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

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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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*Correspond with us at [jrwseditors@gmail.com](mailto:jrwseditors@gmail.com)  
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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 1)

Guest Editors: Olivier Burtin and Kathryn Olmsted

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Natalie Harp is Donald Trump's constant companion. In the White House and on the road, she surfs right-wing websites, printing and handing the president a steady stream of Trump-favorable reportage and sycophancy. This is the stuff of Trump's gaslighting—his successful assertion of “alternative facts” that has kept his MAGA base in thrall for a decade.

Eleven months into his second presidency, cracks are appearing in this cultish support. Persistent inflation and rising unemployment rock Trump's claims about the “greatest economy.” Military adventures overseas rock the promises of America First foreign policy. More and more, it seems, MAGA voices are saying this is not what they voted for. Unprecedented resistance—deep red Indiana's defiance of Trump's gerrymandering demands!—is appearing in the heart of the Republican Party. MAGA's refusal to capitulate to Trump's backtracking on releasing the Epstein files now seems to have been a gateway drug to overcoming devotion to Trump's fictions.

Currently MAGA faces the arrival in full of tariff-inspired inflation and ruinous health insurance costs. Can denial or routine bromides like scapegoating immigrants withstand the unparalleled challenge the material world is now presenting Trumpism? Does reality in fact bat last? Can Trump's astounding ability to survive politically through impeachment, loosing a mob on the Capitol, felony conviction, and unmatched self-dealing hold? Testing these questions seems to be in the offing.

In this context, looking back at the history of the right wing in America—its persistence, its successes, and its failures—seems particularly opportune. This is the aim of this special double issue of the *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*, guest edited by Olivier Burtin and Kathryn Olmsted. We invite our readers to consider the articles here as contributing to collective understanding of both our past and present.

Lawrence Rosenthal

December 16, 2025

## INTRODUCTION

## When the Radical Becomes Ordinary

### *A State of the Field of the Far Right in US History*

OLIVIER BURTIN

Université de Picardie Jules Vernes

In the spring of 2017, the historian of conservatism Rick Perlstein published a remarkable essay in the *New York Times Magazine* explaining how he and his peers had failed to anticipate the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Over the previous two decades, professional historians had crafted a narrative of the rise of the conservative movement that played down the role of its irrational, conspiratorial, and hate-filled elements, preferring instead to stress the significance of more respectable actors like the founder of the *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., or the middle-class housewives of southern California. In so doing, Perlstein found that the gatekeepers of America's past had proved "too credulous," failing to understand how the mainstream conservative movement could produce "a man like Trump," who defied so many of the expectations of polite society and yet still managed to enter the White House. For historians to better grasp the foundation of Trumpism, he concluded, "[t]hey'll need instead to study conservative history's political surrealists and intellectual embarrassments, its con artists and tribunes of white rage."<sup>1</sup>

Over eight years on, that advice has not gone unheeded. From our current vantage in 2025, it is clear that historians have worked to redress the blind spots Perlstein diagnosed, pulling the far right out of the shadows and placing it closer to the heart of the narrative of modern American life. Our special issue seeks to take stock of that shift: its insights, its limitations, and the terrain it has yet to cover. This introduction both surveys where the field stands and suggests where it could go next.

Many of the conceptual challenges we now face are far from novel. Much of today's scholarship and public debate around the far right echoes arguments that stretch back to the movement's earliest roots in American history. Scholars have long struggled to name the ideas, figures, and currents that stand beyond the boundaries of political convention. Are we dealing with "extremism," "radicalism," "populism," or even "fascism"? Can such

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1 Rick Perlstein, "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong," *New York Times Magazine*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/magazine/i-thought-i-understood-the-american-right-trump-proved-me-wrong.html>.

boundaries be clearly drawn at all, or are the far right and the political mainstream inextricably entwined? These are not sterile semantic quarrels, for the answers we give to these questions shape our view of this tradition's place in American life. Is the far right better understood as a pathology of the marginal, a last stand of those who cannot adapt to change? Or does it speak for the fears and ambitions of comfortable groups intent on defending a particular vision of order?

These questions have fueled an interdisciplinary debate that reaches back at least to the interwar years. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the emergence of various fascist groups stirred a wave of inquiry during this period, from both inside and outside of the ivory tower, into what was not yet called the far right but already had a deep influence on American politics. Much of this early work was soon eclipsed by a cohort of liberal intellectuals who, reacting to the Second Red Scare of the late 1940s and 1950s, cast far-right mobilizations as outbursts of psychological fragility, status anxiety, or irrational fear, crafting a framework that would long dominate public discourse even as it met with swift resistance in academic circles. As Perlstein observed in his essay, historians pushed back against this dismissive reading by emphasizing the far right's entanglement with larger currents of American political and cultural life. This revision was both timely and essential. Yet in their eagerness to highlight the movement's ordinariness, later accounts often swung too far in the opposite direction, downplaying the extent to which it sometimes embraced exclusionary and authoritarian ideologies, as if one could not be both mainstream and racist, respectable and extremist, ordinary and radical.

This reluctance to confront the normality of extremism reflects a deeper unease: the possibility that authoritarianism and violence may not represent a rupture from liberal democracy but rather an enduring feature of it—or at the very least, that these seemingly opposing forces have long coexisted more seamlessly than we are willing to admit. Recent scholarship in US history and political science underscores this point, yet the dilemma is hardly confined to America.<sup>2</sup> It lies at the heart of the broader field of right-wing studies, which continues to wrestle with the question of whether such movements should be seen as marginal disruptions in “otherwise stable, pluralistic, and egalitarian democratic societies,” or as revealing “core contradictions and repressive tendencies” embedded within the liberal democratic order itself.<sup>3</sup> As political scientist Cas Mudde has argued, the very opposition between pathology and normalcy can be misleading. Rather than treating far-right movements as aberrant outliers that gain popularity only under crisis conditions, he proposed that they may be better understood as a radicalization of ideas and attitudes that

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2 Steven Hahn, *Illiberal America: A History* (W. W. Norton, 2024); Jefferson Cowie, *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* (Basic Books, 2022); Desmond King, “American Political Violence (The Government and Opposition / Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2023),” *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 2 (2025): 289–312.

3 A. J. Bauer, Isis Giraldo, and Clara Juarez Miro, “Introduction—The Curse of Relevance: Challenges Facing Right-Wing Studies,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 7–8.

are already widely shared within democratic societies. From this perspective, the far right does not stand apart from the mainstream but instead amplifies its latent contradictions.<sup>4</sup>

One final point before diving in: The purpose of this introduction is not to rehash the “fascism debate” that erupted after Trump’s first presidential campaign and has since dominated much of the discourse about the far right, but rather to deflate that controversy by historicizing it and exposing its blind spots. To its credit, the debate rekindled interest in the subject and contributed to a growing recognition that the United States has not been immune to fascism; it erred, however, in its original premise that this was a tradition alien to American soil, one that had been scarcely studied and was largely irrelevant to US history. As we shall see, this view disregarded a substantial body of scholarship that has long traced the careers of American fascists and neofascists from the interwar period onward, while probing the unsettling parallels between fascist ideology and figures not typically labeled as such, such as Huey Long or the militia movements of the 1990s. It is true that much of this work had remained at the margins of the broader historiography, and that many (though not all) of these scholars ultimately declined to frame these movements fully within a fascist paradigm. Yet in hindsight, what is most striking is not the reluctance to apply the label outright but rather the recurring sense that it deserved serious discussion. More than a few scholars have shown that fascism was not a fleeting influence but a real, if only partial, presence in the broader fabric of the US far right. The United States was never immune to the ideological currents that swept the twentieth century, including its most radical.

To make sense of how historians have wrestled with these conceptual and political challenges, this essay first turns its attention to the historiography. By tracing how public and scholarly debates have unfolded since the interwar years, we can begin to see how historical interpretations have shifted alongside broader political transformations, with each generation redefining the terms of the discussion. The essay will then explore matters of definition before suggesting some fertile grounds for future inquiry.

### **From the Margins to the Mainstream: A Century of Scholarship on the Far Right**

Ours is hardly the first generation to discover the presence of the right in the United States. As Leo Ribuffo once wrote, “the study of Americans who were conservatives by some plausible set of criteria is as old if not older than the professional study of United States history.”<sup>5</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, elite conservative figures occupied a central place within the dominant interpretative framework of the progressive school,

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4 Cas Mudde, “The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy,” *West European Politics* 33, no. 6 (2010): 1,167–86.

5 Leo P. Ribuffo, “The Discovery and Rediscovery of American Conservatism Broadly Conceived,” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 2 (2003): 5.

which viewed US history as an enduring struggle between popular democratic forces and entrenched interests.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, scholars in other disciplines began to turn their attention to newer and more radical manifestations, such as the second Ku Klux Klan. At the height of its influence in the wake of World War I, Dartmouth sociologist John Mecklin offered a diagnosis that was as condescending as it was influential, attributing its rise largely to the “well-meaning but more or less ignorant and unthinking middle class” of small Southern towns, governed by “a provincial fear of all things foreign” and a stifling urge to conform.<sup>7</sup> This reading captured the public view of the Klan in those years.<sup>8</sup>

The following decade brought a surge of interest in fascism, both abroad and at home, as the Great Depression led many to fear that America itself might be drifting toward authoritarian rule. Some, like the prominent journalist Raymond Gram Swing, warned darkly that “fascism lies ahead for America,” while others, such as Lawrence Dennis, whom *Life* later called “America’s No. 1 intellectual Fascist,” openly embraced the prospect.<sup>9</sup> The conversation spilled across popular culture and politics alike: films such as *The President Vanishes* (1934), inspired by the so-called Business Plot against Roosevelt, and *Black Legion* (1937), starring Humphrey Bogart, dramatized domestic fascist threats, while the McCormack-Dickstein Committee conducted hearings in 1934 investigating the activities of various homegrown fascist groups. In academic circles, the debate remained cautious. Writing in the *American Political Science Review*, H. Arthur Steiner noted for instance certain parallels between American right-wing movements and aspects of European fascism but nonetheless concluded that, in the United States, these movements amounted to “little more than an ebullient justification of economic reaction, to the fanfare of much waving of the flag and playing of the Star Spangled Banner.”<sup>10</sup> In this, he echoed Marxist analysts like Lewis Corey, who saw fascism as a tool of the “upper bourgeoisie,” mobilizing the “petty-bourgeois masses (including the agrarian) . . . to act as a counter-revolutionary mass force.”<sup>11</sup> The writer Sinclair Lewis, in his best-selling satire

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6 The most influential version of this school was expressed in Charles A. Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (Macmillan, 1927).

7 John Moffatt Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (Harcourt, Brace, 1924), 101, 103, 107.

8 See for instance Frank Tannenbaum, *Darker Phases of the South* (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924); Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (Harcourt, Brace, 1929).

9 Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (Julian Messner, 1935), 32; “The Ism of Appeasement,” *Life*, January 20, 1941; Lawrence Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism* (Harper & Brothers, 1936); on Dennis, see Gerald Horne, *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States* (New York University Press, 2006).

10 H. Arthur Steiner, “Fascism in America?,” *American Political Science Review* 29, no. 5 (1935): 830.

11 Lewis Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism* (Covici, Friede, 1934), 511.

*It Can't Happen Here* (1935), similarly traced the appeal of fascism to the frustrations of the lower middle class.<sup>12</sup>

Amid these anxieties, a distinct tradition of “right-watchers” began to take shape. Drawing inspiration from the muckraking journalism of the Progressive Era, they formed a loose network of journalists, activists, and public intellectuals who devoted themselves to monitoring the far right and sounding the alarm about its growth. Already in the late 1930s, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis—a coalition of scholars, educators, and journalists—sought to expose the mechanics of propaganda produced on both extremes of the political spectrum and to educate the public about its dangers. Funded in part by progressive philanthropist Edward Filene, the institute’s work laid the foundation for more targeted efforts in the following decade, including Dorothy Parker’s Voice of Freedom Committee, which tracked the rise of right-wing radio demagogues, and George Seldes’s *In Fact* newsletter, a pioneering venture in investigative press criticism.<sup>13</sup> Some took even more daring steps: After four years infiltrating domestic fascist groups such as the Christian Front, Arthur Derounian—writing under the pseudonym John Roy Carlson—published *Under Cover* (1943), a sensational and best-selling account of the far-right underground.<sup>14</sup> Others pursued quieter but no less vital work. Upon returning from service in the Pacific after World War II, Gordon Hall began collecting printed propaganda from what he saw as “extremist” groups on both the left and the right, building an archive that would eventually become the Hall-Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda at Brown University, which remains a crucial resource for scholars investigating the history of the US far right today.

While World War II delivered a major blow to both foreign and domestic advocates of fascism, it did little to dispel lingering fears that authoritarian tendencies might resurface on American soil. In the postwar years, the specter of fascism remained a potent reference point, especially among liberals and progressives who viewed the Second Red Scare with growing alarm. Veterans’ organizations such as the American Legion, which rallied behind the Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy, became lightning rods for accusations that fascist impulses were once again taking root—this time under the guise of patriotic anti-communism.<sup>15</sup> McCarthy’s assaults frequently targeted the “East Coast

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12 Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (Doubleday, Doran, 1935).

13 J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); A. J. Bauer, “Agent and Archive: Chip Berlet and the Historicity of Right-Watchers,” in *Exposing the Right and Fighting for Democracy: Celebrating Chip Berlet as Journalist and Scholar*, ed. Pam Chamberlain et al. (Routledge, 2022).

14 John Roy Carlson, *Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld of America* (E. P. Dutton, 1943).

15 Justin Gray, “The Legion’s Americanism,” *New Republic* 119, no. 3 (1948): 19–21.

establishment” and in particular the academic world, denouncing professors as subversive “fellow travelers” corrupting America’s youth.<sup>16</sup>

It was in response to these attacks, and to the broader climate of repression they fostered, that a group of prominent liberal intellectuals such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer, Peter Viereck, and Talcott Parsons began, in the mid-1950s, to craft a new interpretation of the far right. Building on many of the themes already circulating in earlier debates, this framework would come to dominate scholarly and public understandings of the far right for much of the next half century. Combining psychological theories with a dismissive view of conservatives as marginal and irrational actors, they introduced concepts like “status anxiety” (the idea that some middle-class groups that had recently achieved this status now feared displacement) and “pseudoconservatism” (a notion first articulated by Theodor Adorno to designate individuals defending American traditions in ways that undermined liberal democratic norms). Richard Hofstadter later added the influential concept of the “paranoid style” to describe conspiratorial and apocalyptic tendencies in American political culture, linking McCarthyism, the Populists of the 1890s, the second Ku Klux Klan, and the John Birch Society as expressions of the same anti-elitist but irrational tradition. These interpretations, which pathologized far-right politics as emotional and incoherent, were central to works like Bell’s edited collection, *The New American Right* (1955), and Lipset and Earl Raab’s *The Politics of Unreason* (1970).<sup>17</sup>

Together, they offered what later scholars called the “centrist/extremist” model, which posits mainstream liberal democracy as fundamentally sound and stable, with threats coming primarily from “extreme” groups outside the political center.<sup>18</sup> This approach was never consensual. As early as the 1950s, scholars like Morris Janowitz and Morris Schonbach, who conducted extensive primary research, rejected the notion that far-right leaders were psychologically disturbed outliers, arguing instead that these movements had significant popular appeal and ideological coherence.<sup>19</sup> Despite these challenges, the mid-century centrist/extremist model left a lasting imprint on both academic and public discourse. Hofstadter’s and Bell’s diagnoses are routinely exhumed in moments of right-

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16 Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

17 Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunskwik, Daniel Levinson, Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Harper, 1950); Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (Criterion Books, 1955); Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (Knopf, 1965); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1977* (Harper & Row, 1970).

18 Eric Ward, ed., *Conspiracies: Real Grievances, Paranoia, and Mass Movements* (Peanut Butter Pub, 1996), 121; Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, introduction to *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (Guilford, 2000).

19 Morris Janowitz, “Black Legions on the March,” in *America in Crisis: Fourteen Crucial Episodes in American History*, ed. Daniel Aaron (Knopf, 1952), 318; Morris Schonbach, *Native American Fascism during the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of Its Roots, Its Growth, and Its Decline* (Garland, 1985), 2–3, 28–29, 32.

wing ferment, from Goldwater's rise in 1964 to the Religious Right of the late twentieth century and the eruption of the Tea Party movement in 2009.<sup>20</sup> By casting the far right chiefly in psychological or pathological terms, their work reinforced the longstanding tendency to downplay or even ignore the intellectual sophistication of some of its thinkers.

Despite their long afterlife, the core interpretations of liberal intellectuals were quickly dismissed by academic specialists. As New Left scholars were the first to point out, the claim that the Populist movement of the 1890s spawned the post-1945 "radical right" was misleading, as was Hofstadter's portrayal of conspiratorial antisemitism as the core of Populism. A wave of research dismantled these assumptions and shifted the focus back to Populism's serious, left-wing, and egalitarian agenda.<sup>21</sup> Scholars of the Second Red Scare likewise challenged the use of a psychological lens to understand McCarthyism by pointing to the movement's partisan dynamics as a Republican strategy to undermine the New Deal coalition.<sup>22</sup>

In hindsight, we can say that the sharp scholarly recoil against the mid-century accounts of Bell and Hofstadter may have overcorrected. In their eagerness to rescue the Populists from caricature, for instance, some scholars edged toward hagiography, downplaying the movement's more unsavory currents. The Populists were not uniquely antisemitic or conspiratorially minded compared to many of their fin-de-siècle contemporaries—indeed, in some respects, they were less so. Yet they were hardly immune to such impulses either, and efforts to cast them solely as virtuous tribunes of the people risk substituting one distortion for another.<sup>23</sup> Some of the key analytical tools advanced by liberal intellectuals in the 1950s have likewise proved surprisingly durable. What mid-century thinkers described as "status anxiety" is now more commonly recognized as the fear of social displacement, a key engine of far-right mobilization.<sup>24</sup> What was once dismissed as evidence of a "paranoid style" is today seen as constitutive of "affective polarization," as scholars have increasingly acknowledged the centrality of resentment and

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20 Aside from Hofstadter's essay collection *Paranoid Style*, see Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right*, expanded ed. (Doubleday, 1964); Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right*, 3rd ed. (Transaction Publishers, 2002); Richard Hofstadter, *Hofstadter: Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Uncollected Essays 1956–1965*, ed. Sean Wilentz (Library of America, 2020); Richard Hofstadter, *Le style paranoïaque: Théories du complot et droite radicale en Amérique*, ed. Philippe Raynaud, trans. Julien Charnay (François Bourin Editeur, 2012).

21 For a recent overview of the evolution of this debate, see Charles Postel, "Populism as a Concept and the Challenge of U.S. History," *IdeAs. Idées d'Amérique*, no. 14 (2019): 14.

22 Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (MIT Press, 1967).

23 Robert D. Johnston, "The Age of Reform: A Defense of Richard Hofstadter Fifty Years On," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6, no. 2 (2007): 127–37.

24 See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New Press, 2016).

negative emotion in politics.<sup>25</sup> Most presciently, Bell and Hofstadter were right to alert us to the “illiberal, intolerant, and bigoted in democratic mass movements,” which is once again plainly visible.<sup>26</sup> In their haste to redeem “the people,” their New Left critics often overlooked the authoritarian and violent impulses that can accompany populist politics.

This ambivalence toward popular movements, particularly those perceived as illiberal, persisted from the 1970s through the 1990s. During this period, scholars of the far right gravitated primarily toward two interwar phenomena: the second Ku Klux Klan and the constellation of right-wing activists who emerged in the 1930s. Let us examine both in turn.

The interest in grassroots movements and social history that emerged in the 1960s reshaped the historiography of the second Ku Klux Klan. In contrast to the dismissive portrayal advanced by Mecklin in the 1920s, historians of this later period offered a more nuanced account.<sup>27</sup> Leading this revisionist turn was Leonard Moore, who offered a “populist revision” of Klan historiography in the early 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Building on recent scholarship, Moore argued that the second Klan should not be seen as a fringe movement defined solely by radicalism and persecution, but rather as a relatively conventional social organization with broad appeal among white Protestants. While he acknowledged regional variations in the Klan’s character and activity, Moore emphasized that in Indiana—perhaps the center of the group’s influence in the 1920s, and the focus of Moore’s own research—it functioned less as a violent vigilante group or a bastion of Protestant fundamentalism than as a civic and fraternal institution. Its primary functions, he argued, lay in organizing public spectacles, fostering community cohesion, and engaging in philanthropic endeavors.<sup>29</sup> Moore went so far as to contend that the Indiana Klan “is best understood not as a nativist . . . but rather as a populist organization,” defining it as a movement concerned “primarily not with persecuting ethnic minorities but with promoting the ability of average citizens to influence the workings of society and government.”<sup>30</sup> Although he did not ignore examples of the Klan’s intolerance, Moore tended to treat them as marginal to

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25 On affective polarization, see for instance Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.

26 Gary Marotta, “Richard Hofstadter’s Populist Problem and His Identity as a Jewish Intellectual,” in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, ed. John Abromeit, York Norman, Gary Marotta, and Bridget María Chesterton (Bloomsbury, 2016), 113.

27 David Harry Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 204; Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, chapter 4.

28 Leonard J. Moore, “Historical Interpretations of the 1920’s Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision,” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 341; Leonard Joseph Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991). For another representative of this approach, see Shawn Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (University of Illinois Press, 1992).

29 Moore, “Historical Interpretations,” 350–52.

30 Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 11.

the organization's appeal. In his effort to underscore the group's mainstream character, he seemed reluctant to fully reckon with the extent to which bigotry and exclusion were not anecdotal but constitutive elements of the Klan's vision of civic belonging.

The interpretations of this "populist" school were never widely accepted. As early as the mid-1960s, some scholars had already begun to move beyond the artificial binary between civic respectability and ideological extremism. Writing only a few years after Hannah Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), one historian described Klansmen as "deeply anxious men" who were not pathologically monstrous but rather emblematic of the "banality of evil." He portrayed the second Klan as a "counterrevolutionary movement" whose emphasis on racial purity, ethnonationalist nostalgia, and the exclusion of perceived outsiders would, "if spawned in Europe," have rightfully earned it "the designation 'fascist.'"<sup>31</sup> Nancy MacLean extended this line of analysis three decades later, insisting that the Klan's appeal lay precisely in its ability to be both ordinary and extreme. Far from being merely a channel for civic engagement or communal energy, the organization was also animated by racism and violence. Like her predecessor, MacLean drew explicit parallels between the second Klan and the fascist movements of interwar Europe, noting shared ideological themes, overlapping social bases, and common origins in periods of "class polarization" and postwar dislocation.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Glenn Feldman emphasized the centrality of violence in the Klan's identity, characterizing it as "the most visible, resilient, and terrible version of fascism that America has ever produced."<sup>33</sup>

These contrasting views notwithstanding, the same tendency to understate the radical and violent potential of far-right movements also marked the body of works that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s on the constellation of activists who constituted the 1930s American right. These studies decisively rejected the centrist/extremist framework. In his examination of George Sylvester Viereck, the German-American poet and writer who used congressional franking privileges to disseminate Nazi propaganda in the United States, Neil Johnson argued for instance that the man did not fit the mold of Adorno's "authoritarian personality." Far from being "rigid and unimaginative," "herd minded," or a "moral purist," Viereck defied the profile: he had neither suffered under a domineering father nor emerged from a lower middle class gripped by fears of proletarianization.<sup>34</sup> Leo Ribuffo offered a similarly revisionist perspective in his landmark study of the "Protestant Far Right" of the 1930s, where he focused on William Dudley Pelley, Gerald

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31 Robert Moats Miller, "The Ku Klux Klan," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and Everett Walters (Ohio State University Press, 1965), 228.

32 Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 181–82.

33 Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915–1949* (University of Alabama Press, 1999), 1.

34 Niel M. Johnson, *George Sylvester Viereck: German-American Propagandist* (University of Illinois Press, 1972), 263–64.

B. Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith. Rejecting reductive psychologizing, Ribuffo stressed how their ideas “often converged with the cultural and political mainstream,” particularly in their propensity to draw on broader streams of anti-communism, antisemitism, and conspiratorial thinking that were deeply embedded in public life.<sup>35</sup> Decades later, Ribuffo underscored the central insight of his work—that, “for good or ill, the center in practice is rarely sealed off from the so-called extremes.” The boundaries separating far-right demagogues from respectable conservatives, or genteel antisemitism from its more virulent and violent variants, were in his view far more permeable than typically acknowledged.<sup>36</sup>

Like Moore before him, Ribuffo approached his subject with a marked ambivalence, stopping short of fully reckoning with the far right’s radicalism. In an effort to counter the tendency of contemporary critics to portray far-right figures as mere pawns of a foreign conspiracy, Ribuffo drew on previous scholarship that emphasized their American roots and agency.<sup>37</sup> He went one step further, however, in arguing that these figures were victims of what he termed a “Brown Scare,” in which adversaries of the far right “often exaggerated both its power and its Axis connections” in order to facilitate its repression. According to Ribuffo, this exaggeration “set precedents” for the suppression of domestic dissent during the Second Red Scare by curtailing “expressions that were only distantly dangerous or merely obnoxious.”<sup>38</sup> While Ribuffo was right to expose the sensationalist tone that often infused liberal and left-wing exposés like Derounian’s *Under Cover*, he erred in the other direction, downplaying the ideological extremism of figures such as Pelley, Winrod, and Smith. Rather than reckoning with the ways their ideas strained, and at times broke, the bounds of liberal democratic politics, he cast them as eccentric outgrowths of familiar traditions. In doing so, he minimized the degree to which their critics had legitimate

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35 Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 1983), xii.

36 Leo P. Ribuffo, “Retrospective Roundtable on Leo Ribuffo’s *Old Christian Right*: Final Entry from Ribuffo,” *Society for US Intellectual History* (blog), December 9, 2018, <https://s-usih.org/2018/12/retrospective-roundtable-on-leo-ribuffos-old-christian-right-final-entry-from-ribuffo/>.

37 For early scholarship on the Nazi movement in the interwar United States, see Susan Canedy, *America’s Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma, A History of the German American Bund* (Markgraf Publications Group, 1990); Dieter Berninger, “Milwaukee’s German-American Community and the Nazi Challenge of the 1930’s,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 71, no. 2 (1987): 118–42; Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924–1941* (Cornell University Press, 1974); Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler’s Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Kennikat Press, 1973); Leland V. Bell, “The Failure of Nazism in America: The German American Bund, 1936–1941,” *Political Science Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (1970): 585–99. On Italian American fascists, see Luciano J. Iorizzo, “Fascism,” in *The Italian American Experience: An Encyclopedia* (Garland Publishing, 2000); Luca de Caprariis, “‘Fascism for Export’? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani All’Estero,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 151–83; Philip V. Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921–1929* (Bordighera, 1999); John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton University Press, 1972); Alan Cassels, “Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties,” *American Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (1964): 707–12.

38 Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 178, 215.

reasons to sound the alarm, especially without our benefit of hindsight.<sup>39</sup> By advancing the concept of a “Brown Scare,” Ribuffo inadvertently reinforced his peers’ reluctance to treat the far right as a serious subject of historical inquiry. Influenced by his analysis, the few historians who did engage with the topic concluded that fascism had never posed any real threat in the United States.<sup>40</sup>

In his classic *Voices of Protest* (1983), which explored the lives of Huey Long and Charles Coughlin, Alan Brinkley was slightly more critical. Even as some aspects of his analysis echoed that of mid-century liberals—he argued that many of Long and Coughlin’s ideas were rooted in the Populist tradition and that their followers were largely middle-class people afraid of losing their hard-won status—Brinkley also stressed that their ideology was neither irrational nor insignificant. More importantly, he noted the ambivalent and evolving character of their views, which he recognized as bearing strong similarities with fascism. Both men, he wrote, appealed to “the idea of the traditional, rooted community and the special virtues of the common people,” focused on “the dangers posed by distant, hidden forces,” and displayed clear “hostility toward ‘internationalism.’” The parallel went even further for Coughlin, who in the late 1930s veered toward overt antisemitism and openly praised fascism. It was little surprise, then, that many domestic fascists saw these two figures as the likeliest candidates for leadership of their movement. Although Brinkley concluded that Long and Coughlin were not “fascists in any meaningful sense of the term,” his analysis also demonstrated the many overlaps between this tradition and populism.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time as historians of the second Ku Klux Klan and of the 1930s far right debated whether these movements should be considered fringe and whether to label them fascist, the scholarship on mainstream conservatism was undergoing a remarkable transformation, moving from the periphery to the center of the historical profession. In the decade following Ronald Reagan’s election to the White House in 1980, many historians seeking to understand the roots of the “conservative revolution” that he embodied still operated within the intellectual framework established by mid-century intellectuals. Though they rejected their predecessors’ “dismissive and condescending attitudes,” they continued to interpret conservatism primarily as a form of populist backlash, emphasizing how opposition to civil rights and liberalism in the late 1960s and 1970s had driven many

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39 On this point, see Alex McPhee-Browne, “Reimagining the Far Right,” *Reviews in American History* 51, no. 3 (2023): 305–9.

40 Peter H. Amann, “A ‘Dog in the Nighttime’ Problem: American Fascism in the 1930s,” *History Teacher* 19, no. 4 (1986): 559–84; Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Glen Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers’ Movement and World War II* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 179.

41 Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (Knopf, 1982), 278–79, 282.

white workers to the right.<sup>42</sup> The turning point came in the 1990s, when historians finally acknowledged the centrality of conservatism in US politics and the need to accord it serious scholarly attention.<sup>43</sup> Energized by the simultaneous revival of political history, a new generation of scholars moved past the focus on “Reagan Democrats,” tracing the roots of the conservative movement back to the 1930s and 1940s, and examining the interplay between formal politics and a broader constellation of actors, including grassroots activists, intellectual currents, institutions, and organizations.<sup>44</sup>

Scholarship on the far right was not exempt from these broader intellectual shifts. In the 1990s, for example, Philip Jenkins published a remarkable local study of the “extreme right” in Pennsylvania from 1925 to 1950, in which he rejected both the centrist/extremist model and the “Brown Scare” framework. While acknowledging the limited size of this movement, he emphasized that it “genuinely had a political base.” He rejected the exaggerations of its contemporary critics but found that there were nonetheless “dozens of extremist groups on the far Right, forming an interlocking network” that “operated as a recognized presence within the ‘normal’ landscape of social and political life” during this period. He also criticized American historians for their reluctance to view these far-right movements as part of a broader international phenomenon, with parallels in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.<sup>45</sup> Turning to a later period, Frederick Simonelli’s 1999 biography of George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party, was the first comprehensive scholarly work dedicated to neo-Nazism in the United States. His study underscored Rockwell’s significance in shaping the modern far right, pushing back against his frequent dismissal as a mere eccentric. The biography highlighted his pivotal role in popularizing the “white power” slogan, promoting Holocaust denial, and forging connections with the nascent Christian Identity (CI) movement.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, the rise of CI to prominence within the far right during the 1980s and 1990s, epitomized by the central role of Richard Butler’s Aryan Nations compound in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, catalyzed a series of scholarly works that, much like Ribuffo’s exploration

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42 Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (2011): 726.

43 On this shift, see Michael Kazin, “The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century,” *American Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (1992): 136–55; Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 409–29; Leo P. Ribuffo, “Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 438–49.

44 On this revival, see Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

45 Philip Jenkins, *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania, 1925–1950* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 5–6, 8–9, 23.

46 Frederick J. Simonelli, *American Fuehrer: George Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party* (University of Illinois Press, 1999).

of the interwar period, emphasized the influence of religion. One of the earliest to tackle this subject was James Aho, whose sociological study situated CI within the broader context of the Religious Right, framing the former as the more “extremist” wing of this larger movement.<sup>47</sup> A few years later, Michael Barkun traced CI’s roots back to British Israelism (the belief, originating in the seventeenth century, that Anglo-Saxons were the true descendants of the biblical Israelites), its spread to the East Coast during the Gilded Age, and its increasing embrace of overt antisemitic rhetoric as it migrated westward in the 1930s and 1940s. Over time, this belief system shifted from upholding the status quo to advocating for revolutionary insurrection.<sup>48</sup> Expanding the scope further, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Mattias Gardell examined the influence of neopaganism and esoteric cults such as Wotansvolk and the Church of the Creator, which not only provided theological underpinnings for ideologies that championed Aryan supremacy but also linked the US far-right struggle to similar movements across Europe.<sup>49</sup>

In the 2000s and early 2010s, the scholarship on conservatism came to the forefront of the profession. New works shed light on the roots of the movement not only before the backlash of the 1970s but also in some of the more prosperous areas of the country, particularly in the post–World War II Sunbelt. Studies of groups like Young Americans for Freedom, which served as training grounds for a new generation of conservative activists in the 1950s and 1960s, embraced Ribuffo’s view that the far right was never hermetically sealed from the mainstream, stressing “the overlapping concerns and personae that linked the organizations once seen as radical to the more respectable and electorally oriented Right.”<sup>50</sup> In her classic study of grassroots conservatives in Orange County, California, Lisa McGirr noted the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries between the extremes and the center, for even “conservatives who embraced conspiratorial thinking shared a sufficient set of complaints, assumptions, and common enemies that united them with their more ‘respectable’ cohorts in one movement.” In reaction to the tendency in public discourse to paint anyone voicing clearly conservative views as “far right” or “ultraconservative,” she argued that such terms “should be limited to white supremacist, paramilitary, and fascist fringe groups like the KKK and the Minute Men, groups that stepped outside of

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47 James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (University of Washington Press, 1990).

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

49 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York University Press, 2002); Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Duke University Press, 2003).

50 Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism,” 728. For works on YAF, see Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York University Press, 1999); John Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (Rutgers University Press, 1997).

democratic political processes to achieve their goals.”<sup>51</sup> Such organizations continued to attract relatively little scholarly attention. Preoccupied with dismantling the condescending yet still influential assumptions of mid-century intellectuals, most historians followed in McGirr’s footpath and sought to display empathy toward their subjects by concentrating “on elements of the Right they felt able to normalize, if not to endorse.”<sup>52</sup> In doing so, they often drew sharp distinctions between groups, ideas, and figures situated closer to the political mainstream and the more radical or conspiratorial elements relegated to its radical fringes, whose role they tended to minimize.

The scholarship on the militia movement provides a clear example of this dynamic. Emerging from the Minutemen of the 1960s and the Posse Comitatus of the 1970s and 1980s, modern-day militias gained prominence in the early 1990s, following the events at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, as well as the passage of the federal assault weapons ban under President Bill Clinton. Catherine Stock, for instance, characterized the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing as the latest manifestation of a long tradition of “rural radicalism.” This tradition, she argued, had fostered a strain of “vigilantism and intolerance” dating back to the South Carolina Regulators of the 1760s and reinvigorated during the farm crisis of the 1980s.<sup>53</sup> Darren Mulloy and Evelyn Schlatter, in their studies of the militia movement and white supremacist groups in the western US, focused not on what set these groups apart from mainstream American society but on what they shared, namely a common support for traditional masculinity and a romanticized vision of the American Revolution and the American West.<sup>54</sup> However, some scholars went further and sought to downplay the radical nature of the movement by drawing on Ribuffo’s work. In 2009, Robert Churchill argued that the militia movement had been the victim of a “second American Brown scare,” with left-wing scholars and watchdog groups misleadingly associating it with racism. He contended instead that the militia movement was driven primarily by legitimate opposition to the federal government’s excessive use of force.<sup>55</sup> The effort to soften the militia movement’s radical edge was hardly limited to academic circles. From its emergence in the 1990s, conservative voices in the media and national politics framed its adherents as ordinary American “patriots,” heirs to a venerable

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51 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 10.

52 Samuel Goldman, “The Problem of American Conservatism, Revisited,” *American Political Thought* 13, no. 2 (2024): 242; Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism,” 736.

53 Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: From Bacon’s Rebellion to the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Penguin, 1997), 13.

54 Darren Mulloy, *American Extremism: History, Politics and the Militia Movement* (Routledge, 2004); Evelyn Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970–2000* (University of Texas Press, 2006).

55 Robert H. 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), 9–11.

tradition of armed self-defense stretching back to the Revolution and standing guard against government tyranny.<sup>56</sup> Drawn by the militia's anti-statist and anti-globalization outlook, segments of the left also rallied to its defense, demonstrating once again the cross-partisan appeal of populist rhetoric.<sup>57</sup>

To be sure, such arguments were hardly undisputed. Other historians pointed out that the roots of the militias went back to the mid-century fight against racial integration.<sup>58</sup> In a wide-ranging work of cultural analysis published in 1994, James William Gibson connected the spread of paramilitary groups in the 1980s and 1990s to the humiliating defeat in Vietnam and the backlash against liberalism and feminism, which gave birth to a "New War culture" dominated by *Death Wish*, *Rambo*, and *Dirty Harry*-style figures—aggressive white men who despised liberal elites, rejected all rules of warfare, and fought alone against predominantly nonwhite enemies. Gibson further noted that the tropes of "despair and search for rebirth" that marked this culture were in many ways similar to the "stab-in-the-back" myth that pervaded Weimar Germany after World War I. The cultivation of a male warrior ethos glorifying war and despising political liberalism represented, as he put it, "the core of fascist culture."<sup>59</sup>

The militia movement was not the only far-right campaign in which scholars detected traces of fascism. The same was true of historians who explored the "massive resistance" movement against racial integration in the postwar South, a topic that witnessed renewed attention in the late 1990s and the 2000s.<sup>60</sup> Neo-Nazis were actively involved in this effort as early as the late 1940s, when the Columbians, Inc., a group of young white men, attempted to block the integration of residential neighborhoods in Atlanta by adopting "Nazi-style brown shirts, insignia, militancy, and apocalyptic promises of final, genocidal

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56 For an example of this approach, see Mack Tanner, "Extreme Prejudice: How the Media Misrepresent the Militia Movement," *Reason*, July 1995, 42–48. On the allies of the far right in 1990s Washington, see James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture*, 2nd ed. (Thunder Mouth Press, 1995), 23.

57 Janet Biehl, "The Fallacy of 'Neither Left nor Right': Militia Fever," *Green Perspectives*, Institute for Social Ecology, No. 37, April 1996.

58 Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (Thomas Dunne Books / St. Martin's, 2002).

59 James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* (Hill and Wang, 1994), 32, 117, and esp. chapter 10. Kathleen Belew made a similar argument in *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

60 For early scholarship on this subject, see Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1944–64* (University of Illinois Press, 1971); Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Louisiana State University Press, 1969). For a state of the field in the mid-2000s, see Clive Webb, ed., *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

violence.”<sup>61</sup> In the 1950s, various “rabble rousers,” as Clive Webb has called them, played a key role in energizing grassroots resistance to the civil rights movement across the South by deploying just the kind of populist, overtly racist, and rabidly antisemitic rhetoric that southern Democratic lawmakers were trying to downplay in their own efforts to defend segregation in Congress. One of the leading firebrands in this group was J. B. Stoner, who in 1958 helped found the National States Rights Party, a group that merged Lost Cause and Nazi symbols (its flag featured the SS thunderbolt on top of a Confederate battle-flag motif).<sup>62</sup> Beyond these relatively small organizations, the more outwardly respectable White Citizens’ Council cultivated close ties with the far right, with local members often encouraging or actively engaging in acts of violence against civil rights activists.<sup>63</sup> After its heyday in the mid-1950s, the group continued to be involved in these circles, for instance by helping support George Wallace’s 1968 campaign, building ties to the Klan, or broadcasting radio and TV programs in which it increasingly cloaked its “white supremacist activism in the colorblind rhetoric of conservatism.”<sup>64</sup>

The White Citizens’ Council was one of the chief proponents of what the activist-scholar Leonard Zeskind described as a strategy of “mainstreaming.” In his overlooked yet essential *Blood and Politics* (2009), which remains the most comprehensive survey of white nationalism in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, Zeskind distinguished between “mainstreamers” and “vanguardists.” The former—including the council, Willis Carto, and David Duke—sought to advance their ideas through (mostly) nonviolent advocacy and movement-building within the bounds of the existing legal and political system. By contrast, “vanguardists” such as William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries* (1979), abandoned any hope of winning over more than “a slim minority” of whites and instead sought to “build smaller organizations of highly dedicated cadres with the intention of forcefully dragging the rest of society behind them” through the use of terrorist methods. Zeskind argued that the history of the far right since the 1950s had been marked by a constant oscillation between these two poles. He also emphasized that the movement had never been confined to the margins, despite frequent portrayals in the media to that effect. Rather, “white nationalists look like a demographic slice of

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61 Steven Weisenburger, “The Columbians, Inc.: A Chapter of Racial Hatred from the Post-World War II South,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 4 (2003): 823. See also Robert Pierce Patrick, “A Nail in the Coffin of Racism: The Story of the Columbians,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2001): 245–66.

