the American extreme right, which has historically negotiated the tension between authoritarian impulses and libertarian philosophical commitments through creative ideological amalgamation. This capacity for ideological synthesis—or perhaps more accurately, ideological bricolage—represents one of the most distinctive features of the American far right, distinguishing it from its European counterparts, which have historically embraced state power with fewer qualms and less intellectual contortion. Of course, the antistatism of those who defend the January 6 rioters is conditional. They are, for the most part, only critical of state expansion when it is conducted by their partisan enemies.

Smith, Swift, and Goff were ideological pioneers. Their careers serve as a reminder that fascism was hardly an exclusively European phenomenon, and that its expression was central to the American far right from the New Deal to the present. The ideological apparatus they constructed proved to be less a historical curiosity than a template for subsequent generations of activists. From the mountain compounds of the Aryan

33 Ibid.

Nations to the tactical formations of contemporary Christian militias, the essential architecture remains recognizably theirs. What distinguished these pioneers was their intuitive grasp of American political culture's peculiar traits. They understood that in a society founded on Protestant dissent and revolutionary mythology the most effective path to radical politics lay not through the secular ideologies that animated European fascism but through the sanctification of political violence under the ensign of Christian redemption. Their banner, which might have read *Pro Christo et Patria*, would be taken up with renewed vigor in our own day, summoning a new generation of soldiers—as zealous as their forebears—to final combat with the forces of the Antichrist.