62 Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

63 McMillen, *Citizens’ Council*, 360; On the role of Leander Perez, leader of the New Orleans Citizens’ Council, in inciting a white mob’s assault on a school administration building in 1960, see Glen Jeansonne, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta*, 2nd ed. (University Press of Mississippi, 2006).

64 Rebecca Brückmann, “Citizens’ Councils, Conservatism and White Supremacy in Louisiana, 1964–1972,” *European Journal of American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 7; Stephanie R. Rolph, *Resisting Equality: The Citizens’ Council, 1954–1989* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018).

white America: mostly blue collar and working middle class with a small number of wealthy individuals.” According to his estimate, their core membership numbered around thirty thousand, with an additional two hundred thousand people occupying the broader “periphery” of the movement.<sup>65</sup>

As the founder of the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights in 1983, Leonard Zeskind belonged to the same tradition of right-watchers that had emerged in the interwar period. This small but active network coalesced in the late twentieth century around several watchdog organizations, including the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Political Research Associates (PRA). Among its leading figures were Ken Stern, who investigated the spread of antisemitism and militia activity for the American Jewish Committee; Mark Potok and Heidi Beirich, who oversaw much of the SPLC’s extensive monitoring of far-right groups; Pam Chamberlain, whose work at PRA’s *The Public Eye* offered critical analyses of Christian nationalism; and Frederick Clarkson, who exposed the rise of dominionist and Christian Reconstructionist movements. Several other activists continued the documentary tradition pioneered by Gordon Hall after World War II. Mark Pitcavage, for instance, built one of the most comprehensive records of militia activity through his *Militia Watchdog* website. After a career in journalism, Wesley McCune founded Group Research Inc. in 1962, which collected materials on the far right for more than four decades. Three years later, Laird Wilcox began donating his collection of extremist publications to the University of Kansas. Today, both McCune’s archive, now housed at Columbia University, and Wilcox’s remain among the most important repositories of material on US political extremism. Ernie Lazar also amassed and digitized a vast trove of primary sources and bibliographies related to extremist organizations across the political spectrum, creating a unique resource that continues to serve journalists and scholars alike.<sup>66</sup> Working largely on their own, these various figures played a crucial role in crafting a nuanced portrait of the far right, emphasizing its factionalism and internal contradictions rather than reducing it to a single monolithic force (today, this tradition continues with podcasts like *Know Your Enemy*).

Although much of their work unfolded outside the confines of academia, these right-watchers were anything but detached from scholarly debates. The most ambitious synthesis of their insights came with *Right-Wing Populism in America* (2000), coauthored by Chip Berlet, a veteran investigative journalist and researcher at PRA, and Matthew Lyons, a longtime analyst of right-wing movements and editor of the antifascist blog *Three Way Fight*. Rejecting the centrist/extremist model, Berlet and Lyons insisted that right-wing populism, defined as the fusion of “attacks on socially oppressed groups with grassroots

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65 Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), xviii–xxi.

66 Lazar’s work is accessible at “CRWS Archives and Resources,” Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, UC Berkeley, accessed June 24, 2025, <https://issi.berkeley.edu/centers/crws/archives>.

mass mobilization and distorted forms of antielitism based on scapegoating,” was not some foreign aberration but was deeply embedded in American political traditions. Far from being irrational fringe elements, these movements drew strength from precarious middle layers of society, notably middle- and working-class whites, as well as disaffected segments of the elite seeking to harness popular resentment for their own ends. Fascism, they argued, represented only the most virulent strain within this larger ecosystem—dangerous not because of its dominance but because of its capacity to interact with and amplify other factions of the right.<sup>67</sup> Their granular mapping of far-right factions did not lose sight of the structural forces that united its various strands. In a 2004 essay, Berlet for instance distinguished between a reformist conservative right (represented by institutions like the GOP and the Heritage Foundation), a dissident right (including the Christian right and militia movements), and an extreme right that openly rejected democracy (such as neo-Nazis and the Klan). While emphasizing the heterogeneity of these currents, Berlet also underscored that they shared not only the same “targets” but also “common styles, frames, and narratives.”<sup>68</sup> In this respect, his work not only echoed earlier left-leaning critiques like Ribuffo’s but helped lay a foundation for much of the scholarship that would follow, even as mainstream academia largely ignored his contributions.

The recognition by scholars such as Zeskind, Berlet, and Lyons that a fascist tradition had long existed on American soil was largely absent from the “fascism debate” that followed Trump’s rise to the presidency in 2016.<sup>69</sup> The iconoclastic style and rhetoric of the forty-fifth president led many commentators to claim that Trump and his supporters were either fascist or harbored fascist potential. Skeptics dismissed these arguments as alarmist, preferring to interpret his ascent through other frameworks—polarization, oligarchy, or democratic backsliding—but both sides shared the mistaken assumption that fascism was a foreign import with no real roots in the United States. Because most of the debate’s leading voices were not specialists on the US far right, they tended to ignore the extensive body of scholarship on the subject. Their arguments, shaped more by present-day political anxieties than by historical research, often strayed far from the archival record. In his study of how the concept of “fascism” has been invoked in US politics and culture since the interwar years, for instance, Bruce Kuklick criticized those who employed the term for projecting the shortcomings of their own democracy onto an external threat, even as he overlooked the reality of American fascists and neo-Nazis after 1945.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately,

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67 Berlet and Lyons, introduction to *Right-Wing Populism*.

68 Abby L. Ferber, “Mapping the Political Right: Gender and Race Oppression in Right-Wing Movements,” in *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, ed. Chip Berlet (Routledge, 2004), 22–25.

69 For a review of this debate, see Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, ed., *Did It Happen Here? Perspectives on Fascism and America* (W. W. Norton, 2024); Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward, introduction to *Fascism in America: Past and Present*, ed. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

70 Bruce Kuklick, *Fascism Comes to America: A Century of Obsession in Politics and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 192.

the debate shed more light on the political divides of the late 2010s and early 2020s than on the history of fascism in the United States. It also underscored the insularity of much US scholarship on the far right, which had remained largely disconnected from broader international debates.

Despite its shortcomings, the fascism debate played a key role in pushing scholars to take the far right more seriously, stimulating new research and bringing greater visibility to existing work. Taken as a whole, this new wave of studies reached several conclusions. It demonstrated, first and foremost, that earlier generations of scholars underestimated the strength of the far right in the United States, both in terms of its membership and of its broader circles of sympathizers within civil society and the state.<sup>71</sup> Second, it revealed that some of the movement's most notorious ideas and slogans—such as “America First”—had far deeper historical roots in popular culture than is commonly assumed.<sup>72</sup> Third, it cast new light on the far right's transnational character, showing that its leaders not only sought ideological inspiration and material support abroad, but that they actively positioned themselves as part of a global struggle against leftist and progressive forces.<sup>73</sup> Fourth, these works challenged the prevailing view that the defeat of fascist regimes in World War II dealt a decisive blow to the movement. They emphasized instead the significant continuities between the “old right,” with its isolationist, antisemitic, and fascist sympathies, and the more outwardly respectable conservative movement that emerged after the war.<sup>74</sup> Finally, even as they pushed back against Ribuffo's tendency to downplay the movement's influence in the interwar period, these scholars agreed with his view that these years did not see clear distinctions between mainstream conservatives and more radical figures.<sup>75</sup> Where earlier historians had tried to normalize the right by emphasizing its internal divisions, this new scholarship followed Perlstein's lead, attempting instead to

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71 See, for instance, Charles R. Gallagher, *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front* (Harvard University Press, 2021); Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler's American Friends: The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2018); Belew, *Bring the War Home*; Steven Joseph Ross, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots Against Hollywood and America* (Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

72 Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: The Entangled History of “America First” and “the American Dream”* (Basic Books, 2018).

73 Joseph Fronczak, “The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right,” *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (2018): 563–88; Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

74 Fronczak, “Fascist Game”; Alex McPhee-Browne, “The Menace of Globalism: Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 2–30.

75 Kim Phillips-Fein, “A Fight Between Two Systems of Thought’: Gerald B. Winrod and the Kansas Senate Race of 1938,” *Journal of American History* 108, no. 3 (2021): 521–44.

de-normalize it by underscoring the ideological affinities, mutual borrowings, and shared impulses that knit its many factions together.<sup>76</sup>

The recent turn toward emphasizing commonalities over distinctions is also evident in the evolving scholarship on anti-communism. Though it was the Second Red Scare that birthed the centrist/extremist model so long dominant in studies of the right, the literature on anti-communism had for decades developed almost entirely apart from the historiography of conservatism.<sup>77</sup> Earlier scholars had often been content to cleave anti-communism in two: a rational, liberal strain deemed responsible, and a more unhinged, reactionary variant consigned to the far right. But this dichotomy has lately come under fire. As Nick Fischer observed, attempts to “unscramble the anticommunist omelet” have largely failed because there was never much of a distinction to begin with. In his account, liberal and conservative anti-communists shared not only principles and tactics but also a remarkable degree of ideological cohesion and institutional continuity, their unity mirroring the very “spider web” metaphor they deployed against their foes.<sup>78</sup> To be sure, some crusaders were more fanatical than others, but anti-communism nevertheless acted as a binding agent that tethered the far right to the political mainstream by providing both with a common enemy, at once imagined and real. Moving away from the long-held focus on the first post-World War II decade, newer scholarship has pushed the origins of anti-communism earlier, challenged the myth of its interwar dormancy, and shown how its fervor outlived McCarthy, providing the scaffolding for modern conservatism.<sup>79</sup> Nowhere is this convergence more visible than in the surge of scholarship on the John Birch Society, which has bridged the gap between histories of anti-communism and studies of the conservative ascendancy.<sup>80</sup>

More broadly, such work has unsettled the familiar narrative of conservatism’s smooth ascent back to power since the 1930s, exposing the movement’s internal contradictions and drawing attention to the actors and ideas that, though often overlooked by the media,

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76 Goldman, “Problem of American Conservatism.”

77 For recent historiographical surveys, see Jennifer Delton, “Rethinking Post-World War II Anti-communism,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 10, no. 1 (2010): 1–41; Marc J. Selverstone, “A Literature So Immense: The Historiography of Anticommunism,” *OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 4 (2010): 7–11.

78 Nick Fischer, *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 80–81, 276–77.

79 Clay Risen, *Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism and the Making of Modern America* (Scribner, 2025); Hubert Villeneuve, *Teaching Anticommunism: Fred Schwarz and American Postwar Conservatism* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020); Robert Justin Goldstein, ed., *Little “Red Scares”: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921–1946* (Ashgate, 2014).

80 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, 2021); D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

have long simmered beneath its public facade.<sup>81</sup> David Walsh has argued that modern conservatism was never hermetically separated from the far right but instead emerged in tandem with it in the 1930s, as both formed a “right-wing popular front” against the New Deal. This ad hoc coalition lasted well into the 1960s, and its collapse was never as complete as “respectable” conservative advocates like William Buckley Jr. sought to portray it to the general public, for far-right voices continued to play a major role in right-wing politics well into the 1990s.<sup>82</sup> John Huntington has made a similar claim, portraying the far right as the “vanguard” of modern conservatism—the source of many of the shock troops, ideas, and organizations that played a crucial role in helping the conservative movement grow—and stressing that there was never a firm dividing line between these two camps.<sup>83</sup> Focusing on Merwin K. Hart, the founder of the National Economic Council and a central figure in right-wing circles from the 1930s to the late 1950s, Alex McPhee-Browne has described him as a “policy entrepreneur, fashioning a range of positions that would later rise to prominence on the right.”<sup>84</sup>

Although scholarship on the far right long predates Trump, his first term marked a turning point. Much like the movement it studies, scholarship on the far right has shifted from the margins to the mainstream since the mid-2010s, and not only in the United States. The creation of this journal in 2023, nearly a decade and a half after the foundation of Berkeley’s Center for Right-Wing Studies, reflects that belated recognition.<sup>85</sup> After neglecting the far right for decades during the Cold War, scholarship is once again in a moment closer to the interwar years, when public discourse was seized by urgent debates over the far right as a looming threat to democracy.

### Contours and Horizons: Rethinking the Far Right

Precisely because there is so much discussion of this topic, it is important to clarify what we mean when we speak of the “far right.” The term itself has become dominant in recent years, replacing substitutes such as “right-wing populism” in the early 2000s, “radical right” in the 1990s, and “extreme right” in the 1980s. Cas Mudde has defined the “far right” in

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81 A.J. Bauer, “The Alternative Historiography of the Alt-Right: Conservative Historical Subjectivity from the Tea Party to Trump,” in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History: Alt/Histories*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (Routledge, 2020).

82 David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024).

83 John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

84 McPhee-Browne, “Menace of Globalism,” 11.

85 Hilal Ahmed, Fred Block, Elisha Bures, et al., “Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023): 2–36. The CRWS was founded in 2009.

opposition to the “mainstream right,” which accepts liberal democracy, and divided the former into two subgroups: the “radical right,” which opposes the checks and balances and rule of law of *liberal* democracy but nonetheless accepts the principle of popular sovereignty and majority rule; and the “extreme right,” which entirely rejects liberalism *and* democracy and calls for revolutionary violence.<sup>86</sup> This definition echoes Berlet’s three-tiered typology but says little about what the far right actually believes in.<sup>87</sup> In their study of the European far right, Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg identify “organicism” (the belief that society functions like a living organism) as the foundation of its worldview. This outlook naturalizes hierarchy and inequality, rejects universalist ideals, and exalts a chosen in-group while defining itself against an excluded other. Far-right movements envision a “closed society” rooted in a mythic past and animated by a redemptive mission. They reject liberal democracy, cast themselves as a new ruling elite, and draw on narratives of decline, lost golden ages, and conspiratorial betrayal to justify their project.<sup>88</sup>

Among the many camps that compose the broad constellation of the US far right, one tradition has drawn particular public and scholarly scrutiny: fascism. While debates over the term often suggest a mire of conceptual confusion, a broad consensus has in fact taken shape in recent decades around the complementary frameworks of Roger Griffin and Robert Paxton. Approaching the question from different angles, both identified fascism as a populist and ultranationalist project of national rebirth, fueled by anxieties of civilizational decay and justified through the embrace of political violence as a means of regeneration.<sup>89</sup> Far from being confined to interwar Europe, this definition has been applied with equal rigor to other contexts such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>90</sup> This more rigorous lens makes clear that fascism, while a valid and necessary category, has historically represented only one faction within the wider far-right spectrum. Other subgroups may pursue parallel aims through more conventional means: electoral politics, gradual reform, or legal manipulation. The dividing line between fascist and non-fascist

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86 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity, 2019), 7.

87 Ferber, “Mapping the Political Right.”

88 Nicolas Lebourg and Jean-Yves Camus, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 21–22.

89 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Routledge, 1993); Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Knopf, 2004).

90 For examples of such works, see Gabriela de Lima Grecco and Leandro Pereira Gonçalves, eds., *Fascismos iberoamericanos* (Alianza Editorial, 2022); Christoph Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag* (Lit Verlag, 2009); Marzia Casolari, *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism* (Routledge, 2020); Maggie Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism: Fascism and Culture in China, 1925–1937* (Duke University Press, 2017); Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

actors, in this sense, lies less in their ultimate visions than in the methods they are willing to employ.

This leads us to the closely related question of the far right's relationship with mainstream politics and with the state itself. Since at least the New Deal, a defining feature of far-right movements in the US has been a deep sense of dispossession: the conviction that they speak for a historically dominant group (white, Christian, heterosexual men) that has been unfairly pushed aside by liberals, Jews, racial minorities, women, and immigrants. Yet while narratives of exclusion and victimhood have been central to the far right's self-understanding, this movement has not always been relegated to the political margins, nor has it invariably positioned itself in opposition to state power. Beyond the obvious example of the present moment, when far-right forces seem in control of both the Republican Party and much of the federal government, history offers other precedents. In the 1920s, for instance, the Ku Klux Klan operated as a kind of "parastate," collaborating with public authorities to violently enforce Prohibition on the ground.<sup>91</sup>

The work of sociologist Sara Diamond and political scientist Ehud Sprinzak can help us overcome this presentist bias. In *Roads to Dominion* (1992), Diamond examined the evolving relationship between right-wing movements and the state, drawing a distinction between the latter's role as an "enforcer of order"—a function the right has typically endorsed—and as a redistributor of wealth and power toward historically marginalized groups, which the right has opposed. So long as the state confined itself to the former function, acting primarily as a guardian of the status quo, right-wing movements generally aligned themselves with it. But when the state sought to reshape existing hierarchies in the name of equity or inclusion, it increasingly became a target of right-wing hostility.<sup>92</sup> Sprinzak touched upon a similar dynamic with his concept of "split delegitimization." While right-wing violence often originates in hostility toward perceived "enemies" within society, such movements become truly radicalized and begin using terrorist violence only once they conclude that the state itself has failed to defend their own in-group.<sup>93</sup> In sum, what defines the far right is not so much its oscillating stance toward the state, which has ranged from confrontation to support, as its persistent rejection of state interventions *perceived* to benefit an illegitimate out-group (even modest or ineffectual efforts to challenge entrenched racial or gender hierarchies can be construed as existential threats provoking outsized responses).

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91 Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (W.W. Norton, 2015), chapter 5. On the concept of "parastate" organizations, see Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (University Press of Kansas, 1994), 18.

92 Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (Guilford, 1995), 6–11.

93 Ehud Sprinzak, "Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of Split Delegitimization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 1 (1995): 17–43.

In closing this discussion of definitions, we should note that an excessive fixation on rigid typologies—drawing firm lines between the groups that count as “far right” and those that do not—would be counterproductive. The political terrain is rarely so neatly divided. Movements shift with the winds of history; some people may grow more moderate while others radicalize; and, crucially, the most consequential actors often operate in the twilight zones where categories blur. In its early years, for instance, the John Birch Society mattered precisely because of its dual identity: it offered extremists a home while projecting just enough mainstream polish to remain within the bounds of respectable conservatism, thus allowing fringe ideologies to migrate into public life. An obsession with taxonomic precision risks missing the forest for the trees, for the purity of a group’s ideology is not always as important as its ability to build bridges between disavowed margins and the political center.

As the study of the far right itself becomes more mainstream, however, it will be important not to lose sight of the actors who remained beyond the pale. It is, after all, the movement’s willingness to embrace seemingly irrational, conspiratorial, or fringe beliefs that gives it much of its radical character and sets it apart from the broader political culture it seeks to subvert. Beginning in the 1970s, skinheads exemplified this dynamic. Emerging from a British tradition and fueled by punk rock, heavy drinking, violence, and hostility to authority, they formed youth subcultures that helped revitalize the far right in the final decades of the twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> Skinhead gangs not only popularized white power and black metal music but also blurred the boundaries between politics and spirituality, with some adherents dabbling in occult traditions or Satanist sects while simultaneously affiliating with neo-Nazi groups.<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, religion remains an area where more research is needed. Scholars have long shown the limits of the conventional wisdom that identifies the US far right as tied to the defense of a conservative version of Christianity—one that, in recent years, has grown increasingly more authoritarian and illiberal.<sup>96</sup> Aside from Nordic paganism or occult hybrids, many of its members have found inspiration in the esoteric doctrines of traditionalism, a diffuse intellectual current. Rooted in the early twentieth-century writings of René Guénon and later expanded by Julius Evola, traditionalism rejects modernity wholesale, opposing secularism, democracy, and liberalism as corruptions of a primordial sacred order. Though never a mass movement, traditionalism has deeply

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94 Jack B. Moore, *Skinheads Shaved for Battle: A Cultural History of American Skinheads* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993); Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, chapter 22; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, chapter 10.

95 Damon T. Berry, *Blood & Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (Syracuse University Press, 2017).

96 Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Broadleaf Books, 2024); Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023).

influenced segments of the far right, such as the Russian neo-Eurasianism of Aleksandr Dugin.<sup>97</sup> Even within explicitly Christian contexts, then, the far right's religious landscape is not monolithic but instead accommodates a remarkably wide and increasingly global range of illiberal spiritual visions.

Religion often interacted with other factors, of which one of the most prominent was gender. In her book *Killing for Life* (2002), Carol Mason explored the apocalyptic narrative of anti-abortion activists who committed terrorist attacks against clinics and providers, tracing its origins back to Gibson's concept of a "New War culture."<sup>98</sup> And many works have explored the essential role of women in the far right, which may seem counterintuitive given the movement's insistence on defending a patriarchal model of society.<sup>99</sup> Others have focused on analyzing its worldview through a gendered lens. Following in the footsteps of Barbara Spackman's classic *Fascist Virilities* (1996), Abby Ferber has highlighted how white supremacist discourse is inseparable from anxieties over white masculinity, portraying white men as emasculated by feminism and interracial sexuality. Kathleen Blee's work dissects white women's various roles in the white power movement "as ethereal Nordic goddesses and racial victims, as potential 'race traitors,' as wifely supporters of male racial warriors and bearers of the next generation of Aryans, or as racist activists in their own right."<sup>100</sup> More work remains to be done along this track, particularly to trace the evolution of masculinity as an ideal within the far right.<sup>101</sup>

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97 Mark J. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

98 Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2002), chapter 1.

99 Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017), chapters 6–7; Jennifer L. Johnson, *Grandmothers on Guard: Gender, Aging, and the Minutemen at the US–Mexico Border* (University of Texas Press, 2021); Seyward Darby, *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism* (Little, Brown, 2020); Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (Oxford University Press, 2018); June Melby Benowitz, *Days of Discontent: American Women and Right-Wing Politics, 1933–1945* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Anti-radicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Ohio State University Press, 2001); Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right*.

100 Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (University of California Press, 2002), 115; Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996). See also Abby L. Ferber, ed., *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism* (Routledge, 2004); Laura McEnaney, "He-Men and Christian Mothers: The America First Movement and the Gendered Meanings of Patriotism and Isolationism," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (January 1994): 47–57.

101 For a recent example of such work, see Emily K. Carian, Alex DiBranco, and Chelsea Ebin, eds., *Male Supremacism in the United States: From Patriarchal Traditionalism to Misogynist Incels and the Alt-Right* (Routledge, 2022).

A renewed focus on culture and grassroots activism should not eclipse another area where further research is urgently needed: the far right's relationship with capital. Multiple avenues remain largely unexplored here. One of the most obvious concerns the role of wealthy patrons who, often away from public scrutiny, have channeled critical funding to far-right actors. Historians of postwar conservatism and journalists like Jane Mayer have charted this dynamic in the mainstream right and the Tea Party movement, a story that also sits within the broader "counterrevolution" in public finance analyzed by Melinda Cooper.<sup>102</sup> Yet we still know little about similar patterns on the far right before 9/11, though recent work has begun to blaze that trail.<sup>103</sup> Investigating this relationship is all the more crucial given the persistence of conspiratorial tropes that reduce far-right actors to mere puppets of big business. The real value of such research lies in tracing the intra-class tensions among elites and highlighting the agency of far-right movements, whose aims do not always align neatly with those of their backers.

Another line of inquiry in the study of the far right's relationship with capital would explore its ideological and material affinities with the libertarian movement, whose ideology (captured most notably in Ayn Rand's work) has traditionally been embraced by many business leaders.<sup>104</sup> These ties were brought into sharp relief when the failed 2008 presidential bid of its standard-bearer Ron Paul helped catalyze the Tea Party insurgency. Despite its significance, Paul's career has yet to receive the scholarly treatment it deserves. An equally vital direction would shift attention away from capital and toward its traditional enemy, labor. For example, how did far-right actors position themselves in relation to working-class grievances, union movements, and the racialized restructuring of labor markets across the twentieth century? Finally, scholars should also investigate the far right's own entrepreneurial endeavors, which often aimed to turn conspiratorial thinking into profit. Long before Alex Jones launched Infowars in 1999, for example, the explosive growth of the second Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s owed much to its "multilevel marketing structure fueled by an army of highly incentivized sales agents," generating annual revenues of at least \$25 million at its peak.<sup>105</sup>

Where the interwar Klan relied primarily on print and radio, today's far right has proved particularly adept at using social media and podcast platforms. While this

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102 Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (W.W. Norton, 2009); Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (Doubleday, 2016); Melinda Cooper, *Counterrevolution: Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance* (Zone Books, 2024).

103 Chad Pearson, *Capital's Terrorists: Klansmen, Lawmen, and Employers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Kathryn S. Olmsted, *The Newspaper Axis: Six Press Barons Who Enabled Hitler* (Yale University Press, 2022).

104 Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

105 Roland G. Fryer and Steven D. Levitt, "Hatred and Profits: Under the Hood of the Ku Klux Klan," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127, no. 4 (2012): 1,883.

may seem surprising for a movement that has long derided the mainstream media as the tool of a global conspiracy, it is precisely this self-perception as a marginalized and besieged outsider that drove the far right early on to construct its own alternative media infrastructure—an investment that is now paying dividends. Watchdog reports and journalistic investigations have begun to chart the contours of this digital ecosystem, but we still lack a clear understanding of how the far right gained such a dominant foothold online.<sup>106</sup> Additional work may help complicate dominant narratives about Silicon Valley. While historians such as Margaret O'Mara have long debunked the mythology of entrepreneurial genius centered on figures like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, we lack a clear sense of how the digital tools pioneered by their industry became instrumental in amplifying far-right ideologies, and of how prominent tech leaders such as Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, or Mark Zuckerberg have proven susceptible to such views.<sup>107</sup> In tracing the affinities between Silicon Valley and the right, we need not limit ourselves to the recent past: Stanford University's founding president David Starr Jordan was, after all, a leading proponent of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century, and one of its most famous professors helped develop the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Both contributed to the scientific legitimization of white supremacist ideas long before the Internet era.

The global reach of modern communication technologies underscores another area in need of further research: the relationship of the US far right with the wider world. Admittedly, this topic has seen a growing wave of scholarly attention in recent years, as noted earlier. Historians have shown that, despite their deeply nationalist orientation, far-right movements frequently operated with a transnational outlook and sought connections with ideologically aligned activists abroad. Still, the ideas, trajectories, and transnational networks of several key far-right actors—ranging from Carto and Duke to earlier figures such as Rockwell, Ezra Pound, and Francis Parker Yockey, author of *Imperium* (1948)—await sustained historical examination.<sup>108</sup> This is also true of lesser-known activists like Gary Lauck, the “Farm Belt Führer” who produced and distributed vast quantities of

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106 Mike Rothschild, *The Storm Is upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (Melville House, 2021); Andrew Marantz, *Antisocial: How Online Extremists Broke America* (Picador, 2019); Megan Squire and Hannah Gais, “Inside the Far-Right Podcast Ecosystem, Part 1: Building a Network of Hate,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/09/29/inside-far-right-podcast-ecosystem-part-1-building-network-hate>.

107 Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (Penguin Press, 2019); Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

108 Tyler Bridges, *The Rise and Fall of David Duke* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018); George Michael, *Willis Carto and the American Far Right* (University Press of Florida, 2008); Matthew Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda, 1935–45* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On Yockey, see Kevin Coogan, *Dreamer of the Day: Francis Parker Yockey and the Postwar Fascist International* (Autonomedia, 1999).

neo-Nazi materials to far-right groups in Europe, particularly Germany, until his arrest in 1995.<sup>109</sup>

In sum, the field remains rich with untapped terrain. Spatial and regional histories, in particular, beg for deeper excavation: How does geography (urban/rural divides, suburban politics, or exurban migration) shape far-right activism? And how do the various regional genealogies of the far right (the South's Lost Cause, Midwestern isolationism, and the Pacific Northwest's "white homeland" mythos) relate to each other? Ostensibly fallow periods, like the late 1960s and early 1970s, also demand reappraisal. The links between George Wallace's segregationist populism, the National Youth Alliance, and William Pierce's later ideological ventures remain surprisingly unstudied. Likewise, the American variants of ecofascism—infused with anti-urbanism, homesteading romanticism, and "blood and soil" nostalgia—deserve far greater scrutiny. Closely related are the patterns of unorthodox health practices that run through the far right. Distrust of mainstream medicine and faith in miracle cures, from Gerald Winrod's promotion of Hoxsey remedies to Cold War fears of water fluoridation and more recently the Make America Healthy Again movement, form a continuous thread awaiting systematic study. Intellectual history, for its part, has only skimmed the surface: figures like Revilo Oliver, Paul Gottfried, Robert Pearson, and Steve Sailer continue to cast long shadows without having yet received the attention they warrant, in part because of the persistent if misguided tendency to dismiss far-right ideas as unworthy of serious study. And finally, the carceral state remains a glaring omission: Prison has long served as both an incubator and a megaphone for far-right ideologies, while the institutions of incarceration themselves have played an underexamined role in drawing the line between dissent and extremism.

## **Conclusion**

In grappling with these questions, scholars of the far right are doing more than reframing their own field—they have the potential to challenge the master narratives of modern American history. At its core, the study of the far right shows that democracy in the United States was not a stable inheritance but a fragile, hard-won, and often fiercely contested achievement. It compels us to reckon with how deeply antidemocratic currents have run through not merely the fringes of American life but its very center. As Robert Mickey has argued, a fully consolidated democracy, with universal suffrage and equal rights, did not arrive until nearly two centuries after the nation's founding. "If," he asked, "the consolidation of democracy across the entire polity took so long to occur, was so complex and contingent, should we view it as permanent?"<sup>110</sup> The question hangs heavy,

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109 Michelle Lynn Kahn, "The American Influence on German Neo-Nazism: An Entangled History of Hate, 1970s–1990s," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 2 (2021): 91–105.

110 Robert Mickey, *Paths out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 32, 352–53.

particularly in the current era of renewed democratic erosion. Likewise, as Samuel Goldman has noted, the growing body of work on conservatism unsettles the “widespread yet unstated assumption” among many academics “that the ‘arc of history’ points to the left.” A deeper understanding of the far right’s historical embeddedness may well flip the script: Conservatives begin to appear not as “weird exceptions or unruly rebels” but as defenders of a dominant consensus, while the left assumes the role of perennial outsider.<sup>111</sup>

Such questions exceed the boundaries of this introduction. What this overview has sought to offer is not a definitive map but a set of waypoints in a century-old conversation about the American far right. Three in particular bear emphasis. First, the scholarship on this subject is deeper and more enduring than many assume, a point worth stressing given how routinely it has been ignored in the high-profile “fascism debate.” Second, this neglect has long extended to the historical profession itself, which, until quite recently, accorded the far right only glancing attention. Scholarship on the topic has slowly advanced from the periphery to the center. Third, a throughline in this body of work has been the far right’s uneasy relationship to the mainstream. Where mid-century liberals dismissed it as marginal and irrational, later historians traced its roots into the cultural and political heart of American life, sometimes at the cost of underplaying its extremism. More recent scholarship has sought to reconcile these views, recognizing that far-right ideas can be both radical and pervasive. In doing so, the field has come full circle, recovering the more critical view of far-right mass movements that defined mid-century critiques while discarding their condescension.

The articles and essays in this special issue make clear that the far right is not a political aberration but a persistent undercurrent in US history, one that has taken root across regions, decades, and institutions. Its protean nature and deep entanglements with the mainstream demand analytical tools that are both conceptually rigorous and historically grounded. If there is a unifying thread in the recent historiography, it is the recognition that studying the far right is not merely a matter of tracing political extremism but of interrogating the boundaries of American democracy itself—its exclusions, its contradictions, and its fragilities. In that sense, this field of study is not just about the far right; it is also about us.

### **Acknowledgments**

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111 Goldman, “Problem of American Conservatism,” 250.

## ARTICLE

## Mapping the Influence of Conservative Catholic Political Thought on the American Right

CHELSEA EBIN

Drew University

**Abstract:** *The second Trump administration has ushered in a new wave of antiliberal, antidemocratic, antipluralist, and authoritarian politics. This article helps explain how these ideologies are informed by conservative Catholic religious and political thought, and how they reflect a vision of the state modeled on the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church. Once a fringe worldview adopted by Catholic integralists, right-wing communitarian politics has gone mainstream. To explain how this has happened, this article traces the development of conservative Catholic political thought in the United States over the past seventy-five years. It begins by contextualizing Catholic beliefs and the place of Catholics in American history. It then proceeds to an examination of key conservative Catholic thinkers and developments in conservative Catholic political thought in the United States from the 1950s onward. It touches on the anti-Communist crusades, William F. Buckley and The National Review, and the transformations initiated by the Second Vatican Council during the middle of the twentieth century. It proceeds to an examination of the influence of the Catholic New Right and the “theocons” associated with the magazine First Things, who shaped conservative politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Moving into the 1990s, it examines the natural law turn in legal thought and explores the influence of conservative Catholic thought on contemporary legal reasoning and the composition of the federal judiciary. The article concludes by assessing the resurgence of communitarian and integralist Catholic thought in the 2000s, focusing on the “postliberal” turn expressed by thinkers like Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule. Across these periods, it highlights three consistent hallmarks of conservative Catholic political thought: authoritarianism, illiberalism, and communitarianism.*

**Keywords:** authoritarianism, postliberalism, conservative Catholicism, American political thought, integralism, communitarianism.

As the 2024 presidential election season drew to a close, Donald Trump’s campaign reached a new fever pitch, with surrogates expressing a dizzying array of antidemocratic, racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic messages. In the fray, one might have missed Tucker Carlson’s remarks at a Turning Point Action campaign rally for Trump in Duluth, Georgia, on October 23. But they are worth highlighting, as they capture an

inflection point in American right-wing political discourse. Amping up the crowd for Trump, Carlson ranted:

There has to be a point at which Dad comes home. . . . Dad comes home, and he's pissed. Dad is pissed. He's not vengeful, he loves his children. Disobedient as they may be, he loves them. . . . But he's very disappointed in their behavior and he's going to have to let them know. . . . And when dad gets home, you know what he says? . . . "You've been a bad little girl, and you're getting a vigorous spanking right now. . . . I'm not going to lie. It's going to hurt you a lot more than it hurts me. And you earned this. You're getting a vigorous spanking because you've been a bad girl."<sup>1</sup>

Trump has leaned into the role of patriarch in chief. By the summer of 2025, following a comment made by the NATO secretary general that seemed to refer to Trump as "daddy," Trump began selling T-shirts emblazoned with an image of his glowering face, accompanied by one word: "Daddy."<sup>2</sup>

We would be mistaken to read Carlson's rant as mere figurative speech or Trump's T-shirt as a joke. While neither Carlson nor Trump is a Catholic, they embrace a politics that is informed by conservative Catholic religious and political thought.<sup>3</sup> It is a right-wing communitarian politics that is antidemocratic, antiliberal, and antipluralist, and envisions a state modeled on the top-down, hierarchical, and patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church. Once a fringe worldview adopted by Catholic integralists, this view of politics has gone mainstream, as evidenced by Carlson's remarks and Trump's T-shirts.

Recent media coverage, particularly centering on then-vice presidential candidate J. D. Vance's conversion to and embrace of a "postliberal" Catholicism, has shone a spotlight on conservative Catholics.<sup>4</sup> And yet, while conservative Catholics have played an important role in shaping the American right, they have often received rather less

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1 "Tucker Carlson Uses Bizarre Analogy of Donald Trump a Dad of Children Who Need a 'Vigorous Spanking,'" posted October 23, 2024, by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, YouTube, 4:12, <https://youtu.be/fYNrDI1dtEw?si=oeCcr2S-2qD8FTDe>.

2 Kinsey Crowley, "Trump 'Daddy' Shirt with His Mugshot Is for Sale, Latest Riff of NATO Leader's Comment," *USA Today*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/06/27/trump-daddy-merch-nato-mark-rutte/84383620007/>.

3 A note on terminology: the Catholic right takes many forms, and many conservative Catholics do not explicitly identify with a particular movement. I have, therefore, adopted the broader umbrella term of "conservative Catholic" unless referring to a specific movement, such as integralism or traditionalism.

4 Elizabeth Dia, "How JD Vance Found His Way to the Catholic Church," *New York Times*, August 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/25/us/jd-vance-catholic-church-conversion.html>. See also J. D. Vance, "How I Joined the Resistance," *The Lamp*, April 1, 2020, <https://thelampmagazine.com/blog/how-i-joined-the-resistance>.

scholarly attention than their evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant counterparts.<sup>5</sup> In mapping the development of conservative Catholic political thought over time, I aim to help fill this gap by exploring how conservative Catholic religious and political views have intellectually shaped the modern American right.

To do so, this article proceeds in two sections: The first provides an overview of the belief system and historical conditions that preceded and facilitated the rise of conservative Catholic thought in American politics. Doing so is necessary not only to identify change over time but also to lay the foundation for locating conservative political ideologies alongside Church teachings. From here, it turns to an examination of the development of Catholic political thought on the modern American right. For each decade under investigation, it highlights the influence of a particular aspect of conservative American Catholicism.

Across these periods, I highlight key developments within Catholic political thought. These include, most centrally, Catholic social teaching and the doctrines of subsidiarity and solidarity, the development of fusionist conservatism, Vatican II reforms that empowered the laity, the natural law theory turn, and common good constitutionalism. These map onto three core attributes of conservative Catholic political thought: authoritarianism, illiberalism, and communitarianism.

Drawing on primary and secondary sources, this article provides a sketch of the development of these ideas by Catholic intellectuals over the past seventy-five years. In doing so, its focus is on key lay thinkers whose ideas and work helped shape conservative Catholic thought and American politics more broadly; it is not on the institutional actions of the Catholic Church hierarchy in the US. This is not to suggest that the ideas put forth and actions undertaken by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) are unimportant or unrelated to conservative politics. They are.<sup>6</sup> But, while often skewing right, the USCCB is, nonetheless, bound to follow the official dictates of the Church. As such, its actions are constrained both by the hierarchy and the teachings of the Catholic Church in Rome. Such is not the case for conservative lay intellectuals, who act with considerably more autonomy and independence.

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5 For example, the following focus almost exclusively on Protestant conservatives: Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (Guilford Press, 1998); Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (South End Press, 1989); Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2007); Esther Kaplan, *With God on Their Side* (New Press, 2004); William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (Broadway Books, 1996); and Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party* (Oxford University Press, 2010). On the need for increased scholarly attention to the role of Catholics in US history, see R. Scott Appleby and Kathleen Sprows Cummings, eds., *Catholics in the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S. History* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

6 Timothy A. Byrnes, *Catholic Bishops in American Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1991); Mary Jo McConahay, *Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and the Far Right* (Melville House, 2023).

It is worth noting that many of the most prominent Catholic lay intellectuals profiled here are converts to the Catholic faith. This raises an important question: are conservatives drawn to Catholicism, or does Catholicism breed conservative beliefs? Given that these thinkers had become politically conservative prior to their conversion,<sup>7</sup> it would seem the former is more likely. In short, these thinkers find important support for their conservative positions within the teachings of the Catholic Church, and they reinterpret these teachings through a conservative lens. Nonetheless, these thinkers neither speak for the Catholic Church nor do they reflect a universal interpretation of Catholic thought.

In the face of Trump's ascendance, there has been a reckoning of sorts among historiographers of the American right. For example, Rick Perlstein has taken scholars to task for overemphasizing conservative intellectuals and underemphasizing the right's more radical ideologies and movements. As Perlstein writes, "Future historians won't find all that much of a foundation for Trumpism in the grim essays of William F. Buckley, the scrupulous constitutionalist principles of Barry Goldwater or the bright-eyed optimism of Ronald Reagan. They'll need instead to study conservative history's political surrealists and intellectual embarrassments, its con artists and tribunes of white rage." I agree that more attention should be paid to fringe right-wing movements and ideologies, and I accept Perlstein's general point that scholars have erred in shoehorning the American right into a liberal framework that renders the right a part of the intellectual mainstream. My hope is that rather than falling into this trap, this article instead elucidates the radical nature of conservative Catholic thought and demonstrates that it falls outside the bounds of a liberal-democratic framework.<sup>8</sup>

### **Contextualizing Catholic Beliefs and the Place of Catholics in American History**

For much of American history, Catholics occupied an uneasy position, facing hostility from White Protestant nativists for their religious beliefs and as "undesirable" immigrants. Without rehashing the Protestant Reformation, it suffices to say that on the belief front, opprobrium tended to focus on suspicion of Catholics' fidelity to the pope and fears that Catholicism was fundamentally at odds with the American political values of liberalism and democratic governance. The centrality and infallibility of papal authority in doctrinal matters were expressly articulated by the First Vatican Council (1869–1870),<sup>9</sup> which took

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7 For a detailed account of three of these intellectuals' conversions to conservatism and Catholicism (Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, and George Weigel), see Todd Scribner, *A Partisan Church: American Catholicism and the Rise of Neo-Conservative Catholics* (Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

8 Rick Perlstein, "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong," *New York Times Magazine*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/magazine/i-thought-i-understood-the-american-right-trump-proved-me-wrong.html>.

9 "Decrees of the First Vatican Council," 1869–1870, Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>.

place in the midst of a period (1860–1890) of massive European Catholic emigration to the United States.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the century, “[i]t wasn’t unusual for respectable politicians to wonder aloud whether Catholics could be loyal to their adoptive country *and* to the Pope.”<sup>11</sup>

In reality, some murkiness attends to how lay Catholics are to understand the doctrine of papal infallibility and whether it extends to papal encyclicals. “The exact assent which Catholics must give to the encyclicals is unclear,” David J. O’Brien explained in *American Catholics and Social Reform*. Moreover, “the formal conditions under which papal definitions are considered infallible are ordinarily not present in an encyclical letter.”<sup>12</sup> Setting aside the matter of how much obedience is owed to encyclical teachings, it is fair to recognize, as O’Brien did in 1968, that “Catholics are part of an international hierarchical organization designed to make them aware of the Church’s teachings and to enforce its religious and moral discipline. On the surface, at least, these features distinguish Catholics from their fellow Americans.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the hierarchical structure of the Church—which, in the nineteenth century, had adopted a more authoritarian form as it concentrated power at the top, brooked little to no dissent, and required the obedience of its faithful—was not the only aspect of Catholicism that seemingly set it at odds with the mainstream of American culture; it was also the Church’s teachings.

The Church historically viewed democracy, modernity, liberalism, and pluralism with suspicion, if not outright hostility, and it was also skeptical of unchecked capitalism. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, in response to the French Revolution, the pope “denounced the Rights of Man of 1789” and the Civil Constitution.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the following century, papal teachings continued to encourage Catholics to reject liberalism and to be wary of democracy. Of particular note, Pope Pius IX’s *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) laid the foundation for integralism, which the Catholic historian and philosopher Garry Wills defines as a “phenomenon” that “saw Catholicism as a systematic whole, each part

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10 José Casanova, “Roman and Catholic and American: The Transformation of Catholicism in the United States,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 6, no. 1 (1992): 75–111.

11 Josh Zeitz, “When America Hated Catholics,” *Politico Magazine*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/when-america-hated-catholics-213177/>.

12 David J. O’Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 22.

13 O’Brien, viii. This view is further supported by the existence of pamphlets such as *The Popes and Christian Citizenship*, compiled by Rev. Francis J. Boland, CSC, PhD, 1939 (Notre Dame University Archives PALP 2/32) and *Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII with Extended Analysis, Study Group Outline, Bibliography*, edited by Donald R. Campion, SJ, and Eugene K. Culhane, SJ, 1961 (Notre Dame University Archives PALP 3/12). These pamphlets contain excerpts from encyclicals and suggest that there was an effort to ensure lay Catholics had access to papal teachings.

14 Garry Wills, *Why I Am a Catholic* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 186.

connected with all other parts, and therefore all of equal weight.”<sup>15</sup> The *Syllabus of Errors* condemned the belief that “the Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church,” and it denounced the idea of freedom of religion, among a host of other “false” beliefs. Pius IX also took aim at Enlightenment ideals of reason and rationalism, asserting the falsity of the belief that “[h]uman reason, without any reference whatsoever to God, is the sole arbiter of truth and falsehood, and of good and evil; it is law to itself, and suffices, by its natural force, to secure the welfare of men and of nations.”<sup>16</sup>

Not long after, in 1878, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical on socialism, decrying “socialists, communists, or nihilists” who “refuse obedience to the higher powers, to whom, according to the admonition of the Apostle, every soul ought to be subject, and who derive the right of governing from God.” Such radicals, Leo XIII added, “proclaim the absolute equality of all men in rights and duties.”<sup>17</sup> While reserving its most fervent criticism for communism, the Church also expressed doubts about capitalism, reflecting growing concern among nineteenth-century Catholics that poverty was a social and not individual problem.<sup>18</sup>

Leo XIII gave voice to these concerns in an encyclical on capital and labor, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which the historian John T. McGreevy explains was indebted to “European Catholic social thought.”<sup>19</sup> *Rerum Novarum* recognized that conditions of inequality were driving revolutionary fervor and urged that “some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class.” Leo XIII also asserted that there needed to be checks on capitalism, for “to misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers—that is truly shameful and inhuman.” The employer’s “great and principal duty is to give every one [*sic*] what is just,” and so “wealthy owners and all masters of labor should be mindful of this—that to exercise pressure upon the indigent and the destitute for the sake of gain, and to gather one’s profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine.” The encyclical also endorsed the right of workers to form unions—with other Catholics.<sup>20</sup>

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15 Ibid., 195–96.

16 Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors*, 1864, Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed November 14, 2025, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>.

17 Leo XIII, *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, 1878, The Holy See, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_28121878\\_quod-apostolici-muneris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_28121878_quod-apostolici-muneris.html).

18 John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (W. W. Norton, 2003), 130–31.

19 Ibid., 131.

20 Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, The Holy See, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html). Pope Pius XI reinforced the Church’s support of unions in 1937 and rearticulated the call for the Church to

*Rerum Novarum* expressed support for the doctrine of familism, which holds the family is the foundational building block of society: “A family, no less than a State, is, as We have said, a true society, governed by an authority peculiar to itself, that is to say, by the authority of the father.” The hierarchical structure of the Church is modeled in the family and vice versa. Thus, just as the authority of the Church cannot be destroyed, “Paternal authority can be neither abolished nor absorbed by the State; for it has the same source as human life itself.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, familism encourages obedience and fidelity to a patriarchal authority figure and a hierarchical distribution of power. It therefore lends itself to male supremacist ideologies as well as authoritarianism.

It also lends itself to both a defense and a critique of capitalism. As discussed later in more detail, for conservative Catholic thinkers in the mid-twentieth century, “capitalism was justified and defended for its familism rather than its individualism, and where capitalism conflicted with familism, most believed capitalism should yield.”<sup>22</sup> Related to this idea is the doctrine of solidarity, which articulates a notion of obligation and duty to one another on an individual, familial, and societal level. Solidarity, then, provides a framework for addressing inequality broadly, while retaining the centrality of the family as a model for caring for the community.

Additionally, the family provides a model for social organization that is supported by—and gives support to—the doctrine of subsidiarity. Broadly defined, subsidiarity is the doctrine that, whenever feasible, the state should devolve power and decision-making to the most local level. While it finds textual support in *Rerum Novarum* (1891), the principle of subsidiarity is most clearly articulated by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931):

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. . . . *The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise*

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constrain capitalism, arguing that “the means of saving the world of today from the lamentable ruin into which a moral liberalism has plunged us, are neither the class-struggle nor terror, nor yet the autocratic abuse of State power, but rather the infusion of social justice and the sentiment of Christian love into the social-economic order.” Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, 1937, The Holy See, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19370319\\_divini-redemptoris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html).

21 Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

22 Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.

*dissipate its efforts greatly.* . . . Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of “subsidiary function,” the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be [and] the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State.<sup>23</sup>

Subsidiarity, solidarity, and familism, all working together, are part of the antidote to liberal individualism and the atomization caused by modernism.

If the Church’s nineteenth-century teachings challenging capitalism, pluralism, liberalism, and the separation of church and state were not enough to exclude Catholics in the United States from the ideological mainstream, Leo XIII had one more directive up his pontifical sleeve. In 1899, he drafted an apostolic letter to Cardinal James Gibbons, archbishop of Baltimore,<sup>24</sup> in which, according to Garry Wills, he “deplor[ed] a spirit of freedom that might loosen dependence on the authoritarianism of the church.”<sup>25</sup> This was followed by what Wills has dubbed Pope Pius X’s “reign of terror” (1903–1914), during which “Pius called Modernism not only a (vaguely defined) heresy but ‘the compendium of every other heresy’ (*omnium haereseon conlectum*).”<sup>26</sup> In short, during the nineteenth century, the official teaching of the Catholic Church effectively labeled the key ideological tenets of the American political system—liberalism, pluralism, secularism, and democracy—heretical and in need of “restoration.”<sup>27</sup>

The sense that the Church needed to play an active role in “restoring” society was buttressed by the publication of *Quadragesimo Anno*.<sup>28</sup> Taken together, *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* established the foundations for Catholic social teaching (CST), which emphasizes, among other things, the dignity of human life, the centrality of the

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23 Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, The Holy See, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html) (italics added); O’Brien, *American Catholics*, 18–20.

24 Pope Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*, 1899, Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed November 14, 2025, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/113teste.htm>.

25 Wills, *Why I Am*, 203.

26 Ibid., 208–9.

27 An authorless pamphlet from 1927 titled *An American’s Catechism on Democracy* is suggestive of how these teachings may have been transmitted to the laity. It poses the question: “But must not an intelligent American believe in Democracy?” Its answer: “Not in Democracy as the term is generally used. . . . If you have read Leo XIII’s *Graves de Communi* as well as his *Rerum Novarum*, you cannot have forgotten that he did not use the term Democrat in its popular and current signification. On the contrary, he expressly warned against giving it any political interpretation.” The pamphlet continues, criticizing democracy for “carr[ying] an implication that all men are equal” and undermining obedience to authority (Notre Dame University Archives PSOC 3-4).

28 Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, The Holy See, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html).

family, and the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>29</sup> As Anna Rowlands explains, during this time, CST emerged as both a modern doctrine, responding to historical events and political ideologies, and as “a social philosophy that refuses to fully accept a liberal settlement.” CST thus “remains suspicious of a doctrine of the individual that does not give weight to the vulnerable, interdependent, self-determining, narrative character of the human person.”<sup>30</sup> Defying simple political classification as either rightist or leftist, these principles set Catholics against the mainstream of American political ideology even as they created openings for Catholic integration into the nation-state.

It should come as little surprise that, as the twentieth century dawned in the United States, Catholics were caught between two competing and opposite poles. On the one hand, they faced pressure to assimilate, and on the other, to remain apart from American society.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps as a means of negotiating these contrasting demands, there was “an air of separateness on the part of the Catholic intellectual community down to and beyond World War II, an attitude of mind that had seemed to continue on a higher level the ghetto mentality that was used to describe Catholics of an earlier age.”<sup>32</sup> Separateness served an important purpose, according to William M. Halsey, in that it sheltered American Catholics from post-World War I “disillusionment” and allowed them to cultivate an “American moralism and idealism.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, the “decoupling” of Americanism and modernism allowed for a “rehabilitation of Americanism—the renewal of American Catholic confidence in the orthodoxy of church-state separation, confessional pluralism, and religious voluntarism.”<sup>34</sup>

Into this environment, and on the cusp of World War II, Pius XI released *Divini Redemptoris* (1937), an encyclical decrying the “imminent danger” posed by “bolshevistic

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29 While subject to revision over time, CST can currently be boiled down to seven basic principles: “respect for the [dignity of the] human person, promotion of the family, the individual’s right to own property, the common good, subsidiarity, the dignity of work and workers, and pursuit of peace and care for the poor.” Christopher Kaczor, “Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching,” *Catholic Answers*, April 1, 2007, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/seven-principles-of-catholic-social-teaching>. See also “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed November 14, 2025, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>.

30 Anna Rowlands, “Mid-Century Catholic Social Teaching, 1930–1958,” paper presented at the 2018 Warsaw Seminar on Catholic Social Teaching, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.sacredheart.edu/media/shu-media/catholic-studies/warsaw-conference/2018\\_Mid-century-Catholic-Social-Teaching-1930-1958\\_Rowlands\\_ADA.pdf](https://www.sacredheart.edu/media/shu-media/catholic-studies/warsaw-conference/2018_Mid-century-Catholic-Social-Teaching-1930-1958_Rowlands_ADA.pdf).

31 O’Brien, *American Catholics*, 9.

32 John Tracy Ellis, foreword to *The Survival of American Innocence: Catholicism in an Era of Disillusionment, 1920–1940*, by William M. Halsey (University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

33 Halsey, *Survival*, 2–3.

34 R. Scott Appleby, “The Triumph of Americanism,” in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Indiana University Press, 1995), 40.

and atheistic Communism, which aims at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization.” Threading the needle between the Church’s condemnation of “liberalistic individualism, which subordinates society to the selfish use of the individual,” and “the collectivist mentality” required by communism,<sup>35</sup> Pius XI teed up American Catholics to lead the anti-communist crusades that helped shape conservatism in the immediate postwar era.

As World War II wound down, Americans started once again to get wound up about communism. While anti-communism had secular adherents, it found a deep wellspring of support among American Christians. This was all the more so the case for Catholics, who “discovered in anticommunism a means of identifying themselves with the greater American society.”<sup>36</sup> Godless communism was pitted against God-filled capitalism, as conservatives had successfully welded together “faith, freedom, and free enterprise.”<sup>37</sup> Both Protestants and Catholics rushed to be foot soldiers in the battle against heathen communism, and many soon found themselves taking part in anti-communist revivals or crusades. In short, to be anti-communist was to be a good Christian, which was to be a good American.<sup>38</sup>

On the Protestant side, the evangelical reverend Bill Graham, a “quintessential Cold War revivalist,” was perhaps the best known of the anti-communist preachers, drawing tens of thousands of people to listen to sermons with titles like “Christ for this Crisis,” “The End of the World,” and “Will God Spare America?”<sup>39</sup> But Graham was far from alone. Preaching even more virulently anti-communist messages were the evangelical ministers Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis, the activist Fred Schwarz, and the Catholics Bishop Fulton J. Sheen and Cardinal Francis Spellman, to name just a few of the most prominent crusaders.

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35 Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, 1937, The Holy See, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19370319\\_divini-redemptoris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html). Indeed, the Church’s opposition to communism was so absolute, it led to support of General Francisco Franco’s war against the Spanish democratic republic in the 1930s. Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 24–25.

36 Donald F. Crosby, SJ, *God, Church, and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church, 1950–1957* (University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 7.

37 Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (Basic Books, 2015), xiv.

38 Clyde Wilcox found that supporters of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade were not consistently conservative. Clyde Wilcox, “Support for the Christian Right Old and New: A Comparison of Supporters of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade and the Moral Majority,” *Sociological Focus* 22, no. 2 (May 1989): 87–97, esp. 95. Likewise, Crosby argues that “[l]iberal Catholics, too, sought to expunge communism from American life, though they differed sharply with conservatives over the means to this end.” *God, Church, and Flag*, 19. Both support the contention that anti-communism was a widespread phenomenon that transcended political and religious affiliations.

39 Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 22.

Although many, if not most, American Catholics were dyed-in-the-wool anti-communists, having received decades of Church instruction condemning communism and socialism, at the outset of the Cold War they continued to face suspicion and hostility from some Protestants.<sup>40</sup> Remarkling on the status of Catholics and conservatives in the post-World War II period, the historian George H. Nash writes:

To be a Catholic in these years was to occupy an uncertain position in American intellectual life; to be a conservative Catholic was to bear an even heavier burden. Perhaps, then, it is not so surprising that much of the new conservatism seemed so Catholic in composition. Both Catholics and conservatives were outsiders.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, anti-communism went a long way in helping Catholics overcome the perception that they were less than fully American. While anti-Catholicism would rear its head briefly around John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, the political scientist Ted G. Jelen is emphatic on this point: "What is clear is that the emergence of anticommunism as a rationale for postwar American foreign policy, and the explicit anticommunism of the Vatican, ameliorated the questioning of American Catholic loyalty."<sup>42</sup> In this changing landscape, a small coterie of conservative Catholics began to distinguish themselves. Among them were Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose ruthless persecution of suspected communists divided Catholics,<sup>43</sup> and the conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, who had begun to make a name for herself in Republican circles by the early 1950s.<sup>44</sup> But perhaps no Catholic of the period had as long-lasting an impact on conservatism in America as William F. Buckley Jr.

Neither conservatives nor Catholics were to remain outsiders for much longer. As American Catholics entered the American mainstream, so too did conservative Catholic thought enter the mainstream of politics.

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40 Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 48; on evangelical and fundamentalist divisions concerning ecumenicism, see Martin, *With God*, 39–40.

41 George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976; repr., Basic Books, 2008), 121.

42 Ted G. Jelen, "The American Church," in *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State*, ed. Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox (Georgetown University Press, 2006), 76.

43 Crosby, *God, Church, and Flag*, 37–42.

44 David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History*, (Princeton University Press, 2010), chapter 4.

## The Development of Conservative Catholic Political Thought in the United States from 1950 to 2025

In 1951, a precocious young Buckley, a devout Catholic freshly graduated from Yale University, published *God and Man at Yale*, a stinging indictment of the institution.<sup>45</sup> According to the historian George Nash, Buckley “strove to document the monumental anti-Christian and collectivist bias which, he believed, was corrupting his alma mater.”<sup>46</sup> In calling Yale to task for teaching its students to question Christian and free-market capitalist hegemony,<sup>47</sup> Buckley created his very own mid-twentieth-century *Syllabus of Errors*, detailing the supposed heresies (secularism and collectivism chief among them) taught at the school. Buckley kept up this steady drumbeat, taking liberalism to task again in his 1959 book, *Up from Liberalism*. Here, Buckley further refined the strategy of framing liberalism as the purview of elites, an argument first developed in *God and Man at Yale*.<sup>48</sup> This strategic framing obscured the fact that a fundamental rejection of liberalism put conservatives at odds with the country’s foundations and enabled Buckley to oppose liberalism without seeming un-American, a crucial and necessary precaution for him as a Catholic in the postwar era.

Buckley was part of a burgeoning conservative movement defined by anti-communism, which included fellow Catholic L. Brent Bozell and later the Catholic convert Frank Meyer. Four years after the publication of *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley launched the conservative journal *National Review*, which “showed this intense preoccupation with communism from the start.”<sup>49</sup> While not a Catholic publication, *National Review* amplified the voices of conservative Catholic intellectuals who were vocal in their condemnation of both liberalism and communism.

The conservative Catholic impulse away from liberalism and toward centralized, hierarchical social and political control put these thinkers at odds with libertarians and classical liberals, who favored limited government as a means of not only bolstering economic freedom but also protecting the civil liberties of the individual. As Nash explains, *National Review* “came under fire” because of its statist worldview. “It was,” Nash writes, “willing to squelch civil liberties at home and engage in racist imperialism abroad in violation of the universal natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence.

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45 On Buckley’s Catholicism, see Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, esp. chapter 2; William F. Buckley Jr., *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith* (Harcourt Brace, 1997); Lee Edwards, *William F. Buckley Jr.: The Maker of a Movement* (Regnery Gateway, 2019); Jeremy Lott, *William F. Buckley* (Thomas Nelson, 2010); and James P. MacGuire, ed., *The Catholic William F. Buckley, Jr.* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

46 Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 212.

47 William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (Henry Regnery, 1951), xiii.

48 William F. Buckley Jr., *Up from Liberalism* (McDowell, Obolensky, 1959).

49 Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 61.

It tended to be arrogant about its Christianity and willing to merge Church and State. It exalted the community over the individual and could muster only ‘lukewarm’ support for a free economy.”<sup>50</sup> Seeking to bridge these divides, Frank Meyer, a senior editor at *National Review*, sought to fashion a new conservatism, termed fusionism.

Fusionism aimed to wed the traditionalists—whom Nash describes as the “defenders of order, consensus, morality, ‘right reason,’ religion, truth, virtue”—to those who favored laissez-faire economics and small government—the “libertarians, classical liberals, and Old Whigs.”<sup>51</sup> Across the pages of *National Review* and in a host of books and essays, Meyer defined conservatism in a way that largely reconciled the American political tradition with Catholic social thought. In an essay titled “Recrudescent American Conservatism,” Meyer outlined the key tenets of the conservative position. Conservatism, he proclaimed, “assumes the existence of an objective moral order,” rejects collectivism in favor of centering the individual within that order, is “profoundly antiutopian,” opposes “state control of the economy,” and “see[s] Communism as an armed and messianic threat to the very existence of Western civilization and the United States.” Meyer also insisted that conservatism “derives from these positions its firm support of the Constitution of the United States as originally conceived—to achieve the protection of individual liberty in an ordered society by limiting the power of government.” While far more straightforwardly capitalist than Catholic social teaching, Meyer’s list—with its emphasis on an “ordered society,” assertion of an “objective moral order,” and recognition of the “tension between those conservatives who stress individual freedom and those who stress community as a fabric of individual rights and responsibilities”—nonetheless created space for a distinctively Catholic conservative political ethos to continue to develop.<sup>52</sup>

On its face, Meyer’s veneration of the Constitution might seem at odds with a faith that, half a century before, had deemed Americanism heretical. However, by the 1960s, the belief that Catholicism was reconcilable with Americanism was taking root. Perhaps no one writer was more instrumental in bringing about this change than John Courtney Murray, a Jesuit priest and theologian who wrote extensively about Catholicism. Throughout the 1950s, Murray was repeatedly censored and prohibited from publishing his writings (particularly those on church-state relations) by the Catholic hierarchy.<sup>53</sup> But, as Wills notes, with a Catholic running for president in 1960, Murray was granted permission to publish *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, which “praised the American Constitution lavishly and showed just how patriotic Catholics

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50 Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 265. On charges of statism leveled against *National Review*, see William F. Buckley Jr., introduction to *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking? American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. William F. Buckley Jr. (Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), xx–xxv.

51 Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 264.

52 Frank S. Meyer, “Recrudescent American Conservatism,” in *Did You Ever See*, 80–83.

53 Wills, *Why I Am*, 214–21.

could be.”<sup>54</sup> Murray’s endorsement of religious freedom and pluralism aligned him with liberals broadly, and with those advocating for change from within the Church during the Second Vatican Council more particularly. This, too, might seem paradoxical at first blush, but the development of conservative Catholicism in the United States was not merely a reaction to but also a product of progressive and liberalizing reforms within the Church.

The Second Vatican Council, which took place over four sessions from 1962 to 1965, marked a significant rupture in the history and doctrine of the Church. Called by Pope John XXIII, the council issued a number of magisterial documents that modernized the Church. While the reforms stemming from Vatican II were sweeping, several of the decrees and apostolic constitutions it issued are particularly significant for the development of American Catholic conservatism. Chief among these was *Gaudium et Spes*, which, Kenneth Himes writes, made “clear that there is no proper political mission for the Church; rather, its mission is religious.”<sup>55</sup> This was accompanied by an explicit endorsement of religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) and Christian ecumenicism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*),<sup>56</sup> and a movement to de-emphasize the role of the hierarchy (*Lumen Gentium*) and empower the laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*). Taken together, and combined with the introduction of liturgical reforms that, among other things, largely replaced the Latin Mass in favor of the vernacular, the council’s proclamations were broadly perceived as fundamentally transforming Catholicism.

For some, these changes were welcome, and supporters argued that “Vatican II saved the American Church by bringing contemporary Catholicism into closer congruence with American political culture.”<sup>57</sup> For others, Vatican II was an affront and a betrayal. Seizing on the increased autonomy and space granted to the laity by the council, and in concert with some among the clergy who were critical of the reforms, traditionalist Catholic groups began to proliferate in the mid-1960s.

That conservative Catholics might criticize the Church was not an altogether new proposition. Wills recounts that, in 1960, Buckley had caused a stir by writing negatively

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54 Ibid., 218–19.

55 Kenneth R. Himes, “Vatican II and Contemporary Politics,” in *Catholic Church and the Nation-State*, 23.

56 Murray had a hand in crafting *Dignitatis Humanae*, which, according to theologian Kenneth Himes, “created the condition for a new kind of Catholicism to develop, one that did not employ the state and its coercive or regulatory power to secure its public presence.” Himes, “Vatican II,” 25. In her careful study of the Second Vatican Council, sociologist Melissa J. Wilde also emphasizes the significance of *Dignitatis Humanae*, writing that it “was an unprecedented statement from the Church that the best form of government is one which allows people to worship as they please.” Melissa J. Wilde, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 88. See also William L. Portier, “Theology of Manners as Theology of Containment: John Courtney Murray and ‘Dignitatis Humanae’ Forty Years After,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24, no. 1 (2006): 83–105.

57 Jelen, “American Church,” 77.

about an encyclical, and that, in 1961, Buckley and Wills alongside others at *National Review* publicly scorned *Mater et Magistra*, an encyclical that reinforced Catholic social teaching, emphasized the common good, and stressed the need to alleviate economic inequality. While liberals “inflate[d] the binding nature of encyclicals” in the 1950s, conservatives were more willing to question their sacrosanctity.<sup>58</sup>

After Vatican II, both liberals and Catholics alike were free to express skepticism, but conservatives remained at the fore of rebelling against Church authority in the name of tradition. This trend was exemplified by the Catholic Traditionalist Movement (CTM), founded by Father Gommar De Pauw in 1965.<sup>59</sup> The CTM was just one of several lay Catholic groups to form in response to Vatican II, but it helped spark a spirit of rebellion among politically and religiously conservative Catholics, such as the New Right political entrepreneur Paul Weyrich.<sup>60</sup> Another significant breakaway occurred in 1966 when Brent Bozell left *National Review* to start *Triumph*, an explicitly conservative Catholic publication.<sup>61</sup> *Triumph* was joined by a number of other conservative Catholic publications, including *The Wanderer* and *The Remnant*, both of which were founded in 1967.

Freed by the Second Vatican Council from adhering to a singular Catholic identity, right-wing Catholic movements and groups mushroomed. “By the late 1960s,” religion scholar William D. Dinges writes, “dissent on the Catholic right had become more differentiated and ideologically rigid.” Catholic traditionalists became increasingly radical in their willingness to challenge the authority of the Church. As Dinges explains, “[t]he traditionalist attack on the doctrinal integrity of the new liturgy, reinforced by similar allegations emerging from the highest sources within the church itself, rapidly shifted the focus of dissent on the Catholic right from the question of errant discipline to one of errant doctrine.”<sup>62</sup> The significance—and irony—of this development cannot be overstated: *Liberal reforms freed conservative Catholics to challenge traditional forms of religious authority, thereby enabling them to rebel against Church doctrines and dictates in the name of upholding tradition.*

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58 Wills, *Why I Am*, 44–49.

59 Mark S. Massa, SJ, *The American Catholic Revolution: How the '60s Changed the Church Forever* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

60 Chelsea Ebin, *The Radical Mind: The Origins of Right-Wing Catholic and Protestant Coalition Building* (University Press of Kansas, 2024), 64.

61 Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 141; see also Mark D. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph: The History of a Radical Roman Catholic Magazine, 1966–1976* (Lexington Books, 2012).

62 William D. Dinges, “We Are What You Were: Roman Catholic Traditionalism in America,” in *Being Right*, 243.

Having laid the foundation for a new conservatism in the 1950s, conservative movements expanded alongside their progressive counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s. By the mid-1970s, the New Right, a self-proclaimed “radical” movement, had begun building institutions and organizations that would enable it not only to propel conservatism into the mainstream but also to redefine the very meaning of conservatism. While ostensibly a secular movement, the New Right was helmed by conservative Catholic leaders, including Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, Garry Potter, and Connaught Marshner, who infused the movement with a distinctively Catholic worldview.<sup>63</sup> In some regards, New Right activists were heirs to fusionism, in that they espoused a “traditional,” that is socially conservative, religious worldview. Thus, the New Right positioned itself against feminism, abortion, and gay rights. But where fusionism sought to marry traditionalism to laissez-faire economic conservatism and limited government, the New Right played fast and loose with its commitments to both limited government and unfettered capitalism.<sup>64</sup> Rather than acquiesce to either a libertarian or classical liberal approach to the role of government and its regulation of the economy, Catholic New Right activists recognized that the state could be used to enforce socially conservative policies.<sup>65</sup>

Arguably, the New Right’s greatest success lay in helping to forge the larger and more prominent Christian Right movement, which came to “anchor” the Republican party beginning in the 1980s.<sup>66</sup> New Right activists not only devised political strategy and brokered the coalitions that formed the Christian Right; they also were instrumental in crafting the Christian Right’s “pro-family” platform.<sup>67</sup> For devout conservative Catholics like Weyrich and Marshner, the emphasis on family and its centrality to society bears the imprint of the catechism of the Catholic Church. Likewise, the principle of subsidiarity informed New Right proposals to devolve the provision of social services away from the state.

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63 The New Right was a pioneer in the use of single-issue advocacy groups and the creation of multiple and overlapping coalitions to advance its agenda. Most of its groups and coalitions avoided overt identifications with Catholicism. A notable exception was Gary Potter’s group, Catholics for Christian Political Action, founded in 1976. Prior to founding CCPA, Potter was also an editor at *Triumph* and later *Rough Beast* (founded in 1971). See Group Research Archives, Catholic Church, Box 54, Columbia University Archives. See also Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 157–58.

64 Ebin, *Radical Mind*, chapters 2 and 3.

65 See, for example, the following New Right publications: Paul Weyrich and Connaught Marshner, *Future 21: Directions for America in the 21st Century* (Devin-Adair, 1984); The Institute for Cultural Conservatism [William S. Lind and William H. Marshner], *Cultural Conservatism: Toward a New National Agenda* (Free Congress Research and Education Foundation, 1987).

66 Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties: Electoral Alignments in American History* (Princeton University Press, 2016), chapters 4 and 8.

67 Ebin, *Radical Mind*, chapter 5.

It is important, however, to note that a commitment to subsidiarity should not be equated with a complete disavowal of social services. Reflecting on his experience working in the Nixon administration, the paleoconservative Pat Buchanan gave voice to this sentiment, remarking:

I think the Catholic faith is consistent with the kind of conservatism I believe in. You know, I'm a traditionalist, I'm a Latin mass Catholic and I hold to traditional views of responsibility. I'm not a libertarian in the sense that I think all these social programs should be abolished in any sense. I'm familiar with *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* and all of those things that influenced me in Catholic school.<sup>68</sup>

This position accords with that of other influential Christian conservatives of the time, particularly the theologian Richard John Neuhaus. A Lutheran until his conversion to Catholicism in 1990, Neuhaus was at the forefront of arguing that religious institutions should serve as “mediating structures” in the provision of social welfare.<sup>69</sup>

Read alongside other aspects of Catholic social teaching, subsidiarity does not necessarily require a weakening of the state. Rather, if the state is to serve as a tool, or an extension of the Church, it retains its coercive capacity to enforce conformity regarding the form and structure of social relations. For example, New Right “pro-family” policies reflected a move toward decentralization and local control (subsidiarity) even as they strengthened the federal government’s capacity to enforce a singular definition of the family among its citizens, thereby ensuring conformity to a conservative worldview. This tracks with the neoconservative ideology emerging during the same time period, which, Melinda Cooper writes, “seeks not to dismantle the welfare state in the name of free-market economics but rather to reshape it so as to attach to it the *conservative* predispositions of the people.”<sup>70</sup> (An important side note: Vice President J. D. Vance is a proponent of this model of advancing conservative Catholic social policy through state coercion and economic populism.<sup>71</sup>) That this worldview emphasized and was modeled on a Catholic tradition that stressed patriarchal control, hierarchy, and obedience to authority is no accident.

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68 Sean Salai, “Remembering Nixon’s Catholic Coup: An Interview with Pat Buchanan,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, August 5, 2014, <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/remembering-nixons-catholic-coup-interview-pat-buchanan>.

69 Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (American Enterprise Institute, 1977), 30. See also Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books, 2017), 284.

70 Cooper, *Family Values*, 61.

71 Jim Tankersley and Andrew Duehren, “JD Vance Pioneered ‘New Right’ Economics. Trump May Not Embrace It,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/02/us/politics/jd-vance-new-right-economics.html>.

Likewise, the New Right's dedication to electoral politics did not necessarily extend to pro-democracy sentiment. Less than three months before voters headed to the polls in 1980, Paul Weyrich proudly proclaimed while addressing a Christian Right rally, "I don't want everybody to vote."<sup>72</sup> On its face, Weyrich's anti-democratic position is reflective of a Republican strategy to suppress voting. But it is also reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Catholic hostility to democratic governance, suggesting a belief that majoritarian rule is not, in fact, desirable.

Alongside the Christian Right, the New Right helped move Ronald Reagan into the White House in 1980.<sup>73</sup> The New Right's flirtation with populism,<sup>74</sup> which suggested a more complicated relationship between Catholicism and capitalism, quickly gave way to Reagan's adoption of trickle-down economics and war on welfare.<sup>75</sup>

One of Reagan's advisors was Michael Novak, a Catholic intellectual who frequently contributed to New Right publications, such as *Conservative Digest*, and cofounded the Institute on Religion and Democracy with Neuhaus in 1981. One part of what Mary Jo McConahay has dubbed the "theocon trinity," along with Neuhaus and George Weigel, Novak was especially instrumental in marrying Catholic conservatism to neoconservatism.<sup>76</sup> He did so, in part, by articulating a rationale for capitalism from a conservative Catholic vantage with the publication of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* in 1982. As Allitt explains, Novak "believed that the free market was consonant with his faith because 'democratic capitalism' . . . is not an individualistic but a familial system, which under the rule of law, nurtures this basic unit of society and can be entirely compatible with the message of the Gospels."<sup>77</sup> It is also worth recalling that in *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII made a case for the compatibility of capitalism with the natural law.

Novak, then, was not so much breaking from Church teaching as selectively retaining elements of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholic social teaching. Well aware of Catholic critiques of capitalism, Novak presciently wrote, "the Christian churches have failed to comprehend [democratic capitalism's] inner spirit. The laity will probably have to

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72 "Paul Weyrich—'I Don't Want Everyone to Vote' (Goo Goo)," posted June 8, 2007, by peoplefor, YouTube, 0:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GBAsFwPglw>. Weyrich's speech is from the National Affairs Briefing Conference held in Dallas, Texas, on August 21, 1980.

73 There are a host of excellent histories of the Christian Right that detail the movement's support for Reagan. See note 3 for recommended sources.

74 Takahito Moriyama, *Empire of Direct Mail: How Conservative Marketing Persuaded Voters and Transformed the Grassroots* (University Press of Kansas, 2023), 135.

75 Farber, *Rise and Fall*, 159–208; Michael Harrington, "The Prospects for Reaganomics," in *Party Coalitions in the 1980s*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1981), 389–94.

76 McConahay, *Playing God*, 150–52; see also Scribner, *Partisan Church*, esp. chapter 1.

77 Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 286.

lead the way. They will encounter opposition.”<sup>78</sup> By the mid-1980s, conservative Catholic groups, such as the American Catholic Conference, were waging open war against liberal economic positions taken by US Catholic bishops. The bishops, already opposed to the Reagan administration’s nuclear policies,<sup>79</sup> were critical of supply-side economics and had begun drafting a pastoral letter on the economy. Eventually published in 1986 as *Economic Justice for All*, the letter urged increased government action to reduce inequality and support the poor.<sup>80</sup>

Prior to the pastoral letter’s publication, early drafts prompted a response from the Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy, which former treasury secretary William E. Simon and Michael Novak co-chaired.<sup>81</sup> Reporting for the *New York Times*, Leonard Silk wrote, “In effect, the lay commission report argues that it is not government’s redistribution of income that helps the poor but economic growth stemming from the imagination and investments of capitalists.”<sup>82</sup> “The pro-market stance championed by the Lay Commission,” Dennis Deslippe explains, “was significant since it required a marked confrontation with Church teachings critical of individualism and consumerism, ones dedicated to just wages, humane working conditions, and the privileging of stable family and community over profit.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, the clash signaled a continued willingness to challenge and confront the Church hierarchy on the part of conservative Catholics in the post-Vatican II era.

Novak and Simon took a decisively postconciliar line when they charged “ecclesiastical overreaching.”<sup>84</sup> For these conservative Catholics, the bishops were violating the Church’s (thoroughly modern) commitment to refrain from politics and not insert itself into matters of the state—at least in regard to economic policy. But not all conservative Catholics endorsed either laissez-faire capitalism or the Church’s retreat from politics.

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78 Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (American Enterprise Institute / Simon and Schuster, 1982), 242.

79 Eugene Kennedy, “America’s Activist Bishops,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 12, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/08/12/magazine/america-s-activist-bishops.html>.

80 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986, accessed November 14, 2025, [https://www.usccb.org/resources/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all\\_1.pdf](https://www.usccb.org/resources/economic_justice_for_all_1.pdf).

81 The Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy, “Toward the Future: Catholic Social Thought and the U.S. Economy—A Lay Letter,” *Crisis Magazine*, November 1, 1984, <https://crisismagazine.com/vault/toward-the-future-catholic-social-thought-and-the-u-s-economy-a-lay-letter>.

82 Leonard Silk, “Celebrating Capitalism,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1984, Group Research Archives, Catholic Church, Box 54, Columbia University Archives.

83 Dennis Deslippe, “For Faith and Free Markets: The Lay Commission and Conservative Catholics in the 1980s,” *Journal of Policy History* 28, no. 4 (2016): 597–623, quote at 599.

84 *Ibid.*, 604.

Indeed, particularly for conservative Catholics who were concerned with the doctrine of “religious freedom” and with so-called social issues, like abortion and euthanasia, such a neat division between religion and the state was neither necessary nor desirable.

During the Reagan years, Neuhaus became “increasingly sympathetic to the neoconservative critique of liberalism.”<sup>85</sup> His move to the right was accompanied by the creation of the Institute on Religion and Public Life and the launch of *First Things*, a journal dedicated to “advanc[ing] a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society.”<sup>86</sup> Concerned with “religious freedom,” Neuhaus adopted an understanding that it “bestows the right to assert absolute moral law over and above federal law.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the moral law became a vehicle for ecumenical coalition-building,<sup>88</sup> which manifested in a statement titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” Coauthored by Neuhaus and Charles Colson, an evangelical convert, the statement sought concord in the service of advancing Christianity and combating the corrosive effects of secularism, modernism, and relativism.<sup>89</sup>

The moral law also served as a means by which the state could be brought in line with conservative Christianity. Fixating on matters pertaining to the family, such as premarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, and divorce, Neuhaus and *First Things* helped shift the discourse toward an examination of law and the perceived failings of the US courts.<sup>90</sup> This helped pave the way for a new generation of natural law theorists, which included legal scholars Robert P. George, a staunchly outspoken Catholic, and Hadley Arkes, a Jew who would later convert to Catholicism. In some ways, these scholars picked up where Charles Murray had left off in his veneration of America’s founding documents. As George put it, “If *the* official act of foundation of the American regime was the publication of the Declaration of Independence—as our Founders themselves plainly believed—then at the basis of American republicanism is the explicit recognition of ‘the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.’”<sup>91</sup> But where Murray aimed to locate a Catholic defense of pluralism and liberal democracy in relation to the Declaration, the new natural law theorists sought to make the case that the American republic was—and always should be—founded on

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85 Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives* (Yale University Press, 2009), 264.

86 See the masthead of *First Things*: <https://firstthings.com/masthead/> (accessed November 9, 2025).

87 Cooper, *Family Values*, 288.

88 *Ibid.*, 291; Scribner, *Partisan Church*, 12.

89 Catholic-Evangelical Consultation, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *Eternal World Television Network* (EWTN), republished from *First Things* (May 1994), accessed November 9, 2025, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/evangelicals--catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium-10976>.

90 Allitt, *Conservatives*, 265.

91 Robert P. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion, and Morality in Crisis* (ISI Books, 2001), 157.

Christian principles.<sup>92</sup> That it was not operating as such reflected a failure on the part of the courts to uphold these founding principles and center morality in the law.

There was nothing new about either the concept of natural law, which can be traced back to Aristotle and Aquinas, or conservative critiques of the Supreme Court (conservatives had long been critical of “judicial activism,” and Bozell published a scathing indictment of the Warren Court in 1966).<sup>93</sup> But the new natural law theorists were making bolder claims about the Supreme Court’s—and conservatives’—failings. The rot went much deeper, Arkes alleged, and “conservative critics obscured the problem as they complained merely about activism.” A 1996 *First Things* symposium on “The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics” was, according to Arkes, a first step in correcting that error as the critique was expanded to identify how judges and the courts were “remodeling the very matrix of the laws on birth, death, sexuality, and marriage.”<sup>94</sup> The solution, then, would be to formulate a legal philosophy to apply natural law to define the appropriate boundaries of the family and delimit what forms of social and sexual behavior would be tolerated in society. They were, in other words, inching toward an expression of church-state integration. It is perhaps no surprise that, as Allitt remarks, those associated with *First Things* came to be “known as theoconservatives by their secular brethren.”<sup>95</sup>

Around the same time that Neuhaus was getting *First Things* off the ground, the Federalist Society, “a group of conservatives and libertarians dedicated to reforming the current legal order” that first came together in 1982,<sup>96</sup> was hiring the conservative Catholic activist and fundraiser Leonard Leo. Recognizing that public opinion—and democratic majoritarianism, by extension—was opposed to right-wing positions on social issues, Leo sought not to constrain the courts but to stack them.<sup>97</sup> Over the past thirty years, Leo has succeeded in doing just this. He has played a role in the selection, nomination, or confirmation of all six of the current Supreme Court’s conservative justices. Moreover, under his watch, the lower courts have been transformed.

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92 The degree to which natural law proponents sought to explicitly tie American foundations to Christianity varied, but Scribner asserts that Catholic neocons rejected a “gauzy and vague Christian foundation for the American republic.” As an example, Scribner recounts George Weigel’s claim that “the American constitutional system is rooted in the scholastic, Catholic thought of the thirteenth century.” Scribner, *Partisan Church*, 12.

93 L. Brent Bozell, *The Warren Revolution* (Arlington House, 1966).

94 Hadley Arkes, *Natural Rights & the Right to Choose* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150.

95 Allitt, *Conservatives*, 265. A former editor of *First Things*, Damon Linker, made a strong case for regarding the group as theoconservatives in *The Theocons* (Doubleday, 2006). Others would dispute the ascription; notably, George asserted in a posthumous tribute that Neuhaus “loathed both theocracy and its secular equivalent.” Robert P. George, foreword to *The Naked Public Square Reconsidered*, ed. Christopher Wolf (ISI Books, 2009), x.

96 “About Us,” The Federalist Society, accessed November 9, 2025, <https://fedsoc.org/about-us>.

97 McConahay, *Playing God*, 87.

According to *ProPublica*, Leo has used “his network of contacts to place Federalist Society protégés in clerkships, judgeships and jobs in the White House and across the federal government.” These court officers are the foot soldiers in Leo’s campaign “to wage a broader cultural war against a ‘progressive Ku Klux Klan’ and ‘vile and immoral current-day barbarians, secularists and bigots’ who demonize people of faith and move society further from its ‘natural order.’”<sup>98</sup> This “natural order” eschews pluralism, is governed by Catholic interpretations of the natural law, and seeks to use the undemocratic and coercive power of the courts to impose its singular vision of social, political, and economic life on the American people.

As Leo was working to transform the composition of the federal judiciary, conservative Catholic thought continued to enter the mainstream of conservative politics. Tasked with helping define “compassionate conservatism,” Michael Gerson, a conservative evangelical, infused George W. Bush’s speeches with Catholic social thought.<sup>99</sup> In 2002, Bush signed into law the Born-Alive Infants Protection Act, which Arkes helped draft.<sup>100</sup> While relatively modest in its scope and application, the act was a step in advancing the legal doctrine of “fetal personhood,” which is premised on the Catholic teaching that life begins at conception. In 2004, *Mirror of Justice*, a Catholic legal blog, was launched to “ask whether the profoundly counter-cultural elements in Catholicism offer a basis for rethinking the nature of law in our society.”<sup>101</sup> For over twenty years, it remained an influential platform for Catholic legal theory. In 2008, Sarah Palin, an outspoken evangelical Protestant, delivered an acceptance speech at the RNC that was written by Matthew Scully, a conservative Catholic whose “specialty was crafting Bush’s pro-life message in a way that would not offend soccer moms or

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98 Andy Kroll, Andrea Bernstein and Ilya Marritz, “We Don’t Talk About Leonard: The Man Behind the Right’s Supreme Court Supermajority,” *ProPublica*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.propublica.org/article/we-dont-talk-about-leonard-leo-supreme-court-supermajority>.

99 “Heroic Conservatism’: A Conversation with author Michael Gerson,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2007, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2007/11/13/heroic-conservatism-a-conversation-with-author-michael-gerson/>.

100 Arkes was credited with advancing Catholic natural law doctrine and promoting the anti-abortion cause long before his conversion to Catholicism in 2010. Christine M. Williams, “Pro-Life Leader Hadley Arkes Becomes Catholic,” *The Anchor*, May 31, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161127214831/http://209.157.64.201/focus/f-religion/2525329/posts>. “Congress Delivers Born-Alive Infants Protection Act,” *Life Insight: A Publication of the NCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities* 13, no. 3 (July–August 2002), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/congress-delivers-born-alive-infants-protection-act>.

101 Rick Garnett, “Twenty Years of Mirror of Justice,” *Mirror of Justice*, February 4, 2024, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250912201631/https://mirrorofjustice.blogs.com/mirrorofjustice/2024/02/20-years-of-mirror-of-justice.html>.

mainstream Catholics who get nervous around some of the more extreme Evangelical rhetoric.”<sup>102</sup>

While the 2008 McCain–Palin ticket was a losing one, conservative Catholics were on a roll. The following year, the “Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience” was published. Largely authored by George, the declaration called on Christians to engage in civil disobedience to resist social decay by protecting the “unborn, disabled, and the elderly,” as well as to resist heterosexual marriage and “to affirm our right—and, more importantly, to embrace our obligation—to speak and act in defense of these truths. We pledge to each other, and to our fellow believers, that no power on earth, be it cultural or political, will intimidate us into silence or acquiescence.”<sup>103</sup> The following month, *The New York Times* profiled George, anointing him “this country’s most influential conservative Christian thinker.”<sup>104</sup> The 2000s were, in short, the beginning of a conservative Catholic zeitgeist that has only continued to gather force and grow in influence.

As conservative Catholics racked up these wins, conservative Protestants seemingly faltered. In 2007, David Kirkpatrick asserted the country was witnessing the “Evangelical Crackup,” as evangelicals and fundamentalist Protestants turned against George W. Bush, and the Christian Right fractured. Conservative Christians were frustrated by the administration’s failure to deliver on a socially conservative domestic agenda and disappointed with the war in Iraq.<sup>105</sup> Barack Obama’s subsequent victory was, therefore, received as a repudiation of the Bush administration’s War on Terror and its social conservatism. But, for many conservative Christians, the problem with the Bush administration was not that it had gone too far, but rather that it had not gone far enough.

Not a theocrat himself, George W. Bush opened the door for theocratic political and legal thought. To fully realize conservative Catholic political thought, the United States would need a president not committed to the principles of liberalism, pluralism, or democracy. Conservative Catholic thinkers like Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule have laid the groundwork for this to happen.

In 2018, Patrick Deneen, a political theorist at Notre Dame University, published a slim book provocatively titled *Why Liberalism Failed*. In it, Deneen charged that liberalism “has failed because it has succeeded,” and in succeeding, it produced broken government systems, economic inequality, and less rather than more freedom. To closely paraphrase

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102 Massimo Calabresi, “The Man Behind Palin’s Speech,” *Time*, September 4, 2008, <https://time.com/archive/6936275/the-man-behind-palins-speech/>.

103 “Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience,” Manhattan Declaration, November 20, 2009, <https://www.manhattandeclaration.org/>.

104 David D. Kirkpatrick, “The Conservative-Christian Big Thinker,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 16, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/20/magazine/20george-t.html>.

105 David D. Kirkpatrick, “The ‘Evangelical Crackup,’” *New York Times Magazine*, October 28, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/magazine/28Evangelicals-t.html>.

Deneen, if the promise of liberalism has been equity, pluralism, dignity, and liberty, it has instead produced inequality, homogeneity, degradation, and unfreedom.<sup>106</sup> If not liberalism, what is to be done? “A better course,” Deneen writes, “will consist in smaller, local forms of resistance: practices more than theories, the building of resilient new cultures against the anticulture of liberalism.” What this looks like is only hinted at, with Deneen asserting that the alternative to liberalism lies in the creation of small, autonomous communities and “the cultivation of cultures of community, care, self-sacrifice, and small-scale democracy.”<sup>107</sup> Who belongs to these communities of care—and what happens to those excluded from them—is left largely to the reader’s imagination.

In Deneen’s critique of liberalism we can see the shadow of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century encyclicals discussed earlier, which decried the corrosive effects of liberal individualism, secularism, pluralism, and unfettered capitalism. Caught between the rejection of individualism/liberalism, on the one hand, and collectivism/communism, on the other hand, Deneen embraces a vaguely defined communitarianism that is strongly influenced by the doctrines of subsidiarity and solidarity. This communitarianism is premised on a singular—as opposed to pluralist—vision of the good that is informed by religion and, despite the emphasis on “care,” is exclusionary and coercive.

We can also identify a move toward embracing a postliberal Catholic future. What Deneen and other “Catholic postliberals” seek, as the political theorist Mark Lilla puts it, is “to establish (or reestablish) a more communitarian vision of the good society, one in which democratic institutions would in some sense be subordinate to a superior, authoritative moral vision of the human good—which for many of them means the authority of the Catholic Church.”<sup>108</sup> This project becomes clearer when one turns to Adrian Vermeule’s conception of “common good constitutionalism.”

Vermeule, who converted to Catholicism in 2016 and has been labeled an integralist,<sup>109</sup> is a legal scholar whose 2022 book, *Common Good Constitutionalism*, presents a case for abandoning both originalism and legal progressivism as modes of constitutional interpretation. Instead, Vermeule embraces a “return” to the “classical legal tradition.” Predicated in part on Roman law, and on fusing common and natural law traditions, the “classical” approach views law as “an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated

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106 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), 3.

107 *Ibid.*, 19–20.

108 Mark Lilla, “The Tower and the Sewer,” *New York Review of Books*, June 20, 2024, 16, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/06/20/the-tower-and-the-sewer-why-liberalism-failed-deneen/>.

109 Madeline Teahan, “There Is No Middle Way Between Atheism and Catholicism, Says Harvard Professor Who Has Converted,” *Catholic Herald*, October 28, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161215151148/http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/10/28/there-is-no-middle-way-between-atheism-and-catholicism-says-harvard-professor-who-is-converting/>; Jason Blakely, “The Integralism of Adrian Vermeule,” *Commonweal*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/not-catholic-enough>.

by a public authority who has charge of the community.”<sup>110</sup> Vermeule couches his defense of the classical model in a careful rereading of constitutional and administrative law that, upon first glance, appears reasonable enough, which is to say it appears compatible with the US Constitution and basic principles structuring American government.

However, *Common Good Constitutionalism* promotes an explicitly authoritarian model of sovereign power as, according to Vermeule, “it reads constitutional provisions to afford public authorities latitude to promote the flourishing of political communities, by promoting the classical triptych of peace, justice, and abundance.” Stated even more bluntly, its primary aim is “to ensure that the ruler has both the authority and the duty to rule well.”<sup>111</sup> That the system he envisions is top-down is expressly stated when Vermeule writes that it “does not suffer from a horror of legitimate hierarchy, because it sees that law can encourage those subject to the law to form desires, habits, and beliefs that better track and promote communal well-being.”<sup>112</sup> Within this hierarchical schema, all other functions of the law and society are subordinated to “promote good rule,” and “constraints on power are good only derivatively, insofar as they contribute to the common good.”<sup>113</sup> In Vermeule’s hands, the law becomes a tool to both coerce and mold its subjects to conform to a singular vision of the good, reinforcing a homogenous communitarian vision of society.

Moreover, Vermeule’s ideal form of law, and by extension model of the state, demands an express rejection of liberalism, individualism, and pluralism. The *common good* that Vermeule presupposes is unitary and communitarian and is seemingly defined to coincide with those values established by conservative Catholicism. This can be seen in Vermeule’s rejection of abortion and support for the rights of “unborn children,”<sup>114</sup> his criticism of free speech and the framework of individual rights, and his support for the regulation of capitalism and the environment. If government is to function properly, it will do so with “a view to promoting solidarity and subsidiarity.”<sup>115</sup>

Indeed, Vermeule explicitly draws on the traditions of subsidiarity and solidarity, going so far as to quote directly from *Centesimus Annus*, an encyclical penned by Pope John Paul II.<sup>116</sup> But Vermeule’s understanding of subsidiarity is warped by his interpretation of sovereign authority, which he derives from the work of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt. Vermeule conceives of subsidiarity through the lens of the “state of exception,” which

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110 Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Polity, 2022), 3.

111 Ibid., 36, 37.

112 Ibid., 38.

113 Ibid., 37.

114 Ibid., 199n103.

115 Ibid., 42.

116 Ibid., 155.

“gives the public authority at the highest level of the system extraordinary power to do what is necessary for the common good, the strength of a giant.”<sup>117</sup> The public authority, Vermeule writes, should have “the jurisdiction to act, under exceptional circumstances where the operation of subsidiary institutions fails, so as to promote the common good throughout the polity—overriding if necessary the views of any subordinate jurisdiction.”<sup>118</sup> Understood this way, the authoritarian “daddy” conjured by Tucker Carlson is really no different from Vermeule’s public authority, freed from the constraints of a secular and pluralist liberal-democratic constitutional order and empowered to spank all the bad girls. Both conceive of a sovereign authority that is more reminiscent of a Roman Caesar—or perhaps, more accurately, a Roman pontiff—and of a state structure more reminiscent of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church than a polity governed by checks and balances.

## Conclusion

In 2021, Ross Douthat, a conservative Catholic public intellectual, published a prescient article titled “Catholic Ideas and Catholic Realities.” While his central contention was that the Catholic Church is in danger of an imminent “widespread structural collapse,” Douthat also provided a typology of the core ideas/groups animating American Catholicism, aptly grouping Catholics into four main camps: populists, integralists, benedictines, and tradinistas.<sup>119</sup>

According to Douthat’s taxonomy, the populists both support Trump and “believe that liberal democracy requires a strong religious politics and an alliance between evangelicals and Catholics.” While hewing toward right-wing economic populism, this group remains nominally committed to the core tenets of liberalism and democratic governance even as they identify with postliberalism. A second group, integralists, seeks a “Catholic empire” and the merging of the Church with the state. Nonetheless, they also tend toward support of Trump because they “prefer illiberal nationalism to liberal internationalism.” Then there are what Douthat terms the “benedictines,” whom we might alternatively label communitarians. While sharing the integralists’ skepticism of liberalism, they advocate for local and bottom-up reform (“institution-building from below”) instead of top-down transformation. (The fourth category, “tradinistas,” are Catholic anticapitalists who are not relevant to this inquiry.)

Plainly, conservative Catholics are not a homogenous group. There are disagreements concerning the separation of church and state, capitalism and the free market, and the

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117 Ibid., 155.

118 Ibid., 158.

119 Ross Douthat, “Catholic Ideas and Catholic Realities,” *First Things*, August 1, 2021, <https://firstthings.com/catholic-ideas-and-catholic-realities/>.

relationship between religious freedom and pluralism. Moreover, there is considerable overlap among these groups. For Douthat, what all of these ideas and the groups affiliated with them have in common is that they “represent attempts to intensify commitment, to forge a more fully Catholic approach to politics and culture than has prevailed since the 1960s.” But he does not imagine they will succeed. Rather than viewing the heightened presence of these groups in American politics as signs of Catholic strength, Douthat worries over their ability to reinvigorate an American Catholicism that is in “decline.”

Indeed, Douthat contends “it’s more likely that the decline will accelerate, with multiple forces eroding the Church’s institutional position over the next twenty years” as a result of a slew of challenges, including the financial and reputational pressures resulting from decades of sex abuse scandals, the rise of evangelical Protestantism among Latinx populations, changing demographics, and continuing trends toward secularism in the United States.<sup>120</sup> One might add that there is the potential for a schism within the Church driven by conservative Catholics’ rejection of the liberal turn ushered in by Pope Francis and his successor Pope Leo XIV, who has signaled his intention to continue in this vein.<sup>121</sup> Thus, it is entirely conceivable that, in the coming years, we will see a marked collapse of the institutional influence of the Roman Catholic Church both in the United States and internationally.

In light of these very real and material concerns, Douthat hits on one possible scenario—(some) of these ideas may successfully gain purchase within conservative politics even as the institutional and religious influence of the Catholic Church continues to wane. It would seem Douthat’s fear is coming to pass: While the number and religiosity of Catholics in the United States declines, the influence of conservative Catholic thought on American politics has never been stronger.<sup>122</sup>

Evidence of this abounds: The Supreme Court, with its six-person majority of overtly conservative justices,<sup>123</sup> all of whom were raised Catholic,<sup>124</sup> the vice presidency, now

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120 Ibid.

121 McConahay, *Playing God*, x. For conflict stemming from the left flank of the Church, see also Ben Munster, “Pope Francis Has Lost Control of His Liberal Revolution,” *Politico*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/pope-francis-rome-vatican-city-germany-catholics-liberal-revolution/>.

122 See “2023 PRRI Census of American Religion: County-Level Data on Religious Identity and Diversity,” *Public Religion Research Institute* (PRRI), August 29, 2024, <https://www.prii.org/research/census-2023-american-religion/>; Jeffrey M. Jones, “Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups,” *Gallup*, March 25, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>.

123 Stephen Jessee, Neil Malhotra, and Maya Sen, “A Decade-Long Longitudinal Survey Shows That the Supreme Court is Now Much More Conservative Than the Public,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 24 (2022): e2120284119, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2120284119>.

124 Nomi Stolzenberg, “Religious Identity and Supreme Court Justices,” *JStor Daily*, October 22, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/religious-identity-supreme-court-justices-amy-coney-barrett/>.

occupied by J. D. Vance, a convert to a traditionalist interpretation of Catholicism,<sup>125</sup> and Project 2025, which bears the imprint of conservative Catholic thought and is proving to be the backbone of much of President Trump's second-term agenda.<sup>126</sup> But the sway of conservative Catholic political thought goes beyond the direct access of conservative Catholics to the seat of American political power; it goes right to the heart of the ideologies underpinning the “new” Republican Party, which has embraced an antidemocratic politics premised on pseudopopulism, illiberalism, and antipluralism.<sup>127</sup>

These core ideological commitments are often described in terms that emphasize what they aim to negate, reinforcing the view that the right is reactionary. But we might be better served by shifting our focus to what they advocate for: authoritarianism, conformism, communitarianism, and familism. These -isms are, in turn, supported by the principles of subsidiarity and hierarchy, a commitment to the “traditional,” and a belief in a singular conception of the common good. Taken together, these ideas promote a comprehensive vision of government and the state that is at odds with the traditions of pluralist liberal democracy in the United States. While not wholly or exclusively promulgated by conservative Catholics, the intellectual roots of these ideas can be found in Catholic social and political thought, which has been nourished and nurtured by conservative Catholic thinkers and within conservative Catholic publications over the past seventy-five years.

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125 Vance, “How I Joined”; see also Elizabeth Dias, “How JD Vance Found His Way to the Catholic Church,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/25/us/jd-vance-catholic-church-conversion.html>.

126 Chelsea Ebin, “The Legacy of the Catholic New Right in Project 2025,” *Public Seminar*, August 26, 2024, <https://publicseminar.org/2024/08/the-catholic-new-right-and-project-2025/>; Steve Contorno and Casey Tolan, “Trump Said He Hadn’t Read Project 2025—But Most of His Early Executive Actions Overlap with Its Proposals,” *CNN*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/31/politics/trump-policy-project-2025-executive-orders-invs/index.html>.

127 For an account of the “new” economically quasi-populist Republican Party taking shape under the auspices of Trump, see Adam Wren, Olivia Beavers, and Megan Messerly, “A New Kind of Republican Party Is Forming at the RNC,” *Politico*, July 17, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/07/17/rnc-republican-party-transformation-maga-00168933>.

## “Democracy Must Be Made Safe for the World”

### *Ralph Adams Cram and the Tradition of American Monarchism*

CHRISTIAN RUTH

University of Florida

**Abstract:** *Ralph Adams Cram was an architect famed for his role in the Gothic Revival movement in the United States. He was also a monarchist. This article examines Cram’s intellectual history and the Romantic-era influences behind his antidemocratic beliefs and ties them to the neoreactionary politics of the “Dark Enlightenment” on the contemporary far right in the United States and abroad.*

**Keywords:** Ralph Adams Cram, monarchism, neoreaction, Curtis Yarvin, Dark Enlightenment, political thought, far right

Ralph Adams Cram is best known as a luminary figure in American architecture. Born the son of a Unitarian minister in 1863 in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, Cram experienced a marked religious experience during a stay in Rome in his early twenties and converted to Anglo-Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> His architectural talents, informed by a deep belief in the primacy of the aesthetics of the medieval era, led him to become the United States’ torchbearer for the Gothic Revival movement, and for Romantic-era architecture. Between 1890 and his death in 1942, Cram built dozens of libraries, cathedrals, university buildings, and government offices. This prolific streak put him on the cover of *Time* magazine and made him a rival of Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>2</sup>

Cram’s deeply held belief in the beauty of the medieval world was only matched by his fervor for feudal politics. “‘The world must be made safe for democracy’ is a noble phrase,” he wrote in 1917, amid the chaos of World War I, “but it is meaningless

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1 Ralph Adams Cram, undated letter in “Childhood Reminiscences” folder, Ralph Adams Cram Papers, Boston Public Library (hereafter RACP), FA 2015.01, Box 6.

2 See *Time’s* cover for December 13, 1926.

without its corollary, ‘democracy must be made safe for the world.’”<sup>3</sup> Cram was an ardent monarchist. He did not necessarily espouse a belief in a pure return to the ancien régime, but he argued for most of his life that modern democracy was a debasement of what he called the “High Democracy” of the Middle Ages, the height of the feudal era.<sup>4</sup> America, he believed, would be best served by jettisoning democracy for the rule of a philosopher king, or a coterie of educated aristocratic rulers.

Cram was not alone then, nor is he alone today. He was a member of a variety of medievalist and Romanticist circles in the late 1800s and early 1900s, ranging from “the Visionists” to the American chapter of the Jacobite Order of the White Rose, which he cofounded.<sup>5</sup> Filled with an eclectic mix of writers, poets, and artists, these groups lauded the beauty of medieval splendor and in some cases the feudal social hierarchy. They were joined in their critiques of modernity and American politics by a wide range of overlapping sociopolitical groups, including the “new humanists,” the distributists, and the Southern Agrarians, all of which Cram increasingly affiliated with later in life. Today, Cram and many of his contemporaries, as well as the Counter-Enlightenment philosophers of the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s who influenced them toward monarchical views, are invoked by the growing ranks of reactionary conservatives on the far right. Instead of revered architects like Cram, though, the new reactionary spectrum encompasses serious scholars such as Patrick Deneen, online figures such as Curtis Yarvin (“Mencius Moldbug”), and the dubiously named but popular “Bronze Age Pervert.”<sup>6</sup> Like Cram, these illiberal reactionaries invoke the same tradition of antidemocratic ideas and lean on the same thinkers and concepts.

As democracies confront the rising illiberal wave of the current era, which to many observers seems to have little historic origin beyond the mid-twentieth century, it is critical to understand the long, winding tradition of illiberal thought. This article

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3 Ralph Adams Cram, *The Nemesis of Mediocrity* (Marshall Jones, 1919), 22.

4 Ralph Adams Cram, *The End of Democracy* (Marshall Jones, 1932), 23.

5 See the “Order of the White Rose, 1898–1900” folder, RACP, FA 2015.01, Box 6.

6 On this intellectual lineage, see Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2009). Recent examples of this tradition include Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018); Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (Sentinel, 2023); Guillaume Faye, *Archeofuturism: European Visions of the Post-Catastrophic Age* (Arktos, 2010); and Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment* (Imperium Press, 2022). Among many works of scholarship on this illiberal resurgence, see George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (Columbia University Press, 2017); Matthew N. Lyons, *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right’s Challenge to State and Empire* (PM Press, 2018); Roberta A. Adams, *Trumpism, Carl Schmitt, and the Threat of Anti-Liberalism in the United States: The Political Thought of Donald Trump and Trumpism* (Lexington Books, 2024); David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024); Brian Wolfel, *Thomas Carlyle and the Political Universe: From American Transcendentalism to an Elusive Post-Liberalism* (Lexington Books, 2024); and Domenico Losurdo, *Democracy or Bonapartism: Two Centuries of War on Democracy* (Verso, 2024).

reexamines Cram, who has received limited scholarly attention.<sup>7</sup> It links him to a broader constellation of antidemocratic conservatives, neo-medievalists, and Romantic-era thinkers as a case study in medieval-inspired reactionary alternatives to democracy. It draws connections to the present day by looking at how some modern reactionary movements, particularly the neoreactionary “Dark Enlightenment,” ground themselves in the philosophies, aesthetics, and emotions of the Counter-Enlightenment, the Romantic era, and the reactionary movements of the early twentieth century.

### Errant Knights

Cram’s yearning for monarchy was inextricably linked to his attraction to the medieval period. Like many others in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Cram was bombarded by the rapid changes in the political and social climate of the United States. He saw mass politics, the excesses of Gilded Age consumerism and industrial capitalism, and the reform tendencies of the Progressive Era wiping away the traditional art and culture that linked the United States to Europe. Modernity loomed, and Cram joined the ranks of Romanticists and Pre-Raphaelite artists who yearned for a purer, emotionally and spiritually fulfilling past. Many of these, particularly in the Victorian era, were ardent critics of democracy, and drew on real and imagined histories of the medieval past to inform their opinions on art, politics, and life. English architect and polymath John Ruskin, who helped ignite the Gothic Revival, argued that places like fifteenth-century Venice epitomized the height of European civilization, a late medieval utopia that embodied the ephemeral “Gothic” that the revival sought to recreate. “Gothic,” Ruskin said, “was formed in the baron’s castle, and the burgher’s street. It was formed by the thoughts, and hands, and powers of labouring citizens and warrior kings.” Such history

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7 Most of the scholarship on Cram has focused on biographical sketches of his bohemian life, his architectural significance, and his impact on Boston rather than his political and philosophical ideas. See Louella Elizabeth Edwards Hirsch, *Ralph Adams Cram: The Gothic Quest in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 1975); Robert Muccigrosso, *American Gothic: The Mind and Art of Ralph Adams Cram* (University Press of America, 1980); Sarah Drummond Lanford, “A Gothic Epitome: Ralph Adams Cram as Princeton’s Architect,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 43, no. 3 (Spring, 1982): 184–220; Douglass Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia, 1881–1900, Ralph Adams Cram: Life and Architecture* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Douglass Shand-Tucci, *Ralph Adams Cram: An Architect’s Four Quests: Medieval, Modernist, American, Ecumenical* (University of Michigan Press, 1995); and Michael D. Clark, *The Discovery of American Tradition: 1865–1942* (Louisiana State University Press, 2005), chapter 3. Greater attention has recently been paid to Cram’s philosophy and politics. See Michael J. Connolly, *Jacobitism in Britain and the United States, 1880–1910* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023), chapters 5–7, for longer discussions of Jacobitism and Cram. See also the recent work of Alex McPhee-Browne reexamining interwar reactionary politics in the United States, including figures like Cram: “Defying the Demos: Antidemocratic Thought in the United States, 1930–1950,” *Journal of American Studies* (2024): 1–26; and “The Menace of Globalism: Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 2–30.

was wrought in an inescapable aesthetic that gave life to that social and political order. It was not enough to simply ape the architecture of the medieval period, though thinkers like Ruskin also advocated for a return to its patterns and behaviors. In a time of rapid change, leaning on the solidity of the medieval past, whether it be the aesthetic of flying buttresses or the tradition of feudal social hierarchy, provided sociopolitical continuity and security. Democracy, industrialization, and commercialization threatened the fabric of society and politics that Ruskin and Cram believed to be essential.<sup>8</sup>

In part, Cram's life was a study in contradictory influences. His family had deep New Hampshire roots, having immigrated to a colonial steading in the mid-1630s after receiving a commission from Charles I and II of the House of Stuart. Raised within a family and community of centuries-long affiliation to Puritanism, Cram converted suddenly to Anglo-Catholicism after he moved to Boston to study architecture. His conversion reflected not only his profound piety but also his fierce loyalty to his Anglo-American roots—while sympathetic, he never converted to Roman Catholicism. Biographers of Cram have noted the influence of his grandfather Ira Blake, who remained an ardent Federalist until his death, on the young architect. Cram himself wrote fondly of “the Squire,” as Blake was nicknamed, and grounded himself in the aristocratic politics of his grandfather while his distaste for modern democracy matured during the heyday of American democratic expansion in the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>9</sup>

Cram cultivated connections to a variety of medievalist and Romanticist circles in the 1890s once he moved to Boston. In the early 1890s, Cram and several others in the “Visionists” social circle in Boston began publishing a short-lived art and commentary journal, *The Knight Errant*. The Visionists were an eclectic group of artists, philosophers, and writers led by noted Boston photographer Frederick Holland Day.<sup>10</sup> Cram worked with Day to organize medievalist plays and art shows inspired by the work of those in the group, including, in 1916, an extravagant set piece, the “Masque of Power,” for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where Cram had been a professor of architecture. Cram bedecked hundreds of students in period attire and recreated a massive sea galley, like those from the doge of Venice, in faux-medieval splendor. He dressed himself as Merlin (figure 1).<sup>11</sup>

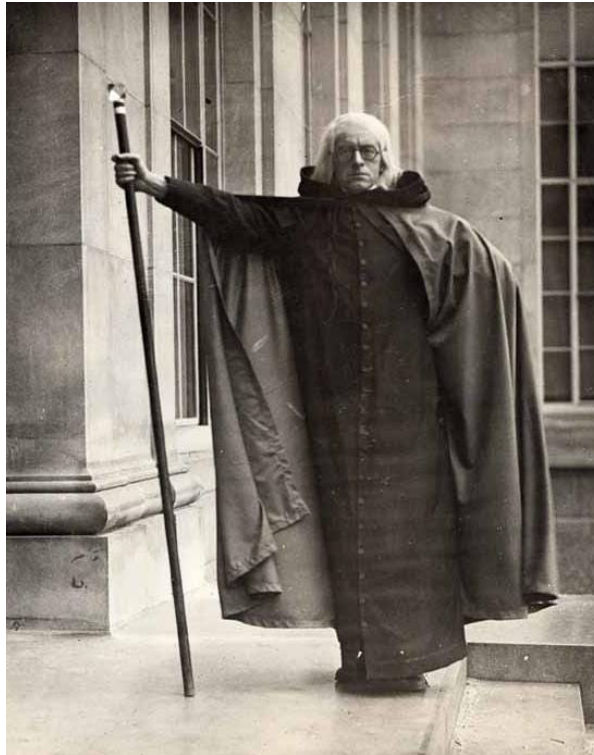
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8 John Ruskin, “Lecture II: Traffic,” in *The Crown of Wild Olive* (John Wiley and Son, 1866), 77; see also Benjamin Evans Lippincott, *Victorian Critics of Democracy: Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, Lecky* (Oxford University Press, 1938).

9 Ralph Adams Cram, “The Last of the Squires,” *Atlantic Monthly* 145 (January 1930). On Cram's family, see Shand-Tucci's *Ralph Adams Cram and Boston Bohemia*.

10 Ralph Adams Cram, *Miscellany 1891–1899*, Box 10, Frederick Holland Day Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For more on Day and the Visionists, see Patricia J. Fanning, *Through an Uncommon Lens: The Life and Photography of F. Holland Day* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

11 “Boston Tech's Telephone Stunt,” CD17-1, Technology Pageant Committee Records, Technology Pageant Committee costumes and properties, 1916–1916, Collection on the Celebration of the Move of



**Figure 1.** Ralph Adams Cram dressed as Merlin in 1916.<sup>12</sup>

It was in groups like the Visionists that Cram first explained publicly his disdain for modern life. The world, he claimed in 1892, was “reaping the whirlwind” of the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Reformation. To Cram, the reactionaries of the nineteenth century—whether they be the Oxford Movement that led to the rise of Anglo-Catholicism, the Pre-Raphaelites trying to capture the essence of color and beauty in defiance of mechanistic art styles, or the growing conservative movement in England—were all linked. He and his friends in the United States were joined to the same “great reaction” to modernity and the legacies of the Enlightenment. “With us, the rise of the tide still continues,” he told readers of *The Knight Errant*.<sup>13</sup> In the medieval period, at least within the imaginary that Cram and his cohort conjured, a true democracy

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the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from Boston to Cambridge, MIT Libraries, Department of Distinctive Collections.

12 Photo from Joshua Kastorf, “The Visionists: Boston’s Turn-of-the-Century Bohemians,” *Medium*, November 5, 2016, <https://mitsap.medium.com/the-visionists-mit-architecture-and-bostons-turn-of-the-century-bohemians-2e6415ec8c80>.

13 Ralph Adams Cram, “Concerning the Restoration of Idealism, and the Raising to Honour Once More of the Imagination,” *The Knight Errant* 1, no. 1 (April 1892): 11–12, RACP, FA2015.01, Box 6.

could be found. That democracy was a limited one, based in the feudal hierarchy of elite rule that allowed everyone, whether they be laborer, merchant, or warrior, to know their established place in society and cooperate, communally, in an interlocked fashion Cram called “democratic.”<sup>14</sup>

Among Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, Cram was especially enamored with Thomas Carlyle, Edmund Burke, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Ruskin.<sup>15</sup> Carlyle, the controversial conservative Scottish philosopher and historian, who has become a darling among today’s far-right thinkers like Curtis Yarvin, decried the social and political upheaval of the 1800s as a “mad state of matters,” plagued by a lack of heroic individual leaders and “a universal big black Democracy” that loomed over the West.<sup>16</sup> Ruskin, something of a personal hero to Cram, and an ardent disciple of Carlyle, argued for a totalitarian government to organize and protect the masses through the just rule of law.<sup>17</sup> The rule of philosopher-kings, inspired by Plato, features prominently as a connective current between these reactionary figures as the best alternative to the chaos of democracy.

Disdain for the mass politics driving emergent global democratic movements in these years was pervasive. French Romantic poet Charles Baudelaire argued that “there are but three beings worthy of respect: the priest, the warrior and the poet. To know, to kill and to create. The rest of mankind may be taxed and drudged, they are born for the stable . . . to practice what they call *professions*.”<sup>18</sup> English mathematician Sir James Jeans, whom Cram cited as a philosopher worth reading, put it succinctly by saying democracy’s achievement is that “it gave credible time to the underdog.” It was likely, Jeans hoped, that democracy was “like teething,” a stage to pass through before achieving higher orders of being.<sup>19</sup>

As these influences shaped Cram, he helped give them new shape via his prominence as an architect. His leadership of the Gothic Revival in the United States was fueled by his determination to resurrect the ephemeral spirit of medievalism that he yoked to both his artistic and political beliefs. He wrote a collection of ghost stories, *Black Spirits and White*, and a dull Arthurian play called *Excalibur*, after he helped launch *The Knight Errant* off

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14 Cram, *End of Democracy*, 65–70.

15 Ralph Adams Cram, *My Life in Architecture* (Little, Brown, 1936), 9.

16 Thomas Carlyle, “No. 1. The Present Time,” in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (Chapman and Hall, 1850), 1–40, quotes at 7, 8. On Yarvin’s love of Carlyle, see Mencius Moldbug [pseud.], “Why Carlyle Matters,” chapter 2 of *Moldbug on Carlyle*, originally published July 16, 2009, on his *Unqualified Reservations* blog, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2009/07/why-carlyle-matters/>.

17 Jon Roper, *Democracy and Its Critics* (Routledge, 1989); Frederick York Powell, *John Ruskin and Thoughts on Democracy* (Saint George Press, 2005).

18 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Hyperion Press, 1930), 69, original italics.

19 James Jeans quoted in *Living Philosophies: A Series of Intimate Credos* (Simon and Schuster, 1931), 112–13.

the ground.<sup>20</sup> His writing became prolific as he advanced his architectural career, turning in the years before World War I to the pressing sociopolitical matters of the day. It was then that Cram's organizing efforts increasingly married his medievalism to his criticism of modern politics.

Along with his lifelong friend, the poet Louise Imogen Guiney, Cram founded the American chapter of the Jacobite Order of the White Rose (OWR).<sup>21</sup> The original Order of the White Rose was created in 1886 by Bertram Ashburnham to continue the centuries-old Jacobite tradition in the United Kingdom. Neo-Jacobites like Ashburnham maintained the divine right of kings and the legitimacy of the deposed House of Stuart. While they did not have the ability to instigate mass upheaval like the Jacobites of old, the OWR still possessed political and, perhaps more powerfully, cultural influence that gained them headlines in the UK.<sup>22</sup> Across the Atlantic, Neo-Jacobites like Cram and his associates in groups like the Visionists were eager to work with the UK-based OWR and to pledge their support to what they saw as the true, divinely appointed crown. Cram took over leadership of the American branch of the OWR in 1899, leading the organization and writing for its flagship pamphlet, *The Royal Standard*.<sup>23</sup>

The American OWR, like its progenitor in the UK, espoused a modern aristocratic benevolence that echoed other conservative voices of the day, but with a dose of Hamiltonian verve that was entirely due to Cram and his longstanding love of the Federalist leader. It was time, Cram wrote for the OWR, that the United States turn toward the system of government created by "the greatest man this continent has ever known—Alexander Hamilton."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Cram never denied the unique circumstances that he and his fellow American monarchists faced: They were citizens of a country that had rebelled against the very monarchy they so revered. "The Revolution of 1775, whether or not we hold it to be unavoidable, is yet an accomplished fact," Cram allowed. And while the United States was fundamentally "false in theory and unchristian in principle," there was no way to deny it existed.<sup>25</sup> Cram reluctantly admitted the dismal likelihood of a hereditary monarchy suddenly arising in the United States, which lacked a royal heritage to start from. It seemed inevitable to him that some amalgamation of aristocracy and centralized

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20 Ralph Adams Cram, *Black Spirits and White: A Book of Ghost Stories* (Stone and Kimball, 1895); and Ralph Adams Cram, *Excalibur: An Arthurian Drama* (R.G. Badger, 1909). See also Ralph Adams Cram, "Red Poppies," undated, in "Red Poppies, or 'The Spirit of Prophecy'" folder, RACP, FA 2015.01, Box 7.

21 "Order of the White Rose, 1898–1900" folder, RACP, FA 2015.01, Box 6.

22 Connolly, *Jacobitism*, 108–112.

23 *Ibid.*, 110.

24 "Proclamation by Ralph von Cram, the Prior, and Alfred John Rodwaye, the Registrar for the Order of the White Rose," *Americana* 5 (1910): 522. Note the addition of the aristocratic "von" to Cram's name.

25 *Ibid.*, 524.

government in the Hamiltonian mode would replace the false “democratic sovereignty and equal political rights” that Cram and his cohort disdained.<sup>26</sup>

To Cram’s frustration, the American branch never took off, and the original OWR fell into a moribund state during World War I, largely due to the fact that the Stuart heir to the throne, Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, led troops against British forces, casting a pall over the movement.<sup>27</sup> As Jacobitism fell into greater disrepute during the war, the American OWR dissolved and Cram transitioned to a more general advocacy for monarchism and aristocratic governance.

The war had a profound and despairing effect on Cram, who lobbied for greater American assistance and early intervention to help Britain and France.<sup>28</sup> Civilization, he argued, had lost the spark of greatness that he located in the medieval era. The intersection between Cram’s fierce Anglo-Catholicism and his medievalism was never more evident than in these years, when he would write about the modern democratic world being beset by a “sterile Puritanism on the one hand” and “a futile hedonism on the other.” For Cram, the horrors of modern war, and the uncertain peace that ended it, cast shadows on his own time. Occupied by imperfect humans, the Middle Ages were far from perfect. Yet Cram remained convinced “the evils” of the medieval period had “been equaled or exceeded during the last ten years,” while “its virtues have . . . scarcely found their rivals within the same decade or, for that matter, the century that went before.”<sup>29</sup>

Chivalry, spirituality, and just government by knowledgeable rulers seemed to Cram to be a vast improvement over the unlettered masses that had seized the reins of power through democratic upheaval over the prior three centuries.<sup>30</sup> Cram’s medieval-romantic idyll was echoed by others. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Benjamin Disraeli, both men Cram admired, had similarly leaned on medieval imaginaries and medieval constructs to frame their politics in the 1800s, adapting medieval values to fit modern times.<sup>31</sup> Ruskin argued for a return not only to some form of medieval politics but also to its aesthetics.<sup>32</sup> Later in life, in the interwar years of the 1930s, Cram, who enjoyed recommending books

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26 Ibid., 526.

27 Connolly, *Jacobitism*, 124.

28 Ralph Adams Cram, *Toward the Great Peace* (Marshall Jones, 1922).

29 Ralph Adams Cram, “The Answer of the Middle Ages,” in *What Is Civilization?* (Duffield, 1926), 59–76, quote at 73. For a larger discussion on this issue, see Muccigrosso, *American Gothic*, chapter 7.

30 Ralph Adams Cram, “The Revolt of the Masses,” *Atlantic*, December 1932; see also Ralph Adams Cram, “The Mass-Man Takes Over,” *American Mercury*, October 1938, 165–75.

31 See Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Shannon L. Rogers, “‘The Past is a Dream’: The Neo-Feudalism of Disraeli,” *Victorian Review* 28, no. 2 (2002): 65–95; and Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 1998), 70–80.

32 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (George Allen, 1880), 113.

by philosophers and writers, also lauded the works of critics and historians with a disdain for modernity, such as William Aylott Orton, Nikolai Berdyaev, José Ortega y Gasset, and Salvador de Madariaga.

Like Cram, Berdyaev lamented the loss of art and spirituality that seemed endemic in modern society and argued for a “call to a new Middle Ages” that would enliven Christianity and alleviate the spiritual malaise sweeping across the Western world. Berdyaev, writing from an Orthodox Christian viewpoint, appealed to a frustration, similar to Cram’s, at the hollowed-out spiritual and artistic spaces he found himself in.<sup>33</sup> After reading Ortega’s essays on the “mass-man,” a collective idea of common people as barbaric and dully led by majority opinion, Cram adopted the term in his own writing, constantly reifying his low view of the worth of the average citizen.<sup>34</sup>

Cram’s beliefs, and the ideas of the philosophers and commentators he drew on, represented a combination of prelapsarian aristocratic yearning and, occasionally, a pseudoscientific racism. Such ideas were geared toward addressing the excesses of the industrial present. The priest, the warrior, and the poet were Romantic ideals, but the modern era seemed to belong to the politician, the industrial magnate, and the salesman.

In *Walled Towns* (1919), Cram reflected on feudal villages as an Edenic image of communal living, and contrasted these with the dirty, smog-ridden, industrial towns that beset the modern world. There must, Cram claimed, be a way out of “this coil of uttermost confusion,” which saw races mingling and families benighted by the dangers and rigor of industrial labor inside contemporary urban America.<sup>35</sup> “Walled Towns,” Cram argued, were meant to evoke the purity of feudal communities, organized around families and protected—in theory—by a benevolent government; such communities were to be refounded, as one reviewer of Cram’s work noted, “in deliberate opposition to nineteenth century democracy.”<sup>36</sup> But Cram’s rural agrarianism and communitarian streak were rooted, too, in the common racial and antisemitic prejudices of his time. To Cram, democracy’s “Mordred,” a reference to the Arthurian villain, was “anarchy and Bolshevism,” and their origins lay in “the Semitic influence which has and always will be the foe of nationality.”<sup>37</sup>

It was time, Cram argued, for a new aristocracy based on his conception of “race values,” which were grounded in then-popular conceptions of evolutionary racial science

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33 Nikolai Berdyaev, *The End of our Time* (Sheed and Ward, 1933), 80.

34 José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (W. W. Norton, 1932).

35 Ralph Adams Cram, *Walled Towns* (Marshall Jones, 1919), 13.

36 *Ibid.*, 96.

37 Ralph Adams Cram, “Peace in Peril! Ralph Adams Cram Warns Us All,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 24, 1918.

and “civilizational” differences between human groups.<sup>38</sup> This was a line of thought that ran through Cram’s conception of socioeconomic classes and human biology. His engagement with Darwinian evolution was influenced by a mixture of his Catholic faith, his medievalism, and his conception of differences between humans that arose from his understanding of history. The interacting of different races, whether socially or sexually, was, for Cram, likewise a product of a mismanaged world that saw “the just line of demarcation” drawn between “Neolithic Man and the anthropoid ape,” and not, as it should be, between the “glorified and triumphant human being and the Neolithic mass which was, is now and ever shall be.”<sup>39</sup> “Mass-man,” Cram repeatedly asserted, was barely human and had to be ruled by those of elevated status. Cram devoted an entire book, *The Nemesis of Mediocrity* (1919), to explaining his early thoughts on the need to have heroic, well-rounded leaders corral and guide the modern masses.<sup>40</sup>

When disputes over the scope and power of the executive branch erupted during the New Deal, Cram, who had become a strong supporter of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, lauded the president’s attempts to expand executive power to meet the crises of the Great Depression. While the country debated, and by the late 1930s began to curtail, FDR’s political might, Cram remained enthused by the president’s seemingly unilateral actions. When FDR’s plan to expand the Supreme Court was met with public and political backlash, Cram griped that the American people had suddenly, and unfortunately, become “constitution conscious.”<sup>41</sup> It would be leaders like Roosevelt, Cram thought, with the Carlylean “heroic will” required to take “the bull by the horns,” who would fix the problems America faced.<sup>42</sup> It should come as no shock that Cram’s political beliefs earned him some notoriety outside the august architectural circles where he usually resided. He became something of a Luddite in spirit, if not in fact, arguing for the abolition of the internal combustion engine, and he debated which had inflicted greater calamity on the world, gunpowder or the printing press.<sup>43</sup> Pining for a monarch and rejecting both the essence and the messy reality of American democracy made him something of an occasional laughingstock among his own friends and fellow artists.<sup>44</sup>

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38 Ralph Adams Cram, “Race,” later titled “Race Values,” in “Race Values: Proposition Toward a New Aristocracy Based Upon Race Values” folder, RACP, FA 2015.01, Box 7.

39 Ralph Adams Cram, “Why We Do Not Behave Like Human Beings,” in “Why We Do Not Behave Like Human Beings” folder, RACP, FA 2015.01, Box 9. A version of “Why We Do Not Behave Like Human Beings” also appeared in *The American Mercury*, September 1932, 41–48.

40 Ralph Adams Cram, *The Nemesis of Mediocrity* (Marshall Jones, 1919).

41 Cram, *End of Democracy*, 126. See also Ralph Adams Cram, “The Return to Feudalism,” *American Review*, January 1937, 336–52.

42 Cram, *End of Democracy*, 163.

43 Cram, *My Life in Architecture*, 65.

44 Louise Imogen Guiney to Rev. W. H. van Allen, May 8, 1899, and Louise Imogen Guiney to Her-

In some circles, however, Cram received praise. He was part of a growing, varied transatlantic conservative cohort that resisted the early twentieth century's disruptive modernity. His "race values" closely mirrored the eugenics movement, and his dismay at mass industry, urban life, and the extension of the franchise were echoed by many. "New humanists," distributists, neoscholastics, Southern Agrarians, and others joined Cram's medievalists in calling for radical transformations of society to address the growing inequality and sociopolitical chaos of the 1900s, especially the global aftershocks of World War I and the Great Depression. "New humanists," led by literary critics and scholars like Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, shared Cram's dismay at the erosion of classical and traditional culture.<sup>45</sup> Catholic distributists, a label Cram would likely accept, were inspired by the social teachings of the Church and the then-recent exhortations of Pope Leo XIII to address the poverty and social unrest caused by the Industrial Revolution.<sup>46</sup> The Southern Agrarians, a varied group of writers and poets centered around Tennessee in the 1920s and 1930s, lamented the erosion of Southern culture, agrarian identity, and traditional faith.<sup>47</sup>

These movements interacted with and informed one another, and they shared, to an extent, a similar reactionary philosophical foundation. They drew, as Cram did, on the Counter-Enlightenment and the feudalistic anti-industrialist traditions of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Joseph de Maistre to inform their calls for a return to what English supporter of Southern Agrarianism Arthur J. Penty called a "definite political status" ensured by royal largesse, craft guilds, and the Church.<sup>48</sup> Like Cram, they worried about the tangible and intangible effects of modernity, and fretted, as Agrarian Donald Davidson claimed, that the arts had no place in industrial life other than what could be purchased. Like Cram, Davidson dismissed modern artistic styles as informed by greed and the whimsy of a decadent public, "which the Middle Ages called a Devil's Bargain," rather than the soulful pursuit of art.<sup>49</sup> What united these movements, and Cram's, was that all shared the sense of "alienation" described by literary scholar Solomon Fishman. They all suffered, as

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bert E. Clarke, June 23, 1899, in Grace Guiney, ed., *Letters of Louise Imogen Guiney* (Harper and Brothers, 1926), 132, 215.

45 Irving Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation*, ed. Norman Foerster (Farrar and Rinehart, 1930).

46 See Alexander William Salter, *The Political Economy of Distributism: Property, Liberty, and the Common Good* (Catholic University of America Press, 2023).

47 The foundational collection of the Southern Agrarians was *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Harper & Brothers, 1930), which featured essays by the "main" Agrarians and announced their ideas. See Alexander Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1966); Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

48 Arthur J. Penty, *The Restoration of the Guild System* (Swan Sonnenschein, 1906), 47.

49 Donald Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," in *I'll Take My Stand*.

their various causes and passions suffered, from the “centrifugal impulse” of modernity, which saw industry and culture fly out and reflect “the detachment of the particle from the mass.”<sup>50</sup>

The disasters of war and economic depression had produced an era of reactionary mass politics, ranging from Louisiana’s populist governor, Huey “the Kingfish” Long, to the demagogic “radio priest” Charles Coughlin; and while Cram disdained the Kingfish, he had a begrudging respect for Long’s recognition of the dangers of unchecked modern industry and the threats to what he perceived as American social cohesion. “Hero worship,” Cram thought, “was one of the fine qualities in man. . . . [I]t is just as implicit in the masses as it is in the elite.” And so it was unsurprising to Cram that figures like Long or Coughlin had ascended to prominence. That Carlylean tendency toward heroic action, which Cram so admired, had to be shepherded carefully, he believed, by his envisioned aristocratic elite.<sup>51</sup>

The new century’s disasters were the “final disenchantment” with modern capitalism and democratic government for Cram and others in his orbit. Some of Cram’s associates, like fascist sympathizer Seward Collins, pursued the idea of creating an American monarchy more vigorously than the architect even considered. Collins was a wealthy socialite and business owner who had turned away from his earlier Progressive views in the late 1920s.<sup>52</sup> In the midst of the Depression and growing geopolitical change, Collins had started to flirt with fascism as a solution to the world’s ills.<sup>53</sup> He started *The American Review* as an outlet for his views, drawing together a spectrum of thinkers who shared his critiques, including Ortega y Gasset, Berdyaev, “new humanist” Irving Babbitt, French distributist Hilaire Belloc, and Southern Agrarians like Herbert Agar.<sup>54</sup>

Shortly after its creation, Cram joined *The American Review* as a contributor. He had long ventured into public writing and had been involved in the creation of several Catholic publications, including the still-running *Commonweal*. In *The American Review*, Cram’s monarchical views meshed with Collins’s, but Cram was never as *directly* tied to American fascism. Collins shared Cram’s admiration for Roosevelt’s powerful expansion of executive authority, though the former became increasingly disillusioned with what he

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50 Solomon Fishman, *The Disinherited of Art: Writer and Background* (University of California Press, 1953), 140.

51 Cram, *End of Democracy*, 84–88.

52 Albert E. Stone Jr., “Seward Collins and the American Review: Experiment in Pro-Fascism, 1933–37,” *American Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1960): 3–19, esp. 3–5; Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (University of Georgia Press, 1958), 61.

53 For a discussion of Collins’s philosophical changes, see Gregory L. Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 268–73; and Edward Shapiro, “American Conservative Intellectuals, the 1930’s, and the Crisis of Ideology,” *Modern Age* 23, no. 4 (1979): 370.

54 Seward Collins, “Editorial Notes,” *American Review*, April 1933, 122–27.

saw as Roosevelt's inability to take unilateral control over the country like the European fascists he had come to admire.<sup>55</sup> Cram lent legitimacy to Collins's monarchical musings, and other conservative figures within Cram's orbit buttressed Collins's journal with the weight of their names. More broadly, there was a running thread in *The American Review* of conservative Catholic rebukes to the modern liberal world, which Cram joined. Catholic commentators like Ross J. S. Hoffman wrote in the *Review* of the "disenchantment with democracy" that had swept the world in the interwar years and argued it was a consequence of people yearning for the natural mode of governance: a strong, stable, single leader.<sup>56</sup>

In places like *The American Review* one can see how Cram's medievalism was not merely a quixotic anachronistic yearning but part of a larger reactionary backlash. Cram's economic philosophy was rooted in an aristocratic distributism, echoing philosophers he had befriended, including Belloc and especially G. K. Chesterton—who also wrote for *The American Review*. Collins, Chesterton, and Cram all pushed for a return to a medieval-style guild system, which they believed would address the socioeconomic disruption they saw stemming from unchecked capitalism and modern industry.<sup>57</sup> It was vital, Cram argued, to return to such systems because, in his mind, they guaranteed housing, protection, and economic purpose to those whom modern industrial revolutions had rendered into impoverished masses.

As Cram phrased it, the progression of philosophy, industry, and politics since the Enlightenment had turned humans into nothing but a "mechanical organism." The medieval era's feudal system, at least as he conceived it, was the "best economic foundation for society," not only in the past but for the tumultuous present and the uncertain future. The "Forgotten Class" of the majority of Americans, Cram claimed, like Hoffman, yearned for and needed the guidance of strong leaders in the feudal mold, which possessed what he considered a personalizing, humanistic touch.<sup>58</sup> The ascendancy of strong authoritarian leaders in the interwar years, and the corresponding rejection of fair, representative democracy, was a boon. It presaged, Cram and others in the *Review* believed, a return to a better natural order. "I am convinced," Cram argued in a piece that praised Berdyaev's work, "that it is a return to the realities of an old mediaevalism and the building-up of a new—and a better—feudalism." But the likelihood of that was questionable, even to

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55 See Stone, "Seward Collins"; and Michael J. Tucker, *And Then They Loved Him: Seward Collins and the Chimera of an American Fascism* (Peter Lang, 2006).

56 Ross J. S. Hoffman, "Liberty and Authority: A Political Essay," *American Review*, October 1934, 562–90. See also Hoffman's sympathy toward fascism in his "The Totalitarian Regimes: An Essay in Essential Distinctions," *American Review*, September 1937, 321–38.

57 Cyril Clemens, *Chesterton: As Seen by His Contemporaries* (International Mark Twain Society, 1939), 35–38.

58 Ralph Adams Cram, "The Forgotten Class" and "The Forgotten Class: Part II," *American Review*, undated, 179–90.

Cram, and his pessimism about humanity and its ability to regain what he thought it had lost remained through the end of his life.<sup>59</sup>

### Medieval Modernists

“I am not a Medievalist because I love old things,” Cram claimed; rather, it was because he thought taking the Middle Ages as a model offered a better way to reform the modern era. “Ralph Adams Cram, the Modern Medievalist? . . . maybe, and maybe, Medieval Modernist!” he joked.<sup>60</sup> Cram’s architectural legacy is still admired and influential today across the United States. But his “medieval modernist” political beliefs have seen the strongest resurgence in recent years. Moving forward from Cram, we can chart the haphazard line of American monarchist thought into the present day, where Cram still serves as an inspiration to some. Cram provides an interesting lens for comparing these new circles of right-wing elitist thought to the old Progressive Era and interwar movements Cram affiliated with because the same global *pressures* that led Cram toward his medieval modernism echo today. Cram’s rejection of the primacy of free-market capitalism and industry, his worry over sociocultural cohesion, and his concern that American life had become divorced from the moral “good” resonate with many of the major worries that animate the modern illiberal New Right.<sup>61</sup> As in Cram’s time, monarchism remains a niche movement, and the monarchism of the present does not always map onto Cram’s ideal. Exploring how today’s currents overlap with, but also diverge from, Cram’s “medieval modernist” alignment reveals how modern monarchism and conservative thinking have drawn inspiration from Cram’s milieu but remade their ideas in new forms.

American monarchists, Cram included, have always faced an uphill battle. In the decades since Cram’s death in 1942, other “royalist” adherents, such as T. S. Eliot, have struggled to balance their “medieval modernist” respect for tradition and (often) their Christian faith with the modern industrialized world.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, due to the bloody fight for civil rights and the broader Cold War binary, which saw a growing postcolonial and democratic “free world” pitted against the totalitarian Soviet Union, American monarchists had a thin tightrope to walk in the second half of the twentieth century.

Some organizations, like the Constantian Society, struggled to keep the idea alive as a grassroots movement. Founded by Randall J. Dicks in 1970, the society advocated for

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59 Ralph Adams Cram, “The Return to Feudalism,” *American Review*, January 1937, 336–52.

60 Ralph Adams Cram, interview, quoted in Ervel Fern Orchard, Ralph Adams Cram, *Medieval Modernist* (Boston University Library, 1937), 148.

61 Ralph Adams Cram, “The Philosophical Necessity,” undated, in “The Philosophical Necessity, originally Sacramental Philosophy” folder, RACP, FA2015.01, Box 8.

62 Indeed, Eliot had a tangled relationship with the “royalist” label throughout his life. See Jason Harding, ed., *T. S. Eliot in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 270.

the creation of an American throne. Dicks was a quiet student at Georgetown University from a Republican family who loved classics. He admired then-prominent monarchs like Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, who Dicks claimed had “transformed his country from the ‘Tibet of Africa’ to the ‘Switzerland of Africa.’” He was adamant that while American monarchism was unlikely it was still worth trying to achieve.<sup>63</sup> The society never had a broad reach or significant impact, but it doggedly maintained publication of its pamphlet, *The Constantian*, and interviewed monarchs from over a dozen countries.<sup>64</sup> It was the goal of the society to “give unity” to monarchists in the United States and promote knowledge about the benefits of monarchism over other forms of government. Dicks’s politics echoed Cram’s only in part. While he asserted monarchy as the best and most natural form of government, Dicks, a product of mid-twentieth-century suburbia, did not have Cram’s attachment to medievalism or the depth of learning that grounded Cram’s ideas in the history and philosophy of aristocratic benevolence.<sup>65</sup>

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, Dicks’s output declined, and the society became defunct with his death in 1999. In its wake, the only active monarchist groups in the United States were joined to larger organizations such as the International Monarchist League, which has acted as an umbrella organization for a wide variety of monarchist groups around the world. American monarchism in the twenty-first century has become both more and less tethered to its earlier roots. Some classical American monarchists who espouse a view similar to Cram’s have become enmeshed with the Royal Stuart Society, which was founded in 1926 as a successor to the OWR and remains the largest and most vocal Jacobite organization in the world.<sup>66</sup> Charles Coulombe, a conservative American Catholic commentator and member of the Royal Stuart Society’s leadership, represents a vocal wing of modern monarchism in this vein. Coulombe’s writings, including several books on modern monarchism and its supposed viability today, draw on many of the same complaints that Cram levied.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Coulombe calls Cram the “foremost” American monarchist and often invokes Cram’s thoughts on government and the critical import of Catholicism.<sup>68</sup> He also *evokes* Cram, but with a far higher degree of optimism about the possibility of a fundamental change in American governance than Cram ever had.

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63 “Student Critic of Nixon; Randall James Dicks,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1969, 22, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/10/14/archives/student-critic-of-nixon-randall-james-dicks.html>.

64 *The Constantian* 9, nos. 2-3, December 1980, New York Public Library (hereafter NYPL). Most of the extant copies of *The Constantian* are located at the NYPL.

65 *The Constantian* 8, no. 1, April 1979, NYPL; *The Constantian* 25, no. 2, August 1998, NYPL.

66 For the Royal Stuart Society’s website and publications, see: <https://www.royalstuartociety.com/> (accessed December 15, 2025).

67 Charles A. Coulombe, *Star-Spangled Crown* (Tumblar House, 2016).

68 Charles A. Coulombe, “Triumph and the Quandary of American Conservatism,” *Catholicism.org*, August 1, 2023, <https://catholicism.org/triumph-and-the-quandary-of-american-conservatism.html>; and Charles A. Coulombe, “Blueprint for a Catholic Future? Ralph Adams Cram and the An-

Times have changed, Coulombe asserts, since Cram's era. Liberal pluralism and democracy have waned over the first two decades of the new millennium.<sup>69</sup> It is no longer just “intellectual LARPing” to be a monarchist in America, Coulombe claims, referring to those who enjoy live-action roleplaying at Renaissance fairs.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Coulombe is hardly alone. A great deal of ink has been spilt over the last decade discussing the ever-increasing crisis of global liberalism. Writing in his recently published *The Compleat Monarchist*, Coulombe highlights the growing ranks of avowed “postliberals” or “illiberals,” whose adherents include American bloggers like Curtis Yarvin, scholars like Patrick Deneen, and statesmen like Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who are all sympathetic to or outright supportive of the kind of antidemocratic, Counter-Enlightenment-inspired thinking Coulombe champions.<sup>71</sup> As Coulombe argues, monarchism is a small but growing slice of political expression, and the growth of illiberal and postliberal movements has created a fertile environment for monarchism to flourish.

The rise to prominence of Curtis Yarvin—a monarchist and Cram admirer who was profiled in *The New Yorker* in June 2025—is a case in point.<sup>72</sup> “Let those of us born with golden brains, therefore—the tiny top sliver that Ralph Adams Cram called human, as opposed to anthropoid—inherit the earth,” Curtis Yarvin wrote in 2009 on his blog *Unqualified Reservations*.<sup>73</sup> Yarvin has also followed Cram in discussing racism in a positive light. “As Ralph Adams Cram suggested, if a boolean line must for political reasons be drawn, it is not a line around humanity—but a line within it,” Yarvin wrote in 2025, alluding not to Cram's architectural prowess but his invocation of biological “race values” that supposedly determine human accomplishment.<sup>74</sup>

Yarvin, who is credited as a driving force behind the rise of the neoreactionary (NRx) movement in the late 2000s and early 2010s, is a chimerical figure. Until the last few years, before he catapulted into more mainstream discussions due to his influence on prominent political figures like Vice President J. D. Vance, and on Silicon Valley billionaire Peter

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glo-Papalists,” *New Oxford Review*, September 2014, <https://www.newoxfordreview.org/documents/blueprint-for-a-catholic-future/>.

69 Charles A. Coulombe, “Confessions of an American Monarchist,” *European Conservative*, June 23, 2024, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/essay/confessions-of-an-american-monarchist/>.

70 Charles Coulombe, “Are American Monarchists Dreamers?,” *Crisis Magazine*, December 30, 2019, <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/are-american-monarchists-dreamers>.

71 Charles A. Coulombe, *The Compleat Monarchist* (Os Justi Press, 2025).

72 Eva Kofman, “Curtis Yarvin's Plot Against America,” *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/06/09/curtis-yarvin-profile>

73 Mencius Moldbug [pseud.], “The Dire Problem and the Digital Option,” *Unqualified Reservations*, November 13, 2009, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2009/11/dire-problem-and-virtual-option/>.

74 Curtis Yarvin (@curtis\_yarvin), “Ultimately the boolean distinction between man and animal is a theological error,” X, May 15, 2025, [https://x.com/curtis\\_yarvin/status/1923059685743116389](https://x.com/curtis_yarvin/status/1923059685743116389).

Thiel, Yarvin haunted the online realm of right-wing discourse as a strange specter that advocated for an American monarch and the abolishment of democracy.

Yarvin's ideas have shaped the tenor and direction of far-right ideologies, particularly through his concept of the "Cathedral," which he and philosopher Nick Land, often described as the father of accelerationism, developed.<sup>75</sup> Yarvin's Cathedral names an amalgamation of concepts, institutions, and beliefs that have allegedly captured global society. This is particularly true of Western societies, and the components of the Cathedral have ever tightened their grip on culture, politics, and the global economy. The bureaucratic "deep state"—a concept in vogue since Donald Trump's ascendancy as the haphazard standard-bearer of the new conservatism of the post-2010s—is part of the Cathedral. Universities and the broader academy, steeped as they are in decades, if not centuries, of Enlightenment thinking, socialism, Marxism, and postmodern theory, are a key part of the Cathedral's ability to indoctrinate new generations. Hollywood, the media, and so on are all, in some cases intentionally, in some cases coincidentally, working together with these larger institutions to obliterate dissident thought and dominate the world. In Yarvin's words, the Cathedral acts as a "reification of the legitimate sources of information," operating as a multilayered lens through which ideas are approved or disapproved for public consumption. The Cathedral shapes what Yarvin, drawing on Cram, considers to be the "mass-man" that makes up the democratic majority, someone who is ill-informed and lacking in true insight beyond the commercialized modern world they see around them.<sup>76</sup>

Yarvin's concept quickly took root and has spread since the early 2010s into the highest echelons of political and social discourse. It is not difficult to find journalistic discussions of direct financial, political, or personal connections between Yarvin's circle of far-right philosophizers and the new Trump administration, with Vice President Vance especially tied to the more intellectual wing of the "New Right."<sup>77</sup> It is also not difficult to see how

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75 See Land, *Dark Enlightenment*; and Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian, eds., *The Accelerationist Reader* (Urbanomic, 2014).

76 Curtis Yarvin, "The Cathedral or the Bizarre," *Tablet Magazine*, March 30, 2022; Claire Donnelly and Meghna Chakrabarti, "JD Vance and the Rise of the New Right," *WBUR*, August 1, 2024, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2024/08/01/vance-trump-new-right-republican-election>.

77 Dennis Saffran, "Populism and Power," *Quillette*, September 23, 2024, <https://quillette.com/2024/09/23/populism-and-power-jd-vance-donald-trump-patrick-deneen-postliberalism-conspiracies/>; Gaby Del Valle, "JD Vance Thinks Monarchists Have Some Good Ideas," *The Verge*, October 16, 2024, <https://www.theverge.com/2024/10/16/24266512/jd-vance-curtis-yarvin-influence-rage-project-2025>; Kiera Butler, "To Understand JD Vance, You Need to Meet the 'TheoBros,'" *Mother Jones*, November/December 2024, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/09/theobros-jd-vance-christian-nationalism/>; Greg Rosalsky, "The Economic Mind of JD Vance," *NPR*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/sections/planet-money/2024/07/23/g-s1-12513/economic-mind-jd-vance>. For an attempt to define this new "New Right"—a term often used by movements of conservative renewal—see Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton University Press, 2025). Field is clear on Vance's prominence within the MAGA New Right's intellectual camps.

the actions of the new administration reflect a war against the largest and most powerful facets of Yarvin's globalist elite Cathedral.

Beyond the chaotic events spiraling across newsfeeds daily, there lie deeper ideological connections that draw the New Right, or, as Nick Land dubbed it, the Dark Enlightenment, into the past.<sup>78</sup> Yarvin alone did not weave the movement from whole cloth, and he is joined by a growing wave of philosophers, academics, and online thinkers that draw, much as Ralph Adams Cram did, on the past to inspire their ideas of how to radically transform the present.

Take, for example, Charles Haywood. Haywood, once a businessman and now a figure in online right-wing circles prominent for his book reviews and commentary, described Cram "as a proto-Yarvin" due to the architect's insistent demands to abolish American democracy and his eugenicist views on race and human biology.<sup>79</sup> Haywood, who veers away from Yarvin's Machiavellian view of power politics in favor of a more explicitly religious though still authoritarian future, caused waves within the New Right by refusing to disavow white supremacists within the movement. Rod Dreher, a former commenter at *The American Conservative*, and Haywood have argued publicly over the latter's assertion that there could be "no enemies to the Right" as long as one is against leftist thought.<sup>80</sup> Disagreement is as much a hallmark of the New Right and the broader Dark Enlightenment as agreement, and casting these only loosely aligned figures as a monolith is certainly a mistake. Still, many within these ideological circles identify, as Cram did, some kind of aristo-populism or monarchy as the cure for what they see as the disorganized chaos of liberal democracy led by "mass-man."

Cram's critiques resonate today within broader New Right circles. For example, the excesses and gross inequalities of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era dismayed Cram. This was not because he believed every person was worthy of an equal economic footing—quite the opposite, in fact—but because he rejected what he saw as a slovenly and poorly run "kakistocracy" in the United States.<sup>81</sup> The drive toward endless production and consumption of goods, brought on by industrial technology and unchecked free markets, had warped the "New Aristocrats" and resulted in what Cram considered a debasement

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78 Land, *Dark Enlightenment*; Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right* (Eruditorium Press, 2017).

79 Charles Haywood, "On the 'Dark Enlightenment,' and of Curtis Yarvin / Mencius Moldbug," *The Worthy House*, June 27, 2018, <https://theworthyhouse.com/2018/06/27/analysis-dark-enlightenment-curtis-yarvin-mencius-moldbug/>.

80 Daniel Miller and Charles Haywood, "No Enemies to the Right? DC Miller vs Charles Haywood," *IM-1776*, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://im1776.com/2022/12/13/no-enemies-to-the-right/>; Rod Dreher, "No Enemies to the Right," *American Conservative*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/no-enemies-to-the-right/>.

81 Ralph Adams Cram, "The Limitations of Demos," undated, in "The Limitations of Demos" folder, RACP, FA2015.01, Box 8. A kakistocracy is government by those least suited to rule (from the Greek *kakistos*, "the worst").

of the true purpose of the upper echelons of society: rightly guiding the country and ensuring the protection of the poor masses. The “orgy of optimism” over the seemingly endless progress of the modern technological age was a lie, Cram asserted.<sup>82</sup>

While free-market capitalism has been the watchword for conservatives over the last century, especially within the United States, such neoliberal ideals have increasingly eroded. Many now reject mainstream free-market neoliberalism, which had come to define both conservative and, arguably, many left-leaning political parties across the globe by the early 2010s. Defending the Trump administration’s chaotic rollout of protectionist tariffs, Vice President J. D. Vance caused an uproar among free-market advocates earlier this year when he said “reducing barriers to free markets shouldn’t be the ultimate aim of our politics. Instead, we should use them, and other tools, to improve the well-being of our people.”<sup>83</sup> Such a formulation of the role of markets and human well-being is a reversal of the neoliberal paradigm, which sees the unshackling and protection of markets as *the* ultimate aim to ensure the well-being of people. Long gone are the days when Ronald Reagan’s calls for a globalized, interconnected world of permeable economic barriers and liberalized trade were the dominant voice of conservatism.

Anti-neoliberalism and strains of aristo-populism have become a key facet of the global New Right. Prominent Catholic academic Patrick Deneen, one of the most visible and respectable of the New Right’s ranks because of his academic credentials, maintains a concerted attack on liberalism, both for its sociopolitical and its socioeconomic implications. In Deneen’s view, liberalism has eroded social cohesion, traditional culture, and economic welfare in favor of glorifying free markets.<sup>84</sup> Such views are shared abroad. Viktor Orbán’s rise to power in Hungary, for example, was fueled by a message of economic independence and a strong rejection of neoliberal economics.<sup>85</sup> But while postliberals and

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82 Ralph Adams Cram, *Convictions and Controversies* (Marshall Jones, 1935), 190.

83 J. D. Vance, “JD Vance Responds to Matthew Hennessey on Markets and Politics,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/jd-vance-the-market-isnt-the-purpose-of-u-s-politics-economics-92a8b3e7>. Vance was responding to an article by Matthew Hennessey, which criticized Vance’s understanding of the market and the government’s role in it. See Matthew Hennessey, “JD Vance Is Wrong: The Market Isn’t a ‘Tool,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/jd-vance-is-wrong-the-market-isnt-a-tool-economics-politics-bea824c4>.

84 Reinhold Martin, “The Ends of Liberalism,” *Places*, August 2024, <https://placesjournal.org/article/the-ends-of-liberalism-patrick-deneen-new-right/>; Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*; Deneen, *Regime Change*. For a critique of Deneen’s failure to differentiate neoliberalism from liberalism, see Samuel Moyn, “Neoliberalism, Not Liberalism, Has Failed,” *Commonweal*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/neoliberalism-not-liberalism-has-failed>.

85 Gábor Scheiring, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy: Authoritarian Capitalism and the Accumulative State in Hungary* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). On Fidesz’s pro-family agenda, see Orsolya Bajnay, “Financial Incentives Meet Moral Imperatives in Viktor Orbán’s ‘Social Contract’ with Hungarian Women,” Heinrich-Böll Foundation, December 12, 2022, <https://cz.boell.org/en/2022/12/09/Orban-Viktors-social-contract-women>.

illiberal parties like Orbán's Fidesz might agree, as Deneen has written and as Cram long argued, that "liberalism has failed," they do not agree on the solutions to that problem.

Conversely, a more technocratic wing of the New Right, epitomized by entrepreneurs and corporate leaders like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Sam Altman, has leaned into what some have called "hyper-neoliberalism," embracing the idea of an aristocratic elite, which so enamored Cram, but via capitalist control. The advancement of the early stages of generative artificial intelligence has led to a surge in technocratic power, coalescing around individual corporations and their leadership—whether in Silicon Valley or elsewhere. Thiel, who has openly and repeatedly discussed his ties to Yarvin, has worked with other venture capital titans, like Marc Andreessen, to invest in the creation of "Freedom Cities," a policy then-candidate Donald Trump endorsed in 2023.<sup>86</sup> While it echoes Cram's idyllic "Walled Towns," the concept of "Freedom Cities" departs from Cram's feudal guild utopia and instead evokes a techno-utopian dreamscape of unfettered innovation, away from government oversight and the legalities or messiness of actual American democratic life.

Some, like Balaji Srinivasan, take this even further. Srinivasan, who wrote *The Network State: How to Start a New Country* (2022), has simply called for wealthy technocrats to carve out sovereign states of their own from the existing geography and body politic of America.<sup>87</sup> Peter Thiel's investment in the Seasteading Institute, which funded privately owned floating proto-cities in neutral bodies of water, is an example of this thinking.<sup>88</sup> The rise of corporate power has fueled debate over the growing disparity between the global rich and poor, leading to discussions, perhaps ironically, of a "neofeudalism" that would have struck Cram as far removed from the medieval imaginary he invoked when he called for a return to the feudal order. It seems questionable that Cram would have approved of the emerging technofeudal *elite*.<sup>89</sup>

Such reactions have proliferated around the world.<sup>90</sup> In France, Action Française, a monarchist organization founded in the nineteenth century, has energized disaffected

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86 Max D. Woodworth, "Freedom Cities: Trump and an American Global New City," *Urban Geography* 45, no. 1 (2024): 45–52.

87 Balaji Srinivasan, *The Network State: How to Start a New Country* (pub. by author, 2022), <https://thenetworkstate.com>. For a recent discussion on network state concepts, see Mark Lutter and Jeffrey Mason, "Build the Presidio Freedom City," *Palladium*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.palladiummag.com/2025/01/17/build-the-presidio-freedom-city/>.

88 "Cities on the Ocean," *Economist*, December 3, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/technology-quarterly/2011/12/03/cities-on-the-ocean>.

89 See Yannis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Penguin, 2024); Jodi Dean, *Capitalism's Grave: Neofeudalism and the New Class Struggle* (Verso, 2025); and Joel Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (Encounter Books, 2020).

90 See, for example, András Bíró-Nagy, "Illiberal Democracy in Hungary: The Social Background and Practical Steps of Building an Illiberal State," Barcelona Center for International Affairs, January 2017,

young conservative voters to march in the streets for the return of a king and the ancien régime to fight against globalization.<sup>91</sup> These impulses have occasionally turned violent. In Germany, dozens of extremist members of the German nationalist Reichsbürger group were arrested in December 2022 for participating in a plot to overthrow German democracy and create a quasi-monarchical government.<sup>92</sup>

In January 2025, hundreds of French royalists from Action Française protested through Parisian streets shouting “anarchy today, monarchy tomorrow” as they honored the death of “king-martyr” Louis XVI at the onset of the French Revolution.<sup>93</sup> Action Française is quite aware of the unique contemporary connections shared between postliberal movements in Europe and abroad. As Action Française members write in their newsletter, the emergence of technocrats like Musk as a new aristocracy provides a strange, but for some welcome, bridge between public and private entities. Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Musk, and others represent, they argue, a “new dynasty” of American politics oriented around technocratic postliberalism, the standard-bearer of which they say is Trump.<sup>94</sup>

The impulse to revert to a semifeudal system goes beyond the “techbro” stereotype, however. In rural eastern Germany, in areas hit hardest by globalization and retreating industrial life, some communities have tried to split off from the German government and make their own sovereign communities. It is not surprising that it is in the former East Germany, for example, where deindustrialization and the scars of communism linger, that the Reichsbürger movement and other reactionary groups that wish to leave the international order are strongest. Neofascist monarchist groups, most prominently Freie

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<https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/illiberal-democracy-hungary-social-background-and-practical-steps-building-illiberal>; Andras L. Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy* (Taylor and Francis, 2017); István H. Szilágyi, László Kelemen, and Sam Gilchrist Hall, *Changing Legal and Civic Culture in an Illiberal Democracy: A Social Psychological Survey of the Hungarian Legal System* (Taylor and Francis, 2021).

91 Edward G. DeClair, *Politics on the Fringe: The People, Policies, and Organization of the French National Front* (Duke University Press, 1999). See also Ismael Saz, Julián Sanz, Toni Morant, Zira Box, eds., *Reactionary Nationalists, Fascists and Dictatorships in the Twentieth Century Against Democracy* (Springer, 2019), 70–75.

92 Ido Vock, “Reichsbürger: German Far-Right Extremists Charged with Planning Violent Coup,” *BBC News*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67691489>.

93 See Dalek\_Caament (u/Dalek\_Caament), “This evening in Paris hundreds of royalists paid homage to the martyr King Louis XVI,” Reddit, r/monarchism, January 18, 2025, [https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism/comments/1i4lhca/this\\_evening\\_in\\_paris\\_hundreds\\_of\\_royalists\\_paid/](https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism/comments/1i4lhca/this_evening_in_paris_hundreds_of_royalists_paid/); Western Exile (@westernexile), “A Royalist march in the heart of Paris is the most thunderous cry of ‘We’re so back’ to sound in Europe in a hundred years,” X, January 20, 2025, <https://x.com/westernexile/status/1881295826984870311?mx=2>.

94 Gwendal Keraliès, “Le trumpisme: Un post-libéralisme utile à la France?,” Action Française, January 9, 2025, <https://www.actionfrancaise.net/2025/01/09/le-trumpisme-un-post-liberalisme-utile-a-la-france/>; Gwendal Keraliès, “Les géants de la Tech: Une nouvelle dynastie dans le pouvoir américain,” Action Française, January 15, 2025, <https://www.actionfrancaise.net/2025/01/15/les-geants-de-la-tech-une-nouvelle-dynastie-dans-le-pouvoir-americain/>.

Sachsen (Free Saxons), arose there during the COVID-19 pandemic as a response to what they viewed as heavy-handed government policies toward public health, but they are rooted in the economic malaise of Germans who feel abandoned by globalization and deindustrialization. Such discontent is exacerbated by the social unrest caused by the massive influx of refugees from places like Syria in the 2010s.<sup>95</sup>

Scattered across regions like Saxony and Thuringia in the former East Germany are enclave villages where thousands of people aligned to the “Königreich Deutschland” (Kingdom of Germany) and other separatist movements reject the current government and carry their own currency and IDs.<sup>96</sup> Like the Reichsbürger, which they are aligned with, these small towns are not, on their own, major threats to Germany’s democratic government. Yet, they seem to be a bellwether: As they grow, and their messages spread, the fact that they are seeing success and support is indicative of the growing grassroots disdain within the West for established liberal-democratic norms and systems.

Cram, who would have likely despised the AI-fueled corporate craze for further hollowing artistic expression, is clearly not a perfect forerunner of every member of the New Right, or the Dark Enlightenment. No such person exists. Yet, many of them draw on Cram’s ideas, those of his contemporaries, or the ideas of people that influenced him. Julius Evola, the Italian fascist turned mystic who hated modernity, is invoked frequently, as are Seward Collins, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, and Oswald Spengler, casting a distinctly fascist shadow over the intellectual foundations of people like Yarvin, or conservative writer Michael Anton, who served as the second Trump administration’s director of policy planning.<sup>97</sup>

On the more market-oriented end of the spectrum, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, the German anarcho-capitalist, Ludwig von Mises, and other libertarian thinkers like Murray Rothbard and Robert Nozick, who have all cast doubt on democratic government, tend to appeal to the technocratic, ultra-libertarian streak running through the Silicon Valley crowd calling for network states.<sup>98</sup> As some scholars have dubbed it, these would-be

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95 Manès Weisskircher, “The Strength of Far-right AfD in Eastern Germany: The East-West Divide and the Multiple Causes behind ‘Populism,’” *Political Quarterly* 91, no. 3, (2020): 614–22; Anna-Sophie Heinze and Timon Scheuer, “Growing Up Far Right? Youth Support for the AfD in Eastern Germany,” *German Politics* (November 2025): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2025.2587919>; and Tim Brinkof, “The Former East Germany Is Fertile Ground for the Far Right,” *New Lines Magazine*, November 14, 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-former-east-germany-is-fertile-ground-for-the-far-right/>.

96 Jenny Hill, “The Self-Proclaimed Kingdom That Doesn’t Recognise Germany,” *BBC News*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63916812>.

97 See, among many instances, Lomez, “Curtis Yarvin (aka Mencius Moldbug): An Interview,” *IM-1776*, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://im1776.com/2021/09/03/curtis-yarvin-interview/>. On Anton’s views on Schmitt, see Michael Anton, “Reductio ad Hitlerum,” *American Mind*, June 28, 2022, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/reductio-ad-hitlerlum/>. More broadly, see Adams, *Threat of Anti-Liberalism*.

98 See Max Chafkin, *The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley’s Pursuit of Power* (Penguin, 2021); Raymond Craib, *Adventure Capitalism: A History of Libertarian Exit, from the Era of Decolonization to the Digital Age* (PM Press, 2022); and Peter Thiel, “The Straussian Moment,” in *Studies in Violence, Mimesis*,

corporate kings espouse a kind of “reactionary futurism,” where technology leads to the transcendence of established political and social orders.<sup>99</sup> Carlyle’s writings emphasize the necessity of a heroic leader to shape the course of a nation’s destiny, meshing with and heavily informing the corporate wing of the New Right, which seeks to raise up such strong leaders from the bitter forge of corporate wheeling and dealing. A “Red Caesar” might be required, some within the New Right argue, to unilaterally right the country’s course. Just as with the original Caesar, the republic is a necessary casualty in such projected scenarios, and the line between a theoretical Caesar and a king seems nonexistent.<sup>100</sup>

In less severe realms, Cram’s legacy, and the legacies of his intellectual milieu, continue. In digital arenas, anonymous users debate the merits and aesthetics of monarchies. On Reddit, for example, communities have formed that discuss the continued relevancy of monarchy, and their personal yearning for a return to monarchical government. The largest community, *r/monarchism*, is a subreddit—a single community—where users post jokes, memes, and paintings of their favorite monarchs. They debate the existing royal lines of various countries, the likelihood of monarchies returning, and the ways that might happen, violently or otherwise.<sup>101</sup> As the subreddit’s own description says, it is a place “for the proliferation, reestablishment, and defence of monarchy.” Users can add decorative badges and colorful titles to their profiles, including the heraldry of their favored royal lineages, or add tag lines that describe their niche brand of monarchical affiliation, ranging from “French Eco-Reactionary Feudal Absolutist” to “Federal Monarchist-U.S.” Users debate the wide spectrum of reactionary thought related to monarchism, including the influence of people like Yarvin, whose idea of a corporate-style CEO-monarch often causes disagreement among traditional monarchists.<sup>102</sup> One user was still trying to keep Dicks’s Constantian Society website functioning nearly twenty years after his death.<sup>103</sup>

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*and Culture: Politics and Apocalypse*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly (Michigan State University Press, 2007), 189–218.

99 Ali Rıza Taşkale, “The Affective Politics of Reactionary Futurism in Silicon Valley,” *Critical Studies on Security* (March, 2025): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2025.2474781>; Sergio C. Fanjul, “NRx: The (Underground) Movement That Wants to Destroy Democracy,” *El País*, November 29, 2024.

100 Casey Wheatland, “Founding Fathers and Red Caesar,” *American Mind*, October 20, 2023, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/founding-fathers-and-red-caesar/>; Michael Lind, “Caesarism Won’t Save Us,” *Compact Magazine*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.compactmag.com/article/caesarism-won-t-save-us/>. For what seems like the originator of the “Red Caesar” discussion over the last half decade, see Michael Anton, *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2020).

101 See the *r/monarchism* main page: <https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism> (accessed November 7, 2025).

102 See, for example, ToTooTwoTutu2II (u/ToTooTwoTutu2II), “Thoughts on Curtis Yarvin aka Mencius Moldbug,” Reddit, January 21, 2024, [https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism/comments/1b96iwq/thoughts\\_on\\_curtis\\_yarvin\\_aka\\_mencius\\_moldbug/](https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism/comments/1b96iwq/thoughts_on_curtis_yarvin_aka_mencius_moldbug/).

103 TheSensibleCentrist (u/TheSensibleCentrist), “Constantian website is up,” Reddit, December 6, 2020, [https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism/comments/k821wn/constantian\\_website\\_is\\_up/](https://www.reddit.com/r/monarchism/comments/k821wn/constantian_website_is_up/).

For some in these niche realms, it is also a chance to advertise: The Danubian Restoration Movement (DRM), organized by students in the United States, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Austria, seeks to resurrect the Austro-Hungarian empire by placing Habsburg descendants on a new throne. Marking the hypermodern realities of these new movements, the DRM does not tend to meet in person or put out pamphlets. They organize on Discord, a gaming and messaging app, on Reddit, and advertise on YouTube via “The Monarchist Channel.”<sup>104</sup> Modern technology might be a cause of woe and social disintegration, but it has also become a tool to raise awareness and promote right-wing causes. The Substacks of prominent figures like Yarvin, whose blog hovers around sixty thousand subscribers and a far larger number of viewers, have a significantly wider reach than Cram could have ever imagined for *The Knight Errant* or *The Royal Standard*.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusion

Bringing these themes together, we can paint a picture of the major ideas animating these often disparate movements on the contemporary far right. They mirror, though not always perfectly, the same kinds of animus that drove Cram: a fierce traditionalism that rejects modernity; an aristo-populism that embraces elite control over democracy; and critiques of liberalism grounded in both the harsh reality of a rapidly transforming modern world and a romanticization of the past. Our current global tumult echoes many of the same worries and problems that led Cram and those in his intellectual circles toward monarchical conclusions. Modernity’s edge, which Cram saw cutting away all that was good and virtuous in traditional life, has only been sharpened in the last century. Emergent artificial intelligence, technocapitalism and the Internet, and the financialization of the economy have heightened the socioeconomic dangers that Cram warned about. The solutions raised by modern monarchists draw on the long tradition that Cram immersed himself in; like Cram, today’s monarchists imagine them as solutions to the woes of a rapidly atomizing, uncertain world. Understanding these impulses is critical toward deciphering what these varied right-wing movements want and what they plan to do to achieve it.

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104 See “Students Want to Restore Austro-Hungarian Empire,” posted May 28, 2024, by The Monarchist Channel (TMC), YouTube, 8:14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G8bFGv-Pa0&cab\\_channel=TMC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G8bFGv-Pa0&cab_channel=TMC).

105 See Yarvin’s “Gray Mirror” Substack at <https://graymirror.substack.com> (accessed December 15, 2025).

## ARTICLE

## The Klandidate

### *Senator Earle B. Mayfield and the Ku Klux Klan in Federal Politics*

FELIX HARCOURT

Austin College

**Abstract:** *Analyzing the particulars of Senator Earle B. Mayfield's time in office highlights the limitations of current conceptions of Klan politicians and Ku Klux Klan political power at the federal level in the interwar United States. A "Klandidate" was not necessarily a member of the group, and certainly not an unthinking puppet. By moving beyond a conceptual framework that makes such assumptions, we are empowered to rethink how we might judge the ways and means by which the Invisible Empire exerted political power in the 1920s. This conceptual shift points to the artificial nature of the centrist/extremist binary in our understanding of right-wing politics and politicians. The Klan's political power at the federal level was much more substantial and far reaching, albeit less totalitarian, than we have previously acknowledged, precisely because of the lack of clearly defined boundaries between the far-right organization and mainstream political life.*

**Keywords:** Ku Klux Klan, nativism, racism, United States federal politics, 1920s

Considerations of the Ku Klux Klan's impact on federal politics in the 1920s have largely focused on the metric of affiliation. In other words, the power of the far-right bigots of the self-proclaimed Invisible Empire has largely been measured through the number of officeholders considered to be Klan politicians. Analyzed through the lens of the Klan as a broad social, cultural, and political movement, however, that question of affiliation is far from simple. If what we might call Klannish political power—that is, the power of the Klan movement, not simply the Klan organization—is to be measured by counting the number of Klan politicians, then we must consider who counts as a Klan politician and why. Moreover, we must interrogate what that definition then means for our understanding not only of the extent of the Klan's political power but also how the movement wielded that power. What we find is that the Klan's significance as a political force on the federal level relied less on the election of Klan members or those under the control of Klan leaders and far more on effective lobbying of sympathetic politicians to leverage the intersection of Klannish political positions and the priorities and politics of the conservative mainstream. Such an understanding underscores the fact, as Leo

Ribuffo noted, that “segregating far-right villainy from the mainstream obscures the sources of indecency.”<sup>1</sup>

Just as Ribuffo pointed to the lives of Gerald L. K. Smith, William Dudley Pelley, and Gerald Winrod to highlight such a convergence in the 1930s, the political career of Senator Earle B. Mayfield of Texas offers a useful case study for the 1920s. When he was elected as the junior senator from Texas in 1922, news coverage described him as “the first Klansman [in] the United States Senate.” Studies of the Klan’s power in the interwar period have consistently cited Mayfield as the touchstone of the Klan’s political career, and his election as “one of the most important victories in Klan history.” Yet both at the time of his election and beyond, Mayfield publicly and vehemently rejected characterizations of himself as what some have termed a “Klandidate.” While this was certainly a self-serving denial, particularly after the Klan’s bigotry fell out of popular favor, it was also a denial that complicates our current understanding of the Klan’s influence on federal politics in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup>

The second Ku Klux Klan emerged in 1915, peaked in national membership in late 1924 with its appeals to popular nativist (particularly anti-Catholic) and white supremacist sentiments, and was largely moribund as an organization by 1929. In Texas, that lifecycle was even more accelerated. The first Texan branch of the Klan was formally organized in 1920. Within a year, there were chapters across the state, even as the Texas Klan became particularly notorious for its violent vigilantism. Despite this association, the organization’s power arguably reached its apex in the state in 1922. The Texas Klan also made itself felt on the national stage as Dallas Klan leader Hiram Evans seized the office of Imperial Wizard. By 1923, though, an effective anti-Klan front had emerged in Texas, and by 1924, the group was already in decline, suffering what the *Dallas Morning News* called a “decisive defeat” in state elections that year. While Klan officials denied the organization had lost any of its popularity, the “empire” was increasingly “invisible.” Notwithstanding a brief resurgence in opposition to Al Smith’s run for president in 1928, the Klan had largely become an afterthought in Texas by 1925.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 1983), xiii.

2 “Choice of Ku Klux Has Big Texas Lead,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1922; L. C. Speers, “Klan Shadow Falls on Nation’s Politics,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1923; “Moody Victorious in Texas Run-Off,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1926; “Earle Mayfield Dies in Texas,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1964; “Tom Connally of Texas is Dead,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1963; “Charles Leddy [sic] Discusses Earle Mayfield’s Record,” *Denton (TX) Record-Chronicle*, August 21, 1922; US Congress, Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas, Hearings Before a Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections*, 68th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions (1924), 1,213; Charles C. Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 122; Norman Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug: Texas Politics, 1921–1928* (Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 99, 107.

3 Patricia Bernstein, *Ten Dollars to Hate: The Texas Man Who Fought the Klan* (Texas A&M University Press, 2017), 50, 224, 226; David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism* (Quadrangle, 1968), 39, 43–45, 48.

The organization's rapid rise and fall in both Texas and beyond led to a popular narrative that the Klan was little more than a rearguard action in the inexorable march of the United States toward modernity—an idea long comprehensively discredited. Working to overcome what Kathleen Blee called the assumption of marginality, scholars arrived at a new academic consensus in the 1990s. A wealth of scholarship in recent years, from local area studies to broad thematic considerations, has left us with an understanding of the second Klan as an important participant in the social, cultural, religious, and economic life of the nation, surrounded by controversy but also deeply rooted in the white Protestant norms of the time. The same was true of many of the Klan's political positions, which often differed but little from many mainstream right-wing policy proposals.<sup>4</sup>

Yet studies of the Klan have often remained focused on the question of how and why the membership of the group rose and fell. This is not an inconsiderable question, and its answer has significant implications. Too narrow a focus on organizational affiliation, however, threatens to undermine our ability to recognize the wider power of the Invisible Empire. A core/periphery model that prioritizes the question of formal membership and misses the depth and breadth of the larger informal movement, to use Michael Denning's framing in his critique of studies of the Popular Front, leaves us with too narrow a conception of the Klan's influence.<sup>5</sup> Nowhere is this clearer than in considerations of the Ku Klux Klan in national politics, one of the most understudied facets of the Klan of the 1920s, especially when compared to the rich literature on Klannish political activity at the town, county, and state level.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Two surveys of the Klan's rise and fall from Thomas Pegram and Linda Gordon encapsulate this new consensus: Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Ivan R. Dee, 2011); and Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017). A sample of recent works that have helped to extend and deepen the scope of our understanding includes Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago University Press, 2017); Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930* (University Press of Kansas, 2011); and Katherine J. Lennard, "Uniform Threat: Manufacturing the Ku Klux Klan's Visible Empire, 1866–1931" (PhD diss., University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, 2017).

5 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1996), xvii, xx, 26, 63, 67, 202.

6 Arnold S. Rice's *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Public Affairs Press, 1962) was the first comprehensive study of the political Klan. It did not face a serious reconsideration until Rory McVeigh's *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), which positioned the history of the political Klan within a broader concept of social movement action and offered a "power-devaluation model" of right-wing mobilization. Within this theoretical framework, the Klan's rapid growth is best understood as a response to a real or perceived "devaluation in the economic, political, and status-based 'purchasing power'" of white Protestant native-born US citizens (39–40).

Within that literature, the Klan of the 1920s has primarily been understood as a political machine of sorts, whose power lay chiefly in the ability to mobilize voters and to elect favored candidates. As such, the Klan's political success or failure could be measured by electoral results. How these individuals then acted in office or how they wielded power has often been of secondary concern. The centrality of affiliation has frequently led to the assumption that if politicians were members, they were effectively Klan puppets, whether true believers or cowed into submission.<sup>7</sup> Such an assumption also reinforces the conception of a neat centrist/extremist divide, with Klan politicians on one side and respectable conservatives on the other.

While Rory McVeigh and Linda Gordon have recently offered a more nuanced accounting of the ways the Klan's political posturing impacted organizational success, they have not entirely escaped this issue. For example, even as Gordon attempts to distinguish between *Klan* politicians and *Klan-friendly* politicians, defining these categories once again depends on paying membership and places the core/periphery model at the center of our understanding of the political Klan. The major exception to this trend is Thomas Pegram's *One Hundred Percent American*, which offers a portrait of politically calculating federal officeholders who transitioned from early electoral successes won behind the scenes to more ham-fisted public politicking in the 1924 election and after. For Pegram, political success for the Klan could be measured not just by their ability to elect allies to office but more importantly by whether the Klan's grand political schemes came to fruition. As he points out, most did not.<sup>8</sup> Following Pegram's cue, we benefit from moving beyond the electoral mode to also examine the behavior of legislators in office. Rather than simply counting the number of legislators, we must consider the relationship of those legislators to the Klan, both as organization and as movement, and to Klannish political goals. In doing so, we better recognize how little separated the violent bigotries of the Klan and the accepted prejudices of mainstream politics.

### Mayfield's Election

For Earle B. Mayfield, the junior senator from Texas from 1922 to 1928, there was a significant difference between receiving support from Klan members and being defined as a Klandidate. When, for example, a *Dallas Morning News* editorial on the 1948 campaign for Mayfield's onetime seat described him simply as "the Ku Klux Klan Nominee," he denied that he was ever the "Klan Nominee" for the Senate. He complained that "this false and untruthful label" unfairly singled him out as though he

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7 Rice, *Klan in American Politics*, 30.

8 Gordon, *Second Coming*, 6, 163–65; McVeigh, *Rise of the Klan*, 7–8, 188, 193; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 188, 193, 196.

was “the only candidate for office in Texas that ever received votes from the members of the Ku Klux Klan,” rather than just one of many such political figures.<sup>9</sup>

There is no denying that this was a self-serving argument, made well after the Klan’s power in Texas had faded, but it was one that Mayfield repeated throughout his lifetime, both in public and in private.<sup>10</sup> Some of Mayfield’s complaints were clearly facile. He argued that because he was not a dues-paying member of the Ku Klux Klan at the time of his campaign, it was inaccurate to label him as the “Klan Nominee.” As Mayfield explained, he had previously joined the Klan on the basis that the organization purportedly stood for law enforcement and tighter immigration restrictions. It was only after he had joined, he claimed, that he was shocked to find that there were strong anti-Catholic and antisemitic elements within the Texas Klan and that members had engaged in “repulsive” acts of violence. Because he purportedly “had many friends who were Catholics and Jews,” he resigned his membership after having only attended two meetings, and made sure to clarify that he had never worn a hood or marched in a Klan parade. His claimed date of withdrawal from the organization just happened to be one month before he declared his candidacy for the United States Senate.<sup>11</sup>

If a Klan politician is strictly defined by membership, then Mayfield would technically evade such categorization. This points to the limits of centering on issues of affiliation, especially since Mayfield was not alone in his strategy. The timely resignation from dues-paying membership became a tactic copied by a number of other contenders for high office. Perhaps most notable in this was future US Supreme Court justice Hugo Black, who resigned his Klan membership in 1925 shortly before his successful run to become the senator from Alabama in 1926.

Publisher Ted Dealey and the *Dallas Morning News* were rightly unconvinced by Mayfield’s flimsy defense and noted Mayfield’s narrow definition of Kandidate: “You were supported by the Klan in 1922 and you know it, so why beat around the bush?”<sup>12</sup> If we remain wedded to a core/periphery model, we are taking an extremely narrow view

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9 “Editorial,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 1948; Earle Mayfield to Ted Dealey, May 26, 1948, Folder 12, Box 5, Earle B. Mayfield Papers, Georgetown University Manuscripts Collection (hereafter EBMP); Ted Dealey to Earle Mayfield, May 31, 1948, Folder 12, Box 5, EBMP; Earle Mayfield, “Incidents of My Life, Volume 3,” 221, Folder 16, Box 15, EBMP.

10 Charles C. Alexander, *Crusade for Conformity: The Ku Klux Klan in Texas, 1920–1930* (Texas Gulf Coast Historical Association, 1962), 47; Earle Mayfield, “Affidavit on *Crusade for Conformity*,” April 25, 1963, Folder 13, Box 15, EBMP; Earle Mayfield, “Incidents of My Life, Volume 1,” 1, Folder 14, Box 15, EBMP.

11 “Texans to Put Klan Before the Senate,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1923; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Earle Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 166–68, 198–99, 297; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 316; Rice, *Klan in American Politics*, 97.

12 Bill Ruggles, Untitled Memorandum, undated, Folder 12, Box 5, EBMP; Ted Dealey to Earle Mayfield, May 31, 1948, Folder 12, Box 5, EBMP.

of how the Klan wielded power—a view narrow enough that it would even technically exempt Mayfield, assuming we take him at his word. If we accept Dealey’s rebuke of Mayfield, on the other hand, we must then consider Dealey’s contention that evidence of support from Klan officials and members is sufficient even in the absence of formal affiliation.

Mayfield disagreed. Even if he had received Klan votes, he contended in his later years, it did not mean he was their politician. It meant that they were his voters. Both in 1922 and long after, he vehemently asserted that he had not explicitly courted Ku Klux Klan support on the campaign trail. In fact, he bent over backward to avoid mentioning the Klan at all. After all, why alienate one bloc of voters by declaring support for the organization, or alienate Klan voters by declaring opposition? In this, Mayfield’s actions fell in line with other political figures in the 1920s seeking to maximize their vote share. Congressman Tom Connally, who would go on to defeat Mayfield in the Democratic primary in 1928, was cautioned by friends in 1922 that any campaign stop could draw him into the Klan issue. Thus, as an incumbent Connally simply attempted to avoid campaigning, first remaining out of state for “urgent, pending public matters” in Washington, DC, and then claiming his son’s illness kept him from public appearances. Even those who privately detested the Klan’s bigotry, as with Michigan congressman Earl Michener, often felt that the best political tactic was “saying nothing and in no way fighting the organization.” After all, as Mayfield described it in his memoir, the Klan issue was a red-hot poker at both ends. Anyone who touched it would be burned.<sup>13</sup>

Given that the Klan was arguably at the apogee of its power in Texas in 1922, Mayfield’s refusal to speak about it on the campaign trail was so unyielding that it became one of the most remarked upon elements of his election. When a rival candidate challenged Mayfield to deny that he was a “Klan candidate,” Mayfield refused to respond. When the *Dallas Morning News* asked Mayfield’s opinion on the Invisible Empire, he refused to respond. When voters asked him his position and worried that, in declining to make his stand known, he was failing “to say anything in condemnation of the mob spirit,” Mayfield did respond. All he would say was that he stood “for law and order enforced through established channels” and that this was not a federal issue. The standard reply from Mayfield’s office refused to even name the Klan as the issue at hand.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 298; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Earl C. Michener to Harry Michener, February 23, 1923, Folder February 1924, Box 7, Earl C. Michener Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; H. F. Connally to Tom Connally, June 17, 1922, Folder 4-8-22, Box 61, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter TCP); Nick Goodrich to Tom Connally, July 4, 1922, Folder 4-8-22, Box 61, TCP; Tom Connally to L. R. Talley, July 6, 1922, Folder 4-8-22, Box 61, TCP; Tom Connally to Waller S. Baker, July 17, 1922, Folder 7-17-22, Box 61, TCP.

14 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 164, 298; “Protest Against Seating Mayfield,” *Fiery Cross* (KKK weekly newspaper, Indianapolis, IN), December 21, 1923; E. A. Berry to Earle Mayfield, April 18, 1922,

How did Mayfield explain winning the votes of Klan members from across Texas? Both during the controversy over his seating in 1923–1924 and in his later memoir, Mayfield held firm to the contention that his positions on immigration, prohibition, public schooling, and public morality were simply “in harmony” with the beliefs of Klan members in the state. Certainly, his speeches would have resonated with Klan ideologues. On the stump, he warned of the “great mass of foreign-thinking peoples in our midst,” who knew “little of American institutions.” The national policy, the Texan declared, must be “America for Americans.” These were unexceptional sentiments, solidly rooted in mainstream political nativism. Even if they were wildly applauded by Klan publications, were such views sufficient to label Mayfield a Klan politician rather than simply a conservative immigration restrictionist?<sup>15</sup>

Mayfield argued that he was “undoubtedly the strongest candidate in the Senatorial race” holding these positions, citing his record in the Texas State Senate and his position on the state railroad commission. As such, he was not the Klan’s man: “They were forced to come to me.” Nor was Mayfield the only political figure who offered such a convenient view of events. When William B. Pine of Oklahoma was criticized as a Klan candidate during his US Senate run in 1924, he argued, “I have been endorsed by the WCTU’s [Women’s Christian Temperance Union] organizations and several Lions clubs. Yet I am never referred to as the Lion’s [*sic*] candidate. I am no more a Klan candidate than a WCTU candidate.” Did a Klan endorsement represent a controlling interest? Both Pine and Mayfield argued not.<sup>16</sup>

But this contention found little support among the Texan’s peers. As far as most were concerned, Mayfield was indisputably a Klan nominee. After unstinting support for his 1922 campaign from newly installed Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans, a fellow Texan, no one was more convinced of this than Klan members and leaders themselves. If their backing was responsible for his election, as they believed, then why should they

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Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Mayfield Campaign to E.A. Berry, April 25, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to George Armstrong, January 25, 1922, George W. Armstrong Papers, AR335-31-2, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries [hereafter GWAP]; Notes on the Corsicana Trial, undated, Folder 28, Box 4, EBMP; *Dallas Morning News* to Earle Mayfield, April 1, 1922, Folder 1, Box 10, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to *Dallas Morning News*, April 14, 1922, Folder 1, Box 10, EBMP; “Mayfield Responds,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 16, 1922; “Candidates Questioned,” *Beeville (TX) Picayune*, April 20, 1922; “Address by Cullen Thomas,” *Houston Press*, July 19, 1922; Mayfield, “Affidavit.”

15 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 298; Earle Mayfield, Speech at Dallas, August 15, 1922, Folder 18, Box 6, EBMP; “Protest Against Seating Mayfield,” *Fiery Cross*, December 21, 1923; “Condemns Ferguson,” *Texas Searchlight* (Fort Worth, TX), July 28, 1922; “Mayfield’s Speech Talk of Town,” *Tyler (TX) American*, June 16, 1922.

16 Mayfield, “Affidavit”; “Drys and Ku Klux Combine in Texas,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1922; “Victories by Klan Feature Election,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1924; Maynard Hanson, “Senator William B. Pine and His Times” (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 1983), 58.

not expect him to be beholden to their political goals? He owed them, so they owned him.

After all, Mayfield was not the only Klansman (or, technically, ex-Klansman) to throw his hat in the ring in 1922. The Democratic primary had seen fierce jockeying for position between Robert L. Henry and Sterling Strong as to which of them was the most forceful advocate for the Invisible Empire. Both were overt and proud Klan candidates. Yet neither attracted backing from Evans, who had vaulted from leadership of the powerful and prosperous Dallas Klan to become one of the group's national officials, and was in the process of attempting to take control of the entire organization. If we focus on questions of affiliation and disaffiliation, then it would seem that it was the nonmember who bested the members. Yet Mayfield did so with the support of the organization's leaders.<sup>17</sup>

Those involved in the 1922 election offered a number of different arguments as to why Evans favored Mayfield. Some simply thought that Evans was forced to back Mayfield as the other two candidates were unlikely to win. Unsurprisingly, this was Mayfield's preferred explanation of events. Others at the time argued that Henry and Strong were politically damaged by their overt support for the Klan, making it the organization's most strategic move to back a closemouthed sympathizer rather than a voluble champion. The Klan's leaders were certainly aware of the negative impact that its support could have, going so far as to endorse candidates they opposed in order to sink their campaigns, as in Oregon and Oklahoma.<sup>18</sup>

Other explanations suggest less an ideological convergence and more a relationship of convenience. Some alleged that Evans supported Mayfield in the hope that he would prove not only politically valuable but also provide profitable links to wealthy sympathizers, particularly among the oil and railroad interests. There is also the possibility that the decision had nothing to do with the candidates themselves. In approaching the Klan for backing in his campaign, Henry had been granted the favor of Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons. With Evans looking to push Simmons out and supplant him as Imperial Wizard, it would have behooved the Texan to see Simmons's candidate knocked out of the race and replaced with his own man.<sup>19</sup>

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17 "Ferguson Objects," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1922; "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Dallas Morning News*, July 2, 1922; "Address by Cullen Thomas," *Houston Press*, July 19, 1922; Sterling P. Strong to Unknown Correspondent, June 29, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; "Strong May Withdraw," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 12, 1922; "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 3, 1922; "Strong Makes Charge," *Dallas Dispatch*, July 11, 1922.

18 David Chalmers, "The Ku Klux Klan in Politics in the 1920's," *Mississippi Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1965): 234-47, esp. 237.

19 "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Dallas Morning News*, July 2, 1922; "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 3, 1922; S. L. Ricketts to R. L. Henry, June 17, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Erwin Clark to Hiram Evans, July 17, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Committee on Privileges and

Whatever the reason, Evans threw his support behind Mayfield and pushed the Texas Klans to follow his lead. This was a divisive tactic. Henry resigned from the Invisible Empire after bitter recriminations, later offering damaging testimony against Mayfield. Others followed Henry's lead, including high-ranking state officer Erwin J. Clark, who charged Evans with tearing apart the "glorious" Klan with his political machinations.<sup>20</sup>

Evans's support for Mayfield divided not only the Texas Klan but the state's Democrats more generally. It is in that split that we might see how Mayfield achieved the kind of notoriety as a Klandidate that others supported by the Klan at the time evaded. The results of the first Democratic primary left Mayfield in a runoff for the nomination against former governor James Ferguson. Freightened with his own baggage after having been impeached and removed from office in 1917 for various financial "irregularities," Ferguson saw the Klan issue as an effective campaign tool against Mayfield. From his opening runoff speech onward, Ferguson relied on explicitly attacking Mayfield as a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The charges stuck, and the national press began to refer to Mayfield as "openly the candidate of the Ku Klux Klan." In these attacks, we start to see the shaping of the mythos of the Klandidate, grounded in the largely discredited characterization of Klan members as marginalized fanatics. While the academic consensus has moved away from this idea, it too often continues to warp popular understanding of the Klan's political machinations, with the assumption that Klan politicians must surely have been of one mind with the organization.<sup>21</sup>

Mayfield's actions in the campaign certainly did not help dispel such an idea. At one campaign event, described by the *Dallas Morning News* as "resembling an open meeting of the Ku Klux Klan," a crowd of some six thousand saw Mayfield seated alongside the leader of the Dallas Klan. With Mayfield on the stage, another speaker praised

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Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 47–48, 68–69, 376–77; Erwin Clark to Z. E. Marvin, July 3, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; "Say Klan Ordered Mayfield Election," *New York Times*, May 10, 1924; Arnold Rice, "The Southern Wing of the Ku Klux Klan in American Politics, 1915–1928" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1959), 129.

20 George Armstrong to Brown Harwood, February 15, 1924, AR335-48-2, GWAP; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 49–50, 52, 55, 68–69, 110, 425; R. L. Henry to Dudley Kent, June 15, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; R. L. Henry to J. H. Muse, June 18, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; R. L. Henry to C. A. Shock, July 10, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Erwin Clark to Z. E. Marvin, July 3, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Erwin Clark to Hiram Evans, July 17, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; "Supervisors for Klan Candidates," *Dallas Morning News*, July 20, 1922.

21 Alexander, *Crusade for Conformity*, 44; Brown, *Hood*, 95–97; "Ferguson Charges Mayfield Klansman," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 2, 1922; "Expect Light Texas Vote," *New York Times*, August 26, 1922; "Ferguson Objects," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1922; "Gov. Ferguson's Platform," *Ferguson Forum* (Ferguson's newsletter), April 6, 1922; "Will the People Stand For It?," *Ferguson Forum*, July 6, 1922; "Charles Leddy [sic] Discusses Earle Mayfield's Record," *Denton (TX) Record-Chronicle*, August 21, 1922.

the bigoted organization as “a most glorious agency for the enforcement of law and order.” At actual Klan rallies, speakers urged members to back Mayfield and reminded them not only of Ferguson’s impeachment but also of his opposition to prohibition. After Mayfield defeated Ferguson, Klansmen paraded and lit fiery crosses in triumph. A widely circulated missive from Klan official A. D. Ellis noted that “the spirit of 100 percent Americanism will be enhanced with Klansman Mayfield representing us in Washington.” Texas Klan leader Brown Harwood echoed this language in a letter urging Klan voters to turn out in support of “red-blooded 100 per cent Americans.” If they could only defeat Ferguson, he wrote, “Klansman Earle B. Mayfield should carry our banner to Washington and plant it in the Senate.”<sup>22</sup>

This was an association further encouraged by Texas Republicans, who scented an opportunity to challenge the Democratic stranglehold on state offices. After Mayfield won the primary, Republican state chair R. B. Creager threw the support of the state committee behind a Democratic splinter candidate, George E. B. Peddy, in the general election. Drawing anti-Klan Democrats to the ticket, Creager hoped, would mean a “great and permanent strengthening of [the] Republican Party in Texas.” Texas Democrats, meanwhile, warned that to “divide politically on the Ku Klux Klan question” would be to make the Republicans “the dominant power in the State.” On the national stage, Democratic leaders fretted that if Mayfield won, it would be “a nightmare to the national democracy,” as the attention lavished on his candidacy would divide the party over the Klan and religious intolerance—a prophetic vision of the infamously contentious 1924 Democratic National Convention.<sup>23</sup>

Mayfield’s denials of his bigoted past and complaints about being defined as a Klan nominee were not solely later inventions. In his correspondence following the 1922

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22 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 197–98; “Mayfield Appears at Fair Park,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 16, 1922; “Rev. Monk Speaks,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 24, 1922; “Klan Victory at Polls,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 28, 1922; “Mayfield’s Speech Talk of Town,” *Tyler American*, June 16, 1922; “Klan’s Role Described,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 16, 1922; “Corpus Christi Klan Meets,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 26, 1922; “Klux Celebrate Victory,” *Ranger Times* (Eastland, TX), August 27, 1922; A. D. Ellis to Texas Klans, March 22, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 79.

23 “Republican Convention Gathers,” *San Antonio Express*, August 9, 1922; “Texas Republicans Attack Ku Klux,” *Austin (TX) American*, August 9, 1922; “Peddy Says Klan Caused Bolt,” *Austin American*, August 15, 1922; “State Leader for GOP Hits Klan,” *Austin American*, August 29, 1922; E. C. Bramblitt, “Editorial,” *Wichita Falls (TX) News*, August 15, 1922; “Peddy Blames Klan Influences,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 21, 1922; “Peddy Address,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 17, 1922; “Peddy’s Political Pedigree,” *Texas 100% American* (Dallas, TX), October 20, 1922; “Keep Peddy’s Name Off Ballot,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1922; Russell Porter, “Fergusons Stand Back to the Wall,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1925; “Washington Post’s Attack on Mayfield,” *American Forum* (San Antonio, TX), April 21, 1923; Brown Harwood to Texas Klans, October 21, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; R. B. Creager to George Armstrong, September 2, 1922, AR335-28-6, GWAP; George Armstrong to E. G. Senter, September 4, 1922, AR335-28-6, GWAP; Brown, *Hood*, 111, 122; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 651.

election, both he and his supporters agreed that if anyone could rightfully be dubbed a Ku Klux Kandidate, it had been his rival in the primary, Robert Henry. Moreover, while Klan leaders and members undoubtedly supported him, Mayfield fundamentally did not believe that he owed his election to the Klan's support. By the time he came to write his self-serving memoir, he even went so far as to allege that the "injection of the Ku Klux Klan question" into the runoff primary against Ferguson was actually an electoral drag. If "there had never been such a thing as the Ku Klux Klan in Texas," Mayfield contended, his margin of victory would have been almost twice as large.<sup>24</sup>

The sore winner may have had a point. His association with the Klan made him a lightning rod for criticism from groups like the Dallas County Citizens League, which had amassed significant support by the time of the 1922 election. As historians of Texas have noted, though, the DCCL's "overconfidence and lack of strategic creativity" made the organization a less than effective political foe. Ultimately, Mayfield won Dallas County by a far higher margin than his statewide tally—a disconnect that is traceable largely to the Klan issue. As one contemporary noted, "the Klan took charge of the district and issues and politics cut no figure."<sup>25</sup>

In areas less favorable to the Klannish movement, however, the organization's active backing of Mayfield may well have hurt the candidate. Some at the time noted that it was Ferguson's earlier impeachment and his stances on prohibition that had led voters to hold their nose and vote for Mayfield "in spite of his membership in the Klan." Others were so disgusted by both candidates in the Democratic runoff primary that they simply did not vote. Most telling was the question posed by the *Marlin Democrat* at the time: If "the Knights of the Mask and Bed Sheet want to claim Mayfield's election," why was it that none of the other Klan candidates won their primary races that year?<sup>26</sup>

This was one of Mayfield's favorite data points in his argument—that the Klan in Texas was "never as strong as the Klan leaders made it appear." If, as Imperial Wizard Evans contended, Mayfield owed his election entirely to the Klan, how could you explain the failed candidacy of Klansmen Billie Mayfield (no relation) for lieutenant governor and Ed Bentley for superintendent of public instruction? For Mayfield, the explanation was simple. He did not owe his victory to the Klan. Rather, it was his "air-

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24 Jno. B. Littler to Earle Mayfield, February 2, 1924, Folder 1, Box 5, EBMP; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 194.

25 "Ferguson Objects," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1922; Mark N. Morris, "Saving Society Through Politics: The Ku Klux Klan in Dallas, Texas, in the 1920s" (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 1997), 169; Kevin G. Portz, "Political Turmoil in Dallas: The Electoral Whipping of the Dallas County Citizens League by the Ku Klux Klan, 1922," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2015): 150, 153; Shelley Sallee, "The Woman of It: Governor Miriam Ferguson's 1924 Election," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (1996): 5; E. G. Senter to George Armstrong, May 24, 1922, AR335-32-7, GWAP.

26 "Editorial," *Marlin (TX) Democrat*, August 29, 1922.

tight organization,” built during his years on the railroad commission, that had allowed him to overcome the headwind of a Klan endorsement.<sup>27</sup>

### Mayfield in Office

The struggle over the nature of Mayfield’s Klandidacy did not end with his election. Indeed, the divisive nature of Mayfield’s campaign was such that even before he defeated Peddy in the general election, a series of bitterly contested lawsuits were launched protesting the involvement of the Klan in the campaign. While the courts did not find sufficient ground to prevent Mayfield from taking his seat in the Senate in 1923, a special subcommittee of the Senate Privileges and Elections Committee was tasked with determining whether or not the Texan would remain there. Ironically, this process seemingly deepened the Klan’s involvement in Mayfield’s candidacy. Even as he began his tenure as a senator, the three-man legal team representing his campaign included two Klansmen, William A. Hanger and William F. Zumbrunn. Both men would be crucial in defending Mayfield, as well as the Klan more broadly.<sup>28</sup>

Officially, the Senate committee was convened to look into “charges of excessive and illegal expenditures of money and of unlawful practices” in the Texas general election. It quickly became clear, however, that the hearings would function as a ruling on the operations of the Klan itself. This was certainly the argument made by Peddy’s lawyers. Mayfield’s election, they claimed, meant the “subversion of visible government into a mendacious invisibility where corrupt and unpatriotic men and women (unrestrained by law or morals) may possess and exert brutal power over the lives and liberties of the people.”<sup>29</sup>

These hearings again illustrate the underlying assumptions that continue to shape both popular and much academic understanding of what it meant to be a Klan politician. In the picture Peddy’s lawyers painted for the committee, Mayfield was a loyal and dedicated Klansman who would act as nothing more than a puppet for the Invisible Empire. His election had been bought through the Klan’s largesse, vastly exceeding electoral spending limits. Those who could not be bought were reportedly bullied and threatened. Ballots had been tampered with. Multiple witnesses testified that the Klan’s “political machines” had won the election and were designed to “control our candidates when placed in office.” As such, Peddy’s team argued, Mayfield could not be judged as

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27 “Editorial,” *Marlin Democrat*, August 29, 1922; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 198–99.

28 *State of Texas v. S. L. Staples*, District Court of Navarro County, Texas, Case 12,210, October 1922, Folder 2, Box 5, EBMP; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 610, 614; Mayfield, “Affidavit.”

29 Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 1, 667.

an individual but had to be considered as an extension of the organization—the perfect Klandidate.<sup>30</sup>

The hearings into whether Mayfield's election should be considered illegitimate dragged on month after month. Outside of the hearing room, Klan supporters and opponents alike mobilized to put political pressure on the committee's members. At least one member of the committee, Republican senator James Watson of Indiana, was later accused of negotiating a pact with the Imperial Wizard: Watson would allegedly work for Mayfield's seating in return for the Klan's support for Watson's reelection, and possibly for his bid for the 1924 Republican vice-presidential nomination. The Senate committee's final report in early 1924 stated that there was sufficient evidence of neither campaign finance violations nor of collusion between the Klan and the Mayfield campaign.<sup>31</sup>

While the question of Mayfield's legitimacy was ultimately settled in his favor (thanks to the Klan's lawyers and, most likely, the political pressure they could bring to bear), Mayfield was also acutely aware that if it were not for the Klan's public backing, his first two years in the Senate would not have been dogged by lengthy and embarrassing hearings. Similar to the election itself, the Senate hearings both tied Mayfield ever more closely to the Klan and led Mayfield to publicly and privately distance himself from the organization. Mayfield unequivocally blamed the Klan for the various legal challenges to his election. It was the Klan's fault, he grouched, that he had been "hounded as no man holding office in Texas was ever hounded before."<sup>32</sup>

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30 Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 127, 1,166.

31 "Outside Meddlers with Texas Affairs," *Houston Post*, November 12, 1922; "Newspaper Attack on Mayfield Answered," *American Forum*, April 14, 1923; "Time to Quit Hounding Mayfield," *American Forum*, April 28, 1923; "Editorial," *Lockhart (TX) Post-Register*, August 10, 1923; "Shall a Klansman Go To The Senate," *Tolerance* (Chicago, IL), November 26, 1922; "Mayfield to Face Bitter Contest," *Tolerance*, December 30, 1923; "Watson Forced to Wear Klux Collar," *Tolerance*, June 15, 1924; "Klan Attacks Underwood," *New York World*, January 18, 1924; "Pope's Presidential Possibilities," *Texas American* (Dallas, TX), May 4, 1923; "Tell Your Senator," *Texas American*, December 28, 1923; "Why We Are Supporting Felix D. Robertson," *Texas American*, February 29, 1924; "Washington Post Opens on Mayfield Case," *Fiery Cross*, April 6, 1923; "Committee to Hear Mayfield's Case Appointed," *Fiery Cross*, December 14, 1923; "Can Oust Mayfield," *Washington Post*, March 29, 1923; "Texans to Put Klan Before the Senate," *New York Times*, October 27, 1923; L. C. Speers, "Shadow Falls on Nation's Politics," *New York Times*, November 18, 1923; "Watson Had Klan Card," *New York Times*, October 29, 1926; "Finds Mayfield Case Slow," *New York Times*, May 28, 1924; "Editorial," *American Standard* (New York, NY), July 1, 1924; "Mayfield Backing Won Watson Klan Aid," *Washington (DC) Evening Star*, October 28, 1926; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 50, 69, 411, 512, 584; George Armstrong to Earle Mayfield, November 23, 1923, Folder 19, Box 40, GWAP; Harry Tom King to Earle Mayfield, February 6, 1925, Folder 14, Box 5, EBMP; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 213; Marion Monteval, *The Klan Inside Out* (Monarch Publishing Company, 1924), 140, 149.

32 Earle Mayfield to C. L. Tanner, February 3, 1928, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to Ben C. Richards, January 13, 1926, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to Henry Wills, April 28, 1927, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP.

Even worse than ensnaring him in a political “bed of thorns,” though, was the question of attorneys’ fees. Mayfield repeatedly complained in later years that “the Klan should have borne the expense” but “did not pay a thin dime.” Instead, Mayfield noted, he was forced to borrow money from a local banker, who was not coincidentally also a leader in the Texas Klan. When his credit ran out, Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans personally loaned Mayfield a very precise \$13,235.83 to help cover legal expenses, albeit at a rate of six percent interest. As such, the senator from Texas complained, Evans “was on the receiving end of the line and not on the paying end as far as money was concerned.”<sup>33</sup>

Scholars of the Klan have generally lost interest in Mayfield following his election and the contested hearings. But beyond elections, the means by which the Klan movement exerted political power in influencing legislative decisions and policymaking is crucial. In this regard Mayfield is particularly useful in helping deepen our understanding of Klannish political power.

Whether or not Mayfield was actually a dues-paying member of the Klan at the time of his election, he had drawn active support from the organization. Even as he publicly kept them at arm’s length, he forged ongoing relationships with Klan leaders. Frequent correspondence with Texas Klan official Z. E. “Zeke” Marvin grew into recurring meetings between Mayfield and Imperial Wizard Evans to discuss state and national politics, including efforts to shape the 1924 presidential election.<sup>34</sup> Mayfield pushed for the candidacy of Klan-backed William McAdoo on the convention floor, and as it became clear that neither McAdoo nor the hated Catholic governor of New York Al Smith could muster the necessary votes to capture the nomination, Mayfield and the Texans worked assiduously to drive the convention away from the overtly anti-Klan Oscar Underwood and toward the eventual victor, John W. Davis. All the while, Mayfield reportedly sat as a member of Imperial Wizard Evans’s “board of strategy” in the nearby Hotel McAlpin, alongside Klan leaders from around the country.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 223, 233; Mayfield, “Affidavit.”

34 Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, November 8, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, May 13, 1924, Folder 14, Box 5, EBMP; Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, February 7, 1925, Folder 14, Box 5, EBMP; Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, December 24, 1925, Folder 7a, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to Z. E. Marvin, December 29, 1925, Folder 7a, Box 6, EBMP; “Klan Scored as Elaborate Spy System,” *Fort Worth Record*, May 14, 1924; “Machine Coalition with Klan Reported,” *El Paso Times*, May 18, 1924; “Texas’ Greatest Political Convention,” *Waco (TX) News-Tribune*, May 28, 1924; “Editorial,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 1924; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 195–96, 264; Brown, *Hood*, 170, 174–75; Lee N. Allen, “The Democratic Presidential Primary Election of 1924 in Texas,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (1958): 476, 485–89.

35 Allen, “Democratic Presidential Primary,” 492; Alexander, *Klan in the Southwest*, 165–67; Brown, *Hood*, 207; Rice, *Klan in American Politics*, 81; “Wizard Evans at NY,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 26, 1924.

In office, Mayfield built a voting record that seemingly reflected this ongoing alliance with Klan leaders. Shortly after defeating Peddy, officials of the Invisible Empire urged the Texas senator to back Joseph Robinson of Arkansas for senate minority leader. Though Robinson would later parlay a widely lauded attack on religious bigotry into becoming Al Smith's 1928 running mate, the Grand Dragon of Georgia proclaimed in 1922 that he was a longtime friend of Robinson. Mayfield not only backed Robinson for the leadership position but boasted that his was a decisive vote in Robinson's victory over Furnifold Simmons of North Carolina.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Mayfield voted in 1926 to seat Daniel Steck of Iowa in his contested Senate election against Smith Brookhart and to dismiss impeachment proceedings against Judge George English of Illinois. Both Steck and English were represented in their hearings before the Senate by William F. Zumbunn—the same man who had represented Mayfield in his seating dispute, and the chief legal counsel for the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>37</sup>

In ongoing wrangling over questions of congressional procedure, Mayfield also hewed closely to the Klannish position. In a remarkable example of political dysfunction in the 1920s, Congress—for the only time in its history—failed to agree on a plan for reapportionment following the 1920 census. Difficult negotiations almost broke down completely over Kansas Republican Homer Hoch's proposal that alien residents be excluded from census calculations to determine political representation. In outrage, Fiorello LaGuardia dubbed the idea "the Evans plan" after the Klan's Imperial Wizard. While Mayfield had left the Senate before the final vote on the reapportionment bill, he—along with other Klan-affiliated political figures—had expressed vocal support for the nativist proposal. In a less fraught vote, and in a reflection of the Klan's intersection with the political mainstream, Mayfield sided with both Klan leaders and every other Senate Democrat (with the exception of Oscar Underwood) to vote down a proposal to revise Senate rules on cloture.<sup>38</sup>

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36 Nathan Bedford Forrest to Earle Mayfield, December 21, 1922, Folder 29, Box 4, EBMP; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 226; "Close Fight in Senate," *New York Times*, January 20, 1923; "Robinson Will Lead Senate Democrats," *New York Times*, February 9, 1923.

37 "Yea and Nay Votes of Senator Earle B. Mayfield of Texas in the Senate of the United States, December 3, 1923, to July 3, 1926," Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP; "Complete Voting Record of Senator Earle B. Mayfield, 69th Congress, 2nd Session," Folder 2, Box 7, EBMP; William F. Zumbunn to Hanford MacNider, April 14, 1926, Box 72, Folder 13, Hanford MacNider Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library; "Evans Calls Klan to Fight," *Washington Evening Star*, September 21, 1926; "Zumbunn Resigns from English Case," *Washington Evening Star*, October 27, 1926; "Steck Resents Charge," *Washington Evening Star*, October 30, 1926; "Seating Contested," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 5, 1926; "Watson Carried Klan Card," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 29, 1926.

38 "Senate Poll Points to Defeat," *New York Times*, May 31, 1925; "Problems that Confront the New Congress," *New York Times*, April 7, 1929; "Senate Sends Apportionment Bill," *New York Times*, June 4, 1929; "Amendment Proposed to Exclude Aliens," *Fellowship Forum* (Klan journal, Washington, DC), January 12, 1929; "Immigration's Loophole," *Wisconsin Kourier* (Washington, DC), March 13, 1925; Charles W. Eagles, *Democracy Delayed: Congressional Reapportionment and*

As his support for Hoch's census proposal might suggest, Mayfield was happy to vote in line with the Klan's hardline position on foreign relations. Throughout his term in office, Mayfield consistently stood against measures to settle international war debt. Given the organization's anti-Catholic bigotry, Klan members were particularly concerned over the vote on whether to settle Italian debt, and Klan publications approvingly noted Mayfield's voting record on the question. Of particular note was Mayfield's support of the Klan's key political issue, immigration restriction. Historians have often portrayed the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act enshrining national quotas in American immigration law as the lone great political victory of the Ku Klux Klan. The restrictions did not go as far as many wanted—the Grand Dragon of South Carolina, for example, echoed the Imperial Wizard in suggesting that all immigration to the United States should be suspended for at least ten years. Nonetheless, Klan members launched a strenuous effort in support of the proposed bill. As *The New York Times* noted on the eve of the House vote, “the Ku Klux Klan has made its influence felt.” Once passed into law, Klan leaders were happy to take credit.<sup>39</sup>

Historians have also, however, argued that the Klan's lobbying on this issue was almost incidental to the passage of the legislation and that “Klan backing made no material difference in the outcome.” If anything, Pegram argues, Klan support for the bill may actually have hurt its chances at passage. At the very least, an endorsement from the Invisible Empire provided a useful angle of attack for opponents of the legislation. With or without the Klan, this view holds, the nation was set on a course of immigration restriction.<sup>40</sup>

Certainly, Klan policy positions on immigration restriction were largely mainstream. What is overlooked in this formulation, though, is the series of political battles that followed passage of the law. Where the Johnson-Reed Act sailed through the House by a vote of 308 to 58 and passed the Senate 69 to 9, the vote margins of the post-passage battles over finer details of the legislation were far narrower. Hence even Mayfield's single vote in the Senate took on outside importance. Here, rather than in passage of

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*Urban-Rural Conflict in the 1920s* (University of Georgia Press, 1990), 21, 58, 70, 78–80.

39 Ku Klux Klan, *Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, at Their First Annual Meeting Held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (Arno Press, 1977), 70, 74; Hiram Evans, *The Menace of Modern Immigration* (Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1924), <https://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/menacemodernimmigration.pdf> (accessed December 7, 2025); “Bill to Register Aliens,” *Fiery Cross*, July 20, 1923; “A Klansman for President,” *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly* (Houston, TX), July 28, 1923; “American Civilization Endangered,” *Badger American* (Milwaukee, WI), March 1, 1924; “Vote on Alien Bill This Week,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1924; Peter J. Sletterdahl, *The Nightshirt in Politics* (Ajax Publishing Company, 1926), 39.

40 Gordon, *Second Coming*, 195; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (Oxford University Press, 1967), 254; Kristofer Allerfeldt, “And We Got Here First: Albert Johnson, National Origins, and Self-Interest in the Immigration Debate of the 1920s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 1 (2010): 8; McVeigh, *Rise of the Klan*, 110; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 210–11.

the bill itself, could the Klan realistically claim to use its lobbying power to make a political difference? Again it is difficult to definitively conclude that Mayfield voted at the Klan's behest rather than from his own restrictionist sentiments.<sup>41</sup>

Klan publications and leaders certainly lobbied Mayfield to continue to take a hardline position in the battles over the details of the Johnson-Reed Act. With the majority, the Texas senator voted for the exclusion of Japanese immigrants, for determining national origins quotas based on the census of 1890 rather than 1910, and for the reduction of those quotas. While an amendment that would have provided for the total exclusion of all immigration for five years went down to defeat, Mayfield's vote helped stave off an effort to increase quota percentages in the bill. In a reflection of his dual interests in immigration restriction and Texas agricultural profits, he voted to institute quota restrictions on immigration from the Western hemisphere but also to limit restrictions on the migration of unskilled agricultural laborers.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most significant of these fights was sparked by a 1926 proposal from Senator James W. Wadsworth of New York, who advocated for an amendment exempting family members of immigrants already in the United States from the new quotas.<sup>43</sup> Though it quickly became clear that Wadsworth would not be able to garner the necessary votes, even the failed proposal was sufficient to make the New York senator a political target in his reelection campaign that year. The Klan's publication *Fellowship Forum* led a successful charge to unseat Wadsworth. His defeat was a shocking loss for one of the more powerful Republicans in the Senate and a man who had been seen by some as a strong contender for the 1928 presidential nomination.<sup>44</sup>

In the Senate session following the election, Wadsworth made a lame-duck effort to revive his proposal, offering a more narrowly conceived amendment that would allow for the entry of the wives and children under the age of eighteen of those immigrants

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41 Mae Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 70; "Strict Immigration Bill Easily Passes," *New York Times*, April 13, 1924; "Huge Votes for Exclusion," *New York Times*, May 16, 1924.

42 "Yea and Nay Votes," Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP; "National Origins," *Kourier Magazine* (Atlanta, GA), September 1925; W. A. Hamlett to Earle Mayfield, September 1925, Folder 13, Box 5, EBMP; William Griffith, "Open Letter on Immigration Restriction," 1927, Folder 4, Box 6, EBMP; "Alien Wall Holds," *Fellowship Forum*, February 12, 1927; "Patriots Defeat Drive of Foreign Bloc," *Fellowship Forum*, December 17, 1927; "Preservation of Nation," *Fellowship Forum*, April 21, 1928.

43 "Amending Immigration Bill," *New York Times*, February 28, 1926; "Wadsworth Calls Alien Law Inhuman," *New York Times*, March 5, 1926; "Plan Urged by Davis," *New York Times*, March 19, 1926.

44 "Politics and Politicians," *Fellowship Forum*, September 25, 1926; "Romanists Open Fight," *Fellowship Forum*, October 2, 1926; "Opening of Congress Brings Bill," *Fellowship Forum*, December 11, 1926; "Klan Active in Monroe County," *New York Times*, August 30, 1926; "Klan Organ Opens War on Wadsworth," *New York Times*, September 26, 1926; "Klan Posters Conspicuous," *New York Times*, October 15, 1926; L. C. Speers, "Control of Senate is Prize of Election," *New York Times*, October 24, 1926; "See Dry Law Reaction," *New York Times*, November 4, 1926.

already in the United States. Rather than upward of half a million nonquota arrivals, this new amendment would allow only for some thirty-five thousand exemptions. This reduction in numbers, unsurprisingly, did not mollify the Klan, which attacked Wadsworth's plan as a "conspiracy to break down America's immigration barriers."<sup>45</sup>

Here, as on other issues, Earle Mayfield seemingly followed the Klan line. While his vote was insufficient to defeat the proposal in the Senate, it did help ensure that Wadsworth's amendment only narrowly passed by a vote of 39 to 37. In an article considering the significance of Mayfield's vote, the *Dallas Farm News* presciently mused that "the scant majority of two votes the amendment received will readily permit its defeat" in the House. In fact, the amendment never made it out of the House Immigration Committee—a committee chaired by the newly reelected and Klan-backed Albert Johnson.<sup>46</sup>

Given this record in office, it is no great surprise that Mayfield has been viewed by many as little more than a puppet politician. The Klan nominee had simply become a Klan senator, his vote under the control of the Invisible Empire. Even the Imperial Wizard, Hiram Evans, purportedly saw Mayfield as nothing more than a tool to be used at will. Almost forty years later, in his unpublished memoir, Mayfield bemoaned the idea that Evans "labored under the impression that he owned me like a man owns a bird dog."<sup>47</sup>

Yet this image of Mayfield as an owned man is belied by several key issues. First and foremost is the fact that while the Texan's voting record on issues important to the Klan shows a clear affinity, such issues were seemingly not his priority. Consideration of Mayfield's time in office suggests a portrait not of a committed ideologue but of a fairly mundane politico, balancing the competing demands of his constituents. The junior senator's key legislative concern was not nativist restrictions but rather the one topic that Mayfield had discussed in virtually every one of his campaign speeches: transportation policy. His primary goal in office, he contended, would be to repeal "the unreasonable rates saddled upon the commerce of our State by the Interstate Commerce Commission." Mayfield's almost single-minded dedication to talking about freight rates allowed him to deflect from the thorny question of his Klan affiliations. Mayfield became an outspoken member of the Progressive-Democrat railroad bloc. Beyond the issue of transportation, Mayfield was at least as much a member of the powerful farm bloc as he was a Kandidate, praised by Klan and non-Klan publications alike for his

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45 "Senate Adopts Wadsworth Amendment," *New York Times*, December 15, 1926; "House Will Block Move by Senate," *Fellowship Forum*, December 25, 1926; "Patriotic American Legislative Program," *Fellowship Forum*, February 19, 1927.

46 "Senate Adopts Wadsworth Amendment," *New York Times*, December 15, 1926; "Wadsworth Amendment Passes," *Dallas Farm News*, December 17, 1926; "Alien Wall Holds," *Fellowship Forum*, February 12, 1927; "Complete Voting Record," Folder 2, Box 7, EBMP.

47 Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 242.

speeches “standing firmly for the American farmers.”<sup>48</sup> This was a legislative record Mayfield could—and did—tout to support his contention that, while the Klan may have supported his candidacy, he could not properly be labeled a Kandidate.<sup>49</sup>

Lending further credence to such ideas were the areas in which he actively broke with the Klan’s leadership. According to Mayfield, Evans tried to “deliver my vote to the Republicans on several occasions.” Perhaps most notably, Evans reportedly pushed Mayfield to vote against a 1924 resolution calling for an investigation of the attorney general, Harry Daugherty, over his involvement in the Teapot Dome scandal. A loyal southern Democrat, Mayfield refused and joined his party in calling for Daugherty’s head, though he sat out a subsequent vote on whether to hold the attorney general in contempt. In Mayfield’s self-aggrandizing retelling of events, he told the Imperial Wizard that he had to vote for his “honest convictions,” while a furious Evans accused Mayfield of ingratitude. More likely, Mayfield saw a lost cause that would hurt him more politically than crossing the Imperial Wizard would, even with the Klan at the height of its national power that year.<sup>50</sup>

A more substantive break came in 1926 over the Permanent Court of International Justice, or World Court. Klan publications railed against the international agreement as a “masked attack upon America’s nationalism.” Mayfield, on the other hand, had repeatedly backed the idea of an international tribunal during his 1922 campaign, and he refused to contradict himself now. Instead, he followed the lead of Claude Swanson of Virginia. The ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Swanson led the charge for US membership in the World Court with the caveat of the “Harding-Hughes-Coolidge” reservations, designed to allay fears about undue international influence on domestic affairs. As with the Daugherty affair, Mayfield recognized a winning cause and voted with an overwhelming majority, first to adopt

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48 Undated Biographical Sketch, Folder 21, Box 4, EBMP; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 161; Earle Mayfield, Speech at Fort Worth, 1922, Folder 24, Box 4, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to George Armstrong, January 25, 1922, AR335-31-2, GWAP; “Assails Klan,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1922; “Mayfield Speech,” *Houston Press*, July 19, 1922; Brown, *Hood*, 106.

49 HR 9833, Public Law 436, 69th Congress, 1st Session (June 28, 1926), Folder 3, Box 6, Mayfield Papers; S 3889, Public Law 805, 69th Congress, 2nd Session (March 4, 1927), Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; HR 15008, Public Law 552, 69th Congress, 2nd Session (January 18, 1927), Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; S 4746, Public Law 740 (March 3, 1927), 69th Congress, 2nd Session, Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; S 5082, Public Law 651, 69th Congress, 2nd Session (February 25, 1927), Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; “Senator Earle Mayfield,” *Texas Heritage* (Austin, TX), November 1961; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; “Another Petition in Mayfield Case,” *Fiery Cross*, December 28, 1923; “The Senatorship and the Issues,” *Houston Post*, July 30, 1922; “Politics and Politicians,” *Fellowship Forum*, January 2, 1927; “Politics and Politicians,” *Fellowship Forum*, January 29, 1927; “Preservation of Nation Depends on Restriction,” *Fellowship Forum*, April 21, 1928.

50 “Yea and Nay Votes,” Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 242–43; “Committee to Conduct Inquiry is Chosen,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1924.

the Swanson resolutions, then to end debate on the question. Klan leaders, meanwhile, furiously lobbied against the move.<sup>51</sup>

In his memoir, Mayfield once again characterized his stance on the World Court as one of principled defiance. Imperial Wizard Evans, according to Mayfield's egocentric account, was so frustrated by the senator's intransigence that he wept with fury. This unlikely claim is rendered even more implausible by the broader context of Mayfield's refusal. By the time of the vote in 1926, the Klan's national membership was already in decline and the influence of its leadership was waning. There was no real consensus among the group's rank and file on the issue of the World Court, and the Imperial hierarchy seemed ineffective in its efforts to create one. As Pegram has noted, Mayfield was not the only Klan-associated senator who voted to endorse the court despite the objections of Evans and the Imperial leadership. Rice Means of Colorado, arguably the sitting senator most associated with the Klan after Mayfield, did the same. This was less a matter of principle and more a matter of political calculation. Yet even though he was not the only apostate, Mayfield's vote did seemingly contribute to a growing chill in the relationship between the Texan and the Imperial Wizard. As Mayfield's 1928 reelection campaign loomed, Evans made a decisive break. Not only would the Klan not back Mayfield for reelection, it would actively work against him.<sup>52</sup>

It is easy to dismiss Mayfield's defeat in the 1928 Democratic primary at the hands of Congressman Tom Connally as yet another example of the Klan's decline in the latter half of the decade. Certainly, the Klan's political power in Texas seemed to quickly fade after 1922. Where Mayfield had successfully defeated James Ferguson in the Democratic runoff, it was Ferguson who claimed victory in 1924 when his wife, Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, defeated the Klan's candidate, Felix Robertson, in a bitter struggle for the Democratic nomination for governor. The election, the *Dallas Morning News* declared, was "a judgment against the Klan as a political organization." In 1926, Miriam Ferguson's reelection was stymied not by a Klan candidate but by the campaign of Dan Moody, who had come to prominence in his role as the district attorney of

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51 The effort to join the World Court would founder on European rejection of the fifth Swanson reservation, which effectively declared the Court could not take or rule on a case involving the United States or US interests without US approval. "The Papacy a Breeder of Wars," *Badger American*, September 1, 1923; "Alleged Klan Tickets Win," *American Citizen* (Fort Worth, TX), April 13, 1923; "Papal Plotting for the World Court," *American Standard*, May 1, 1924; Earle Mayfield to E. Mittendorf, January 25, 1926, Folder 12, Box 6, EBMP; "Swanson Fires First Gun," *New York Times*, December 18, 1925; "World Court Wins First Senate Test," *New York Times*, January 7, 1926; "Victory for World Court Assured," *New York Times*, January 26, 1926; "Court Protocol Will Be Ratified," *New York Times*, January 27, 1926; "Swanson Stresses Fifth Reservation," *New York Times*, August 4, 1926; "Coolidge Defers World Court Move," *New York Times*, October 2, 1926; "Yea and Nay Votes," Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP.

52 Mayfield, "Affidavit"; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 271–72; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 211–12.

Williamson County for successfully prosecuting four Klan members for assault in 1923. The political power of the second Klan had seemingly been routed.<sup>53</sup>

Yet Mayfield's memoir, self-interested though it is, suggests a more complex narrative. Mayfield had opposed the nomination of Felix Robertson in 1924. In 1926, despite Moody's prosecutorial past, the Texas Klan's hatred of the Fergusons was so great that Imperial Wizard Evans and other Klan leaders endorsed Moody and celebrated his victory. And in 1928, Mayfield's reelection campaign was certainly hurt by his association with the Klan—but it was also damaged by not associating himself closely enough with it. While the Klan's influence in Texas in 1928 was far from what it had been, it was not insignificant, and it was now turned against Mayfield. In the senator's own melodramatic words, "Hiram W. Evans, head of the Ku Klux Klan, cut my throat politically."<sup>54</sup>

Mayfield's loss in 1928 can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that he was a thoroughly dislikable egotist who complained that custom dictated an incumbent be allowed a second term in office. He was especially aggrieved that the "unfair and unholy" effort to contest his seating had undermined his time in the Senate, and suggested that he should be allowed to serve another full term as recompense. If that was not enough, he also complained that Al Smith's candidacy for president depressed the Democratic primary vote in Texas, rendering him little more than a "victim of circumstance."<sup>55</sup>

This series of narcissistic rationalizations should certainly be kept in mind when assessing Mayfield's final accusatory grievance: that the Klan had backed Tom Connally against him in the primary. Yet this charge is not entirely unreasonable. It is certainly true, as Mayfield and his supporters pointed out, that Connally's attacks on Mayfield were political rather than principled. The congressman had not spoken out against the Klan in the elections of 1922 or 1924 or 1926, even as the organization's political fortunes waned in his state. It was only once he entered the Democratic primary race in 1928 that Connally began to lambast the incumbent for his Klan ties. Even then, Connally astutely tried to play both sides against Mayfield. In speech after speech, he not only attacked Mayfield for his association with the Klan but also denounced Mayfield for not having remained sufficiently loyal to the organization. "He rode the Ku Klux Klan into office," Connally declared, "and after using it tossed it aside and renounced it." The major issue for the Connally campaign was not that Mayfield had

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53 Bernstein, *Ten Dollars*, 223–24; Brown, *Hood*, 211, 232–33, 304, 320; "Ferguson Defeats Robertson," *Dallas Morning News*, August 25, 1924.

54 Bernstein, *Ten Dollars*, 274–75; Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), 253–54; Brown, *Hood*, 212, 313, 321, 408; "Calendar of Senatorial Primaries," *Fellowship Forum*, July 31, 1926.

55 Earle Mayfield to Mrs. Tom Pitner, September 7, 1928, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield, Untitled Speech, May 27, 1928, Folder 2, Box 7, EBMP; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 251–52, 275.

been a Klandidate. It was that he had been deceptive about his Klandidacy and had *not* served as a Klan senator.<sup>56</sup>

Mayfield later alleged that the Klan poured money into the state to finance Connally. Ironically, this financing was purportedly directed by Mayfield's savior in the seating contest, William Zumbunn. In the flurry of charges and countercharges, the truth of the matter is unclear. The final vote tally, however, lends credence to Mayfield's larger claim. The Texan's 1922 victory had been propelled particularly by four counties where the Klan was strong—Dallas, Tarrant, Harris, and McLennan. In 1928, those four counties went heavily for Connally, making up much of his margin of victory. Connally and his campaign may or may not have been actively courting them, but Klan voters (or at least voters who had at one time been Klan members) seemingly abandoned Mayfield in droves.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

After a run for governor in 1930 ended in an ignominious sixth-place finish in the Democratic primary, Mayfield's political career was effectively over. *The New York Times* exulted that the result proved the Klan's political power a thing of the past, a minor aberrance in the path of American progress. Mayfield became a popular example of a troubled period, while his status as a Klandidate became the epitaph on Mayfield's political gravestone.<sup>58</sup> Yet this quick dismissal of Mayfield as a puppet of the Klan obscures the reality of the Klan movement's impact on the political landscape of the 1920s.

First, it ignores the way in which Klan influence on legislators actually functioned. Mayfield was not a puppet or a stooge. Undoubtedly a white supremacist, a nativist, and a staunch supporter of prohibition, Mayfield's interests frequently converged with the second Klan's, particularly in the fight for immigration restriction. Yet these were also all mainstream political positions outside the Klan, and he and others broke with the organization's leadership on the issue of the World Court. He sympathized with Klan goals but was seemingly not particularly committed to the organization. Rather, he

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56 "How the Fight Ought to Be Made in the Forum," Undated Campaign Memo, Folder 5, Box 7, EBMP; "Connally Attacks Mayfield," *Dallas Times Herald*, May 27, 1928; "Connally Speaks Here," *Granbury (TX) News*, July 13, 1928; Mayfield, "Affidavit"; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 246–47, 275.

57 "How the Fight," Folder 5, Box 7, EBMP; Brown, *Hood*, 406–7; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 253–54, 271–73; "Smith Man Leads in Texas," *New York Times*, July 30, 1928; "Connally Wins Over Mayfield," *New York Times*, August 27, 1928.

58 "Eleven Seek to Be Governor of Texas," *New York Times*, July 20, 1930; "Ma Ferguson Wins Texas Run-Off," *New York Times*, July 28, 1930.

was much like many other politicians, navigating the often contradictory passions and demands of constituents, supporters, and donors.

Second, examining Mayfield only through the lens of his bitterly contested election and his quick defeat defines the Klan's political power solely by its ability to elect its members and overt allies. To do so overlooks the ways in which Klannish political power exerted itself on those *in office*. How many Klan members were elected to federal office is less important than how many of those in federal office were willing to shape legislation in response to Klan priorities. Mayfield, at least, reveals more about Klannish political power as a legislator than he does as a candidate.

Based on Mayfield's record in office, it would seem less useful to understand the Klan as puppet masters so much as a bigoted lobbying group. This was an analogy the Klan's officers themselves welcomed, not least as a means of further normalizing the group. Imperial Wizard Evans, for example, frequently compared the Klan's efforts in politics to the work of the Anti-Saloon League. By 1926, one Washington correspondent noted, there was a distinct and recognizable Klan "bloc" operating in the Senate, which influenced "every legislative matter of importance." This did not equate to a Klan steamroller compelling pliant politicians to end parochial schools and ban all immigration. It did mean, though, that the Klan had a significant indirect influence on the legislative agenda of the 1920s. This was a lobby influential enough "to demand recognition behind the scenes," especially on close votes when "party leaders . . . found it necessary to inquire into the position of the Klan before they could make an accurate poll."<sup>59</sup>

So, was Mayfield a Klan politician? If we remain wedded to a definition based on formal affiliation, then technically, no. He was not a dues-paying member during his election or his time in office, but this is clearly a misleading categorization. If we use Klan electoral support as our metric, Mayfield certainly received the Klan's enthusiastic backing in 1922, although it is unclear whether that backing was help or hindrance. Yet he was also the target of the Klan's enthusiastic opposition in 1928. He refused to publicly disavow the Invisible Empire but also refused to publicly endorse the group. He worked privately with Klan officials but also bridled at the idea that they could direct or control him. If we judge him on his voting record, we can certainly see that his own political interests converged with those of the Klan on some issues, as with immigration restriction. On other issues, the two diverged. His predominant focus on transportation and agriculture in crafting legislation marks him more as a conservative southern Democrat than as a Klandidate. The ambiguous status key to Mayfield's

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59 Hiram Evans, "The Ballots Behind the Ku Klux Klan," *World's Work* (Garden City, NY), January 1928; Stanley Frost, "When the Klan Rules," *Outlook* (New York, NY), February 20, 1924; Robert B. Smith, "Klan Spooks in Congress," *The Independent* (Boston, MA), June 19, 1926.

political ambitions challenges not only any kind of neat delineation between Klan and not Klan but also between center and fringe.

The fact that Mayfield does not fit neatly into any of these frameworks does not mean that we should not understand him as a Klandidate. It means that we need to expand our understanding of what we mean by a Klandidate, recognizing that formal affiliation is not a determinative factor. That recognition must also extend to the fact that there was no single type of Klandidate. Differing local pressures, changing chronological context, and individual personalities, powerbases, and policy goals all mean that we cannot simply generalize from the case study of Mayfield's political career to create a one-size-fits-all model of Klandidacy. Mayfield differs from fellow senators Hugo Black and Rice W. Means, who in turn differ from congressional representatives like William D. Upshaw and James P. Buchanan. Yet all could—and should—be rightly dubbed as Klandidates.

When we abandon the core/periphery model, we are forced to rethink how we might judge the ways and means by which the Klan movement exerted political power in the 1920s. Instead of simply assuming these individuals were puppets to be used by the Klan's leadership, we must carefully consider what kind of control the Klan did or could exert over these politicians. Similarly, we must investigate to what extent these politicians followed mandates from the organization and to what degree they displayed political independence. Fundamentally, we must ask whether a reliance on categorizing some individuals as "Klan politicians" and others as "not Klan politicians" artificially constricts our understanding of the ways the Invisible Empire wielded political power, and thereby reinforces an imagined centrist/extremist dichotomy.

After all, if someone acts to further the Klan's political interests, does it matter whether or not they are a member or openly avow sympathy? There were many federal politicians in the 1920s who received backing from the Ku Klux Klan in their election, both overtly and covertly. If we look at politicians who received the backing of the Klan without explicitly disavowing that support, then Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover would certainly fall into such a category. We could consider, then, whether the distinction between some US presidents and a "Klan politician" is one of category or simply one of gradation. The lack of clear boundaries in such a case is indicative of a broader issue with the conceptualization of right-wing politics. Rather than considering these questions within an analytical framework that encourages us to draw a boundary between the far right and the political mainstream, we are better served by a conceptual spectrum. With Mayfield as an example of one form of Klandidate, the Klan's political power base seemingly becomes more substantial and far reaching, albeit less centralized and totalitarian, than we have previously acknowledged. When we reconceive of Klan power in that way, it becomes clear that we must reconsider the organization's enduring impact on the legislative priorities of the 1920s and the lessons it might offer for our understanding of the influence of the far right on the broader political landscape.

## ARTICLE

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## “A Planet-Wide Race War”

### *The Global Circulation of White Supremacist Violence in the Late Twentieth Century*

KYLE BURKE

University of South Florida

**Abstract:** *This article examines how and why the global white power movement lurched into a string of real and metaphorical wars around the world in the late twentieth century. These campaigns drew heavily on veterans who had fought leftist national liberation movements on an array of battlefields. The detritus of Cold War militarization, many joined or were recruited into white power groups in the United States and Europe. Perceiving white decline on the world stage, they mobilized for combat across a string of battlefields from Rhodesia to Central America, Northern Ireland, and Yugoslavia. Over time, their visions of global race war turned inward as far-right white supremacist groups on both sides of the Atlantic launched attacks against enemies at home, including their own governments. Central to this campaign was the strategy known as “leaderless resistance,” wherein small cells of supposed “lone wolves” launched spectacular assaults in pursuit of revolutionary change. Inspired by leftist national liberation movements and Islamist terrorists, leaderless resistance was first deployed in the United States and quickly spread to Britain, Germany, and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s. This violence—both actual and imagined—was not simply a recent reaction to neoliberalism, globalization, and international Islamist violence, as many scholars hold, nor was it merely the product of enhanced communication via new social media technologies. Instead, this violence emerged and evolved in an earlier era, dating back to the 1970s, and gained ground through the very same processes that compelled mainstream globalization: transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, and goods.*

**Keywords:** white supremacy, political violence, terrorism, neo-Nazism, transnational right, global

US Navy veteran Shawn Fuller arrived in Ukraine in the early spring of 2018. He had come to join the simmering war against Russia, which had invaded Ukraine’s eastern territories in 2014 and occupied them still. Fuller was a competent soldier, having spent four years in the service, mainly on a ship in the Persian Gulf. But he had received an “other than honorable” discharge, the result of a drunken episode while he

was on leave in Dubai. Since leaving the Navy, Fuller's life had spiraled downward. He worked a series of dead-end jobs without direction or purpose. One night, he slashed a man with a knife during a bar fight in Texas, which got him six years of probation for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. In his free time, he pursued his growing interest in Nordic paganism, browsing white supremacist websites and Facebook groups, which led him to a man who was recruiting veterans for the war in Ukraine. "A lot of what he was saying made sense to me," Fuller recalled. With little to live for in the United States, Fuller packed his gear and headed to Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Next thing Fuller knew, he was on the outskirts of Kyiv. He found his new unit holed up in a flophouse. Some two dozen foreign fighters were gathered with his recruiter, a Norwegian neo-Nazi and convicted bank robber. They were members of the Azov Battalion.<sup>2</sup> While the struggling Ukrainian military had deployed dozens of paramilitary units, Azov stood out. It was not just a militia. It was a neo-Nazi political movement with two publishing houses, social centers, youth camps, sports gyms, book clubs, and a vigilante force known as the National Militia, which patrolled the streets of Ukrainian cities. More than that, Azov was at the center of a vast network of far-right groups that stretched from the United States and Europe to New Zealand. Through the internet, Azov had recruited veterans and aspiring soldiers from around the world.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the global white supremacist movement, Azov was peerless. As one of the most effective and lethal of Ukraine's paramilitary forces, it possessed a vast arsenal of weapons, drones, artillery, and armored vehicles. To those who joined Azov, the purpose of the war mattered less than what Azov itself represented. Fought between two presumably white nations, the war in Ukraine did not clearly register as an outright battle for white supremacy; more than that, Russia itself had emerged as an object of much admiration and inspiration among white supremacists globally.<sup>4</sup> Given that the conflict did not fit neatly into the racial logic of white supremacy, many recruits joined Azov to gain combat experience they could deploy against domestic enemies in white

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1 Fuller's story is recounted in Simon Shuster and Billy Perrigo, "Like, Share, Recruit: How a White-Supremacist Militia Uses Facebook to Radicalize and Train New Members," *Time*, January 7, 2021, <https://time.com/5926750/azov-far-right-movement-facebook/>.

2 Ibid.

3 Marc Bennett, "Ukraine's National Militia: 'We're Not neo-Nazis, We Just Want to Make Our Country Better,'" *Guardian*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/13/ukraine-far-right-national-militia-takes-law-into-own-hands-neo-nazi-links>; Michael Colborne, *From the Fires of War: Ukraine's Azov Movement and the Global Far Right* (Ibidem, 2022), 10, 121–38.

4 As American neo-Nazi and white supremacist Richard Spencer put it in 2016, Russia was the "sole white power in the world" and held "the key to white survival." Quoted in Olga Kiyan, "White Nationalism in the United States and Russia: Transnational Ties, Domestic Impacts," *Harvard International Review*, April 29, 2021, <https://hir.harvard.edu/white-nationalism-in-the-united-states-and-russia-transnational-ties-domestic-impact/>. See also Antonis Klapsis, *An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia* (Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2017)

supremacist struggles once they cycled back home. The Azov Battalion, in that sense, was a model to be recreated elsewhere. In the words of one American who joined the battalion through the Atomwaffen Division, an international neo-Nazi terrorist group, Azov is “the future.”<sup>5</sup>

From its inception, and especially since the start of the broader Ukraine war in February 2022, the Azov Battalion has drawn widespread concern and condemnation from policymakers, journalists, and scholars. Members of the US Congress, hoping to shut down its funding and recruitment networks, sought unsuccessfully to deem it a terrorist group.<sup>6</sup> The British government, compelled by civilian watchdog groups, also struggled to halt Azov’s recruitment through domestic neo-Nazi groups such as National Action, proscribed by the United Kingdom in 2016 as a terrorist organization. In the eyes of British officials, Azov and its offshoots represented something novel: an internationally connected far-right movement mobilized for war on multiple fronts. As Mark Rowley, the former head of the UK’s counterterrorism office, explained about National Action in 2018, “For the first time we have a home-grown, proscribed, white supremacist, neo-Nazi terror group, which seeks to plan attacks and build international networks.”<sup>7</sup>

Rowley was not alone in arguing that the Azov Battalion and its international allies signify something new and different. The far right, in the eyes of many commentators and scholars, has long been parochial and reactionary, inwardly focused on the nation-state, especially overt white supremacists whose vision of belonging is firmly rooted in blood and soil.<sup>8</sup> Only recently, these scholars contend, have these forces sought common cause with one another across national borders.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Shuster and Perrigo, “Like, Share, Recruit.”

6 Michael Colborne, “U.S. Congress Accidentally Boosted Ukraine’s Far Right,” *Foreign Policy*, November 1, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/01/congress-max-rose-ukraine-azov-terrorism/>. Recently the Ukrainian military has sought downplay Azov. See Valerie Hopkins, “For Ukraine Military, Far-Right Russian Volunteers Make for Worrisome Allies,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/26/world/europe/the-leader-of-a-russian-group-involved-in-a-border-in-cursion-is-described-by-watchdogs-as-a-neo-nazi.html>.

7 Kevin Rawlinson, “Neo-Nazi Groups Recruit Britons to Fight in Ukraine,” *Guardian*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/02/neo-nazi-groups-recruit-britons-to-fight-in-ukraine>.

8 This article uses the terms white supremacist and white power to describe a distinct set of movements and actors who make up the racist far right, which forms a significant part of the broader far right but is not entirely synonymous with it.

9 For works that examine the rise of the global far right as a recent phenomenon, see Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton University Press, 2022); Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity Books, 2019); Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Murdoch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (Routledge, 2020); Liz Fekete, *Europe’s Fault Lines: Racism and the Far Right* (Verso, 2018); and Sabine von Mering and Timothy

But Azov was not a new phenomenon. Rather, it was only the latest iteration of a global white power movement that has been decades in the making. As historian Kathleen Belew has shown in a mainly American context, the white power movement's devotion to war and its recruitment of veterans have old origins.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, for more than half a century, supremacist groups and activists have engaged in paramilitary actions that crisscrossed national borders. White supremacists recruited ex-soldiers from wars in Vietnam, Malaya, and the Congo, and enlisted in wars in Rhodesia, Central America, Northern Ireland, and Yugoslavia—experiences that shaped warlike fantasies and campaigns in their home societies. This violence supported and solidified a shared racial identity that, although rooted in blood and soil, transcended the nation-state. As one activist from England explained in 2000, “It’s not an American fight or a British fight or a German fight. It is a white fight, and we’ve got to win it.”<sup>11</sup> In that view, saving white supremacy anywhere meant fighting for it everywhere. American neo-Nazi William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries*, the bible of the armed US racist right since the late 1970s, summed it up in 1995: “We must understand that we are in a planet-wide race war, and survival of our race depends on our winning this war.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the globalized reverie of white supremacist violence embodied in the Azov Battalion has deep roots and stems from different forces than most scholars and policymakers identify. It is not simply a right-wing reaction to neoliberalism, globalization, and international Islamist violence, as many hold, nor is it merely the product of new social media technologies.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the global white power movement

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Wyman McCarthy, eds., *Right-Wing Radicalism Today: Perspectives from Europe and the US* (Routledge, 2013). Only a handful of works have explained far-right mobilizations from the era of World War II through the end of the twentieth century. See Martin Lee, *The Beast Reawakens: Fascism's Resurgence from Hitler's Spymasters to Today's Neo-Nazi Groups & Right-wing Extremists* (Little, Brown and Company, 1997); Jeffrey Kaplan, *The Emergence of a Euro-American Right* (Rutgers University Press, 1998); Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjørgo, *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture* (Northeastern University Press, 1998); Paul Jackson and Anton Shekhovtsov, eds., *The Post-War Anglo-American Right: A Special Relationship of Hate* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017); and Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield, and Jennie Sutton, eds. *The Global History of White Nationalism* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

10 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

11 Mark Cotterill, leader of the American Friends of the British National Party, a support group for the fascist British National Party, quoted in “American White Supremacist Groups Have History of International Conflict,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 29, 2001, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/american-white-supremacist-groups-have-history-international-conflict/>.

12 Quoted in “Pan-Aryanism Binds Hate Groups in America and Europe,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 29, 2001, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/pan-aryanism-binds-hate-groups-america-and-europe/>.

13 On the international far right as a product of new digital communication and media, see Patri-

emerged in the immediate post–World War II era and gained ground in the 1970s and 1980s via the same processes that drove mainstream globalization—cross-border flows of capital, people, ideas, and goods. Through these conduits and connections, white supremacist leaders, intellectuals, and activists fashioned a shared narrative of racial decline and redemption. Analogizing circumstances between countries and continents, they fused the challenges of civil rights, decolonization, and immigration into a global threat to white societies and white power.

Against this perceived threat they mobilized, seeking violence—both actual and imagined—at home and abroad. This article explores how white supremacists read international developments into domestic contexts, and vice versa, finding models and metaphors for militarized action against an array of enemies. Initially rooted in the Cold War, this campaign increasingly turned inward as far-right groups on both sides of the Atlantic launched spectacular attacks against enemies at home in the 1980s and early 1990s. Many would ultimately target their own governments. Central to this campaign was the strategy known as “leaderless resistance,” wherein small cells or individuals launched spectacular acts of violence in pursuit of movement goals. Inspired by leftist national liberation movements and Islamist terrorists, leaderless resistance was not simply a reaction to neoliberal globalization but an adaption to it. Even as white supremacists denounced neoliberalism as a danger to white societies and economic security, they used its mechanisms to spread the strategy and fantasy of leaderless resistance. As a result, leaderless resistance quickly spread from the United States to Europe and elsewhere in the late 1980s. Since then, the perpetrators of far-right mass violence have not only studied each other’s methods and manifestos. Much more than that, they have claimed that they are working toward the same goal, that they are part of a global movement. In their eyes, violent revolution, coursing across national borders, will lay the foundations for a new and vigorous white world order.

### **Failures of White-Supremacist International Organization, 1930s–1960s**

The fantasies and strategies of far-right paramilitary action, revolutionary violence, and planetary race war that coalesced across the Atlantic in the late twentieth century had old origins. In the 1930s, fascist movements in the United States, Britain, and Europe saw each other as potential allies in a shared struggle against liberalism, communism, and racial enemies, above all Jews.<sup>14</sup> These affinities—political, personal,

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cia Ann Simpson and Helga Druxes, eds., *Digital Media Strategies of the Far Right in Europe and the United States* (Lexington Books, 2015); Melody Devries, Judith Bessant, and Rob Watts, eds. *Rise of the Far Right: Technologies of Recruitment and Mobilization* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021); and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

14 On transatlantic fascist networks in the interwar era, see Markku Ruotsila, “International An-

and performative—hinged on fantasies of violence, including, in its most extreme and fanciful iterations, plots to overthrow sitting governments. In the United States, a series of groups, from the Silver Shirts to the Christian Front, mimicked the paramilitary structure and aspirations of the early Nazi Party.<sup>15</sup> In Britain, Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, hoping to replace democracy with dictatorship, trafficked in violence as an aesthetic and rhetorical device, though it largely refrained from using violence as a program of action against the state.<sup>16</sup> Similar dynamics played out elsewhere in Europe, from France to Hungary to Romania. Small fascist and fascist-leaning movements also popped up in Latin America, though their racial politics did not sit easily alongside American and European notions of white supremacy.<sup>17</sup> Yet, despite all their ideological affinity and substantial investments of time and money, fascists outside continental Europe failed to build a workable and lasting program for international collaboration.<sup>18</sup> Historians have demonstrated their heavy dependence on, and unbridled affinity for, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany—ties that, however, tended to marginalize them within mainstream political life.<sup>19</sup> By the end of World War II, most fascist movements lay in tatters, and many leaders were in prison.

Yet fascism, especially Nazism, smoldered like an ember in the postwar era, providing a main framework through which white supremacists envisioned global collaboration and mobilization. The most ambitious effort to make Nazism serviceable to postwar white supremacist movements came from George Lincoln Rockwell, leader of the

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ti-Communism Before the Cold War: Success and Failure in the Building of a Transnational Right,” and Arnd Bauerkämper, “Interwar Fascism in Europe and Beyond: Toward a Transnational Radical Right,” in *New Perspectives on the Transnational Right*, ed. Martin Durham and Margaret Power (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11–66; and Joseph Fronczak, “The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right,” *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (2018): 563–88.

15 On plots by the Silver Shirts and the Christian Front, see Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends: The Third Reich’s Supporters in the United States* (St. Martin’s Press, 2018); and Charles R. Gallagher, *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

16 See Stephen M. Cullen, “Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 2 (1993): 245–67; and Jon Lawrence, “Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-war Britain: The Olympia Debate Revisited,” *Historical Research* 76, no. 192 (2003): 238–67.

17 The best summary of various European fascist movements in their emergent phases is Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Vintage, 2004), 68–86, and 110–18.

18 The most sustained attempt to build a fascist international came from Mussolini’s Italy. But even with substantial state support, the movement was rent with dispute and division. See Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928–1936* (Howard Fertig, 1972).

19 See Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends*, 209–36; Graham Macklin, *Failed Führers: A History of Britain’s Extreme Right* (Routledge, 2020); and Jean-Yves Camus, “Nostalgia and Political Impotence: Neo-Nazi and Extreme Right Movements in France, 1944–1964,” in *The Development of the Radical Right in France*, ed. E. J. Arnold (Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), 195–216.

American Nazi Party, who founded the World Union of National Socialists (WUNS) in 1962.<sup>20</sup> Rockwell, a former US Navy pilot who fought in World War II, organized his American Nazi Party along militarized lines, recruited other veterans, and invoked the metaphor of war to describe its struggle at home and on the world stage.<sup>21</sup> Within a few years, Rockwell had incorporated chapters in Britain, West Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Iceland, Ireland, Canada, South Africa, Australia, Argentina, and Chile.<sup>22</sup> Rockwell's deputy liked to describe the movement as "[t]he only National Socialist organization today functioning on a world-wide basis." Many of its members were "veterans of the armed forces of their respective countries" who had fought "on opposite sides" during World War II and who now realized the "costly mistake of fighting each other—since only the Jews and the Communists profited from that bloody conflict." What Rockwell and his acolytes wanted was not a "large organization, but rather a tough, disciplined, fighting elite world force which can put an end to the disunity of the Aryan White Race, and finally give the White masses of the earth some real, world-wide leadership."<sup>23</sup> Thus, Rockwell was especially keen to recruit veterans from the American and British militaries as well as former Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS troops.<sup>24</sup> Only a militarized movement, modeled on the uniformed stormtroopers of interwar fascism, could save white societies from the intertwined threats of civil rights, decolonization, and growing migration from the global South, all of which Rockwell

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20 Program of the World Union of National Socialists, Series 12, Sub-series 1, box 2, Searchlight Archive, University of Northampton, Northampton UK (hereafter Searchlight Archive).

21 See *Paramilitary Organizations in California* (California Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation, April 1965), ANP-4; "Ready for Inspection," *Stormtrooper* (publication of the American Nazi Party, Arlington, VA), May–June 1963, 18–19, New York Public Library (hereafter NYPL); "Headquarters Training Makes the Difference," *Stormtrooper*, July–August 1963, 22, NYPL; and American Nazi Party leaflet, "White Man . . . Unite and Fight," 1963, in FBI Rockwell File.

22 On the formation of the World Union of National Socialists, see "First Working Draft of the Cotswold Agreements," *The Rockwell Report* 1, no. 21 (August 15, 1962); George Lincoln Rockwell, "International Nazi Progress," *Stormtrooper*, August 1962, 9–10, NYPL; George Lincoln Rockwell, "Commander's International Report: England!" *Stormtrooper*, November 1962, 6–10, 20–34, NYPL; "International Nazi Progress," *Stormtrooper*, January–February 1963, 11, NYPL; "International Nazi Progress," *Stormtrooper*, November–December 1963, 4, NYPL; Paul Jackson, "Dreaming of a National Socialist World: The World Union of National Socialists (WUNS) and the Recurring Vision of Transnational Neo-Nazism," *Fascism* 8, no. 2 (2019): 275–306; and Frederick J. Simonelli, *American Fuehrer: George Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party* (University of Illinois Press, 1999), 81–95.

23 Form letter from Matt Koehl, World Union of National Socialists, Series 12, Sub-series 1, box 2, Searchlight Archive.

24 These included, just among the leadership of the World Union of National Socialists, Rockwell (US Navy), Colin Jordan (British Royal Army), Yves Jeanne (French Waffen-SS), J. R. Debbaudt (Belgian Waffen-SS), and Bruno Ludtke (German Wehrmacht).

and his allies fused into a global threat to white power. Each signaled, as Rockwell put it, the “first skirmishes in the World Race War.”<sup>25</sup>

In Europe, kindred internationally minded far-right groups such as Jeune Europe also plotted armed action and revolutionary violence in pursuit of a continent-wide racial empire. Led by Jean-François Thiriart, a former Waffen-SS soldier and Nazi collaborator from Belgium, Jeune Europe established paramilitary training camps in a half-dozen countries. Much of its ranks comprised veterans from World War II and the Belgian Congo as well as the French Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), a terrorist group that trafficked in white supremacy and waged war against the French state to prevent Algerian independence.<sup>26</sup>

Civilian leaders in the United States, Britain, and Europe urged their governments and the United Nations to take firm action against these movements, particularly those with overtly neo-Nazi politics.<sup>27</sup> As a result of growing state scrutiny and popular antipathy, the World Union of National Socialists and its kin found it difficult to turn diffuse connections into a viable movement, let alone undertake revolutionary violence. Rockwell and those around him could not turn to foreign governments for support, as American and European fascists had done during the 1930s vis-à-vis Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany.<sup>28</sup> Bereft of any kind of state backing, the World Union of National Socialists faced constant disputes over funds and strategy. More problematic was the fact that many of its leaders and members could not stay out of prison. When a former member of the American Nazi Party murdered Rockwell in 1967, the World Union of National Socialists lost its driving force. Its influence evaporated.<sup>29</sup>

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25 George Lincoln Rockwell, *White Power* (1966; repr., Revisionist Books, 2016), 213–14.

26 See Jean-François Thiriart, *Un Empire de 400 Millions d’Hommes: l’Europe* (L’auteur, 1964); and Jeffrey M. Bale, “The ‘Black’ Terrorist International: Neo-Fascist Paramilitary Networks and the ‘Strategy of Tension’ in Italy, 1968–1974” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 106–15. On the OAS, see Alexander Harrison, *Challenging De Gaulle: The O.A.S and the Counter-Revolution in Algeria, 1954–1962* (Praeger, 1989).

27 As Dr. S. J. Roth, the executive director of the World Jewish Congress’s European Division, explained in 1962, neo-Nazis around the globe “were united in their aim and purpose to foster hatreds against Jews and against coloured people, and to turn this hatred into an onslaught on democracy as a whole.” Quoted in “Movements ‘United’ in Race Hatred,” *The Times* (London), November 5, 1962.

28 When organizing the American Nazi Party, Rockwell had sought financial support from the United Arab Republic and its leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, but failed to secure any backing. Still, much of the FBI’s early interest in Rockwell centered on his potential links to Nasser and the UAR. See the FBI Report “George Lincoln Rockwell: Registration Act—United Arab Republic,” May 11, 1959, Washington Field Office, in FBI Rockwell File. Letters exchanged between Rockwell and Nasser appear on pages 28–33 of that report.

29 Simonelli, *American Fuehrer*, 94–95, 131–45; Jackson, “Dreaming,” 304–6.

The failure of the World Union of National Socialists underscored the much broader collapse of the far-right across the United States, Britain, and Europe in the late 1960s. For Rockwell's immediate heirs, "centralized authority" was still the "natural expression in organizational terms of the race-wide basis of National Socialism."<sup>30</sup> But building a centralized international movement with clear ranks became increasingly difficult as many governments targeted explicitly white supremacist groups, and not only those with clear fascist or neo-Nazi sympathies. As hierarchical organizations with leaders and members, dues and offices, they proved vulnerable to infiltration, surveillance, and prosecution. In the United States, the civil rights-era Ku Klux Klan and other violent far-right groups crumbled as federal authorities arrested their leaders, disrupted their operations, and seized their properties.<sup>31</sup> In Britain, the 1965 Race Relations Act criminalized the "incitement of racial hatred," enabling the government to prosecute leaders and activists from the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement and several other organizations.<sup>32</sup> Authorities in West Germany and France also took legal action against overt and violent neo-Nazi and white supremacist movements, imprisoning their leaders and proscribing their groups.<sup>33</sup> Even when states did not take such active measures, or only did so intermittently, many far-right movements still struggled to gain a mass following in the late 1960s. This was especially true for groups that harkened back to interwar fascism or Nazism.<sup>34</sup> For a time, it seemed, governments in the United States, Britain, and Europe had managed to beat back the tide of far-right white supremacists and thus thwart their hopes for worldwide race war.

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30 Matt Koehl, Editorial, *WUNS Bulletin* (Arlington, VA), no. 17, 3rd quarter, 1969, 1–2.

31 On decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the late 1960s and early 1970s, see John Drabble, "The FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE and the Decline of Ku Klux Klan Organizations in Mississippi, 1964–1971," *Journal of Mississippi History* 66, no. 4 (2004): 353–401; 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; and David Cunningham, *Klansville, USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil-Rights Era Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 184–213.

32 On the 1965 Race Relations Act, see Gavin Schaffer, "Legislating against Hatred: Meaning and Motive in Section Six of the Race Relations Act of 1965," *Contemporary British History* 25, no. 2 (2014): 251–75. The earlier 1936 Public Order Act had already enabled the British government to act against the neo-Nazi group called Spearhead, which formed the nucleus of the National Socialist Movement. On Spearhead, see Macklin, *Failed Führers*, 297–98; G. Gable, "Britain's Nazi Underground," in *The Far Right in Western Europe*, ed. L. Cheles, R. Ferguson, and M. Vaughn (Longman, 1995), 258–59; and Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosely to the National Front* (I. B. Tauris, 1998), 230–52.

33 The West German state, for instance, outlawed the Socialist Reich Party, the clearest successor to the Nazi Party, in 1952. See Lee, *Beast Reawakens*, 83–84. The West German constitution enabled the state to act against movements and individuals who threatened the political order. See Gerard Braunthal, *Right-Wing Extremism in Contemporary Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), viii, 19–41. On legal actions in France, see Camus, "Nostalgia and Political Impotence."

34 France provides a good example of this. See Camus, "Nostalgia and Political Impotence."

## New Battlefields

Within a few years, however, the far-right white supremacists on both sides of the Atlantic gained ground as shifting demographic, political, and economic dynamics produced resurgent resentments. In the United States, the apparent success of the civil rights movement, feminism, and immigration reform, followed by mounting economic crises in the 1970s, suggested to many on the right that the United States had entered into terminal decline. Meanwhile, failure in the Vietnam War unleashed broad feelings of government betrayal and breakdown.<sup>35</sup> In the United Kingdom, as the British Empire disintegrated and large numbers of non-white immigrants arrived from the Commonwealth countries, narratives of national decline and cultural disappearance imbued mainstream politics.<sup>36</sup> In France and West Germany, youthful revolt, new migration patterns, and economic crises fueled popular animosity against mainstream politicians, feelings often accompanied by nostalgia for the white supremacist past of imperial grandeur.<sup>37</sup> So, even though state scrutiny had chipped away at centralized and organized far-right groups, these shifts swelled the ranks of potential recruits for a new crop of white supremacist and far-right ideologues.

Sensing these changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the struggles of centralized far-right groups and the growing pool of disgruntled white men—white supremacist leaders in the United States and Europe groped toward a new strategy to replace the model of building a single, overarching organization. The result was a movement without a center. Members were dispersed but bonded through shared assumptions and affinities. And they were devoted to the cause of securing white power at home and on the world stage.<sup>38</sup>

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35 On post-Vietnam feelings of governmental betrayal, see Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Penguin, 2016), 221–50; and Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 19–32.

36 Those anxieties registered most profoundly in Conservative MP Enoch Powell’s famous 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, which warned that large-scale immigration of non-whites threatened to unravel the racial fabric of the nation. On Powell, race, and memories of empire in postcolonial Britain, see Bill Schwarz, *The White Man’s World* (Oxford University Press 2011); and Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

37 On the French far right and its reaction to student and leftist protest in 1968, see Andrea Mamone, “The Transnational Reaction to 1968: Neo-Fascist Fronts and Political Cultures in France and Italy,” *Contemporary European History* 17, no. 2 (2008): 213–36. On French (and British) imperial nostalgia, see Patricia M. E. Lorcin, “The Nostalgias for Empire,” *History and Theory* 57, no. 2 (2018): 269–85. On French nostalgia for empire in more recent years, see Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, “Echoes of Colonial Conflict in Algeria Reverberate in French Politics,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2017. On West Germany, see Barbara Manthe, “On the Pathway to Violence: West German Right-Wing Terrorism in the 1970s,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 1 (2021): 49–70.

38 On the far right’s “persistent failure to constitute international organizations” and its subsequent shift toward “relational networks for the transfer of signs, methods, vocabulary, and ideas,” see Camus and Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics*, 53–97, quote at 97.

This mobilization gained strength by harnessing and refracting violent dreams, discourses, and strategies that were circulating across Cold War battlegrounds. At first, this violence took on a defensive posture as leaders and activists mainly mobilized against perceived threats within white societies. In later years, it moved into a revolutionary register, seeking not merely the defense of white supremacy but the overthrow of the existing international order and the creation of a new one.<sup>39</sup> This was not a clean or straightforward shift: reveries of resistance and revolution blended into and gained strength from each other. But it was nevertheless rooted in broad fears of social unrest, gender confusion, racial change, economic decline, and decolonization—all of which signaled, in varied societies and countries, that the state itself had abandoned the mantle of white power. New white supremacist visions were hatched on battlefields, real and imagined, in Rhodesia, the United States, continental Europe, Central America, and the United Kingdom.

### *Rhodesia*

While the far right on both sides of the Atlantic fretted over these changes, one place stood out as a paragon of white power untouched and therefore unchanged by the global revolutions of civil rights and decolonization. That was Rhodesia, the illegal secessionist state that split from the British Empire in 1965 to preserve white minority rule. From its birth in 1965, Rhodesia had been a pariah, the subject of international embargoes and constant pressure from the United Nations and the British government. But its status as a beleaguered island of white power amid a sea of African nationalism lent it a special luster for many on the right in the United States, Britain, Europe, and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> After all, when Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith declared independence, he explained that “[t]he white man is master of Rhodesia. He has built it, and he intends to keep it.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, independent Rhodesia was an “imperial idyll” out of time, where a small

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39 Writing of the American white power movement, historian Kathleen Belew argues that 1983 marked the movement’s “revolutionary turn,” the point at which its leaders and members declared war against the federal government. See Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 4, 103–34. While that shift was indeed pronounced, earlier modes and models of far-right and white-supremacist revolutionary violence predated 1983. In the United States this included the Minutemen in the late 1960s and also remnants of the Klan in the 1970s. In Europe, the French OAS and Italian Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari also engaged in anti-statist violence with revolutionary aspirations.

40 Rhodesia captured the international white supremacist imagination even more than its neighbor, apartheid South Africa, itself a locus of significant concern and affinity.

41 Quoted in Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 196; and “1964: Not in My Lifetime; 1976: Within Two Years,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1976.

number of white settlers monopolized land, capital, and political power, clinging to a pioneer identity that lingered on well after the heyday of empire.<sup>42</sup>

Many in the American, British, and European far right found much to admire in Rhodesia. In the late 1960s, as Jim Crow segregation collapsed and decolonization brought greater non-white migration to the metropolises of declining European empires, Rhodesia held out the promise of a racially ordered society in which white power persisted in all aspects of life.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the specter of violence hung over Rhodesia. Memories of white settlers being massacred in the Congo gained a prominent place in the minds of white Rhodesians and their overseas supporters, offering a nightmare scenario about what the collapse of white rule would bring. Such fears gained greater weight in the late 1960s as large-scale uprisings unfolded in many American cities, presenting veritable visions of race war. In turn, many in the British and European right feared that American-style racial violence would inevitably follow as more non-whites arrived from Asia and Africa.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, they hoped, Rhodesia would be spared the fate of racial anarchy through the courage of its white population. Writing shortly before

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42 Quote from Josiah Brownell, “‘One Last Retreat’: Racial Nostalgia and Population Panic in Smith’s Rhodesia and Powell’s Britain,” in *The Global History of White Nationalism*, ed. Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield, and Jennie Sutton (Manchester University Press, 2020), 157–86, quote at 166. On Rhodesia’s pioneer myths, their legacy, and their incongruity in modern Rhodesian life, see Bill Schwarz, *The White Man’s World: Memories of Empire*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2011), 400–405; and Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, *‘Rhodesians Never Die’: The Impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia, c. 1970–1980* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 20–21. On Rhodesian society after 1965, see Josiah Brownell, *The Collapse of Rhodesia: Population Demographics and the Politics of Race* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 3–10; and Gerald Horne, *From the Barrel of a Gun: The United States and the War against Zimbabwe, 1965–1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 34–39.

43 This view often clashed with white Rhodesians’ understandings of themselves and their nation as many tended to see Rhodesia as a tolerant, evolving, and progressive multiracial state, in which black Africans were steadily advancing toward civilization and civility. See Allison K. Shutt, *Manners Make a Nation: Racial Etiquette in Southern Rhodesia, 1910–1963* (University of Rochester Press, 2015); and Brownell, “‘One Last Retreat,’” 160. That framing was particularly powerful among mainstream conservatives such as William F. Buckley and those around him at *National Review*, who emphasized Rhodesia’s cordial race relations. See, for instance, James Jackson Kilpatrick, Rene Albert Wormser, and Walter Darnell Jacobs, “Rhodesia: A Case History,” *National Review*, May 16, 1967.

44 In Britain, Enoch Powell was the most powerful prognosticator of such racial violence. Referencing the 1967 Detroit riot to warn against unchecked non-white immigration to Britain, he explained that “at an interval of twenty or thirty years you can leave out ‘Detroit’ and insert ‘Birmingham.’” Quoted in Schofield, *Enoch Powell*, 214. Similar claims echoed in France. Far-right theorist Alain de Benoist, who began his political career advocating for the defense of French Algeria and Rhodesia, was horrified by the Harlem riot of 1964 and the Watts riot of 1965, seeing both as harbingers of racial violence in France once significant numbers of non-whites had migrated from Algeria and elsewhere in Africa. “For France and for Europe, it is a warning,” de Benoist wrote under his pen name, “because today’s America is, in some ways, the Europe of 1975, perhaps even before.” Fabrice Laroche [Alain de Benoist], “Terreur noire aux U.S.A.,” *Europe-Action*, no. 21, September 1964, 9–10. See also Fabrice Laroche [Alain de Benoist], “Je reviens d’Amérique,” *Europe-Action*, no. 34, October 1965, 9–12.

his death, George Lincoln Rockwell saw American riots through the lens of the Congo, where whites “waited too long before realizing what was up, and they are now dead, raped, or gone.” But in Rhodesia, Rockwell declared, “Whites have finally realized what was ahead and have made a brave stand to protect themselves, and civilization.”<sup>45</sup>

Yet Rhodesia’s future was indeed in doubt as it confronted two powerful armed nationalist movements, known as ZANU (Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union) and ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union). By 1972, the insurgency threatened Rhodesia’s very existence.<sup>46</sup> At that moment, thousands of foreign volunteers—mercenaries of sorts—arrived hoping to save Rhodesia from almost certain collapse. The American contingent was the largest, followed by the British and smaller samplings of French and Portuguese. Many shared the common experience of having fought against leftist national liberation movements in one part of the world or another. Most of the Americans were veterans of the Vietnam War. The British contingent drew heavily from soldiers who had served in the colonies of Kenya, Burma, and Malaya. Other volunteers had fought in the Belgian Congo, French Algeria, and Portuguese Angola.<sup>47</sup> Beyond that common experience, most agreed that Rhodesia’s abandonment by the US and British governments required them to step up and fight. As one American mercenary put it, “The West isn’t doing its job. The U.S. especially isn’t doing its duty. If they’re too scared to fight the Communists, then people like me have to act independently. I consider it my duty to fight.”<sup>48</sup>

In the view of many who volunteered for combat in Rhodesia, fighting communism meant fighting the tide of forced race mixing and social engineering that had already washed across the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. It meant reclaiming what had been lost at home. To exploit those sentiments, the Rhodesian government ran a vast propaganda campaign that portrayed Rhodesia as a land of prosperity and racial order in contrast to the decaying and crime-filled multiracial cities of the United States and Britain.<sup>49</sup> It also sent recruitment packets to racist groups such as the John Birch Society and Britain’s National Front, as well as to veterans’ organizations and active-

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45 Rockwell, *White Power*, 271.

46 On the expansion of the Rhodesian war after 1972, see Paul L. Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin, *Chimurenga! The War in Rhodesia, 1965–80* (Sygma/Collins, 1982); and David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (Faber and Faber, 1981).

47 Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 111; “Rhodesia and the Mercenaries,” *Searchlight*, no. 21, 1977, Searchlight Archive.

48 Robin Wright, “Speaking Out: Americans in Rhodesia,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 1976.

49 See David Caute, *Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia* (Northwestern University Press, 1983), 183. On images of Rhodesian prosperity and ease, see Schwarz, *White Man’s World*, 407–8.

duty soldiers on US and British military bases.<sup>50</sup> It even published ads and interviews in paramilitary periodicals such as *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, whose editor, Vietnam veteran Lt. Col. Robert K. Brown, was a firm supporter of Rhodesia and often dressed in the Rhodesian Army's battle fatigues.<sup>51</sup> Beyond pay and adventure, the Rhodesian government promised housing support, hoping that foreigners who joined its army would settle there as citizens, part of its attempt to rebuild its dwindling European-descended population after years of "white flight."<sup>52</sup>

Yet foreign volunteers did not change the war in any meaningful way, and their combat fantasies withered in the face of suffering and death. By 1979, as one reporter noted, "[t]he majority found the routine too rough to last more than a few months." The desertion rate was "estimated to run about 80 percent."<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Rhodesia occupied an important place in the imaginations of many white supremacists across the globe. It signified resolute resistance to racial change, the willingness of white men to wage war in defense of white supremacy, even if that war put them at odds with their own governments. John Alan Coey, a medic from the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio, who was killed fighting with the Rhodesian Light Infantry in 1975, explained his commitment to a vision of whiteness that superseded the nation-state. "I am helping to unify the Europeans, simply by my presence and association with these people," he wrote in 1972. "For they are coming to realize that there is no important difference between Americans, White Africans, or Europeans. . . . I believe that only when all European peoples are unified, can communism and the alien conspiracy be smashed."<sup>54</sup>

Coey, like others who fought in Rhodesia or sympathized with its plight, believed white societies were facing a rising non-white tide that could only be turned back by resolute armed action. "Since coming to Rhodesia," he explained, "I have often heard people remark that it's 'inevitable' for this country and all of southern Africa to follow the 'winds of change' and go the same way as other former colonies to the north. This is rubbish and only indicates a lack of fighting spirit, guts, and the will to rule

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50 On Rhodesia's recruitment of US and British nationals, see "SOF Interview: Major Nick Lamprecht, Rhodesian Recruiting Officer," *Soldier of Fortune*, Summer 1977. On volunteers' pay in Rhodesia, see James McManus, "Mercenary Trial Raises Rhodesia Connection," *Guardian*, June 9, 1976; Robin Wright, "Speaking Out: Americans in Rhodesia," *Washington Post*, September 12, 1976; "US Vets Fight for Rhodesia," *Boston Globe*, December 10, 1976; "Recruiting: Rhodesian Army (Regular Force)," CP 050/1 Part A 28, FCO 36/1872, Mercenaries and Recruitment for Rhodesia, National Archives, Kew Gardens, UK; and Letter from P. J. Barlow to Green, March 18, 1976, CP 050/1 Part A 22, FCO 36/1872, Mercenaries and Recruitment for Rhodesia, National Archives, Kew Gardens, UK.

51 Robert K. Brown, "American Mercenaries in Africa," *Soldier of Fortune*, Summer 1975.

52 On "white flight" in Rhodesia, see Brownell, "One Last Retreat"; and Horne, *Barrel of a Gun*, 87.

53 A. J. Venter, "Rhodesia's Tragic Terrorist War: The End is Near," *Soldier of Fortune*, June 1979.

54 John Alan Coey, *A Martyr Speaks: The Journal of the Late John Alan Coey* (New Puritan Library, 1988), 40.

a civilization built by better men.”<sup>55</sup> From New Zealand, a kindred spirit echoed that Rhodesian soldiers and volunteers were ready to sacrifice themselves “in order to show the spineless Western world that the White man has still the guts to fight against the evil tentacles of world communism and African barbarism.”<sup>56</sup>

Although Americans and other foreign volunteers could not win the war for Rhodesia, their stories helped radicalize a large pool of right-wing men who saw in armed action a path to power. To those who had fought in Rhodesia—or more often fantasized about it—the collapse of its white supremacist government in 1979, which gave way to the increasingly authoritarian regime of African nationalist Robert Mugabe, foretold a frightening future that might befall other white nations. Reading Rhodesia into domestic politics, many right-wingers in the United States, Britain, and Europe feared that something similar would soon happen at home. In their view, non-whites, aided by liberals and leftists and other enemies, were working to subvert white societies from within and, ultimately, establish totalitarian states.<sup>57</sup>

### *United States*

Atlanta-born white supremacist leader William Pierce drew those fears and fantasies together in his infamous novel, *The Turner Diaries*. A former physics professor, Pierce had served in high-ranking positions within the American Nazi Party and the World Union of National Socialists before starting his own neo-Nazi group, the National Alliance, in 1974. For him, the bonds of whiteness superseded those of state and nation. “Race is everything,” he professed. Thus, “the destiny of America” was “inextricably linked by ties of blood and culture to those of the other white nations of the world, whether in Africa, the Pacific, or Europe.”<sup>58</sup>

But in the aftermath of civil rights movements, increased non-white immigration, and decolonization, Pierce was convinced that white power was in retreat everywhere. The slow collapse of Rhodesia was particularly terrifying. Writing in 1976, Pierce had lionized Rhodesia as “one of the last bastions of the white world which has not fallen,” unlike other former colonies in Africa and the increasingly multiracial societies of the United States, Britain, and Europe. By contrast, Rhodesia “still had white men and

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55 Quoted in “Killed in Action,” *Soldier of Fortune*, Spring 1976.

56 Member of the New Zealand National Front quoted in “Racism in New Zealand,” *Searchlight*, no. 37, 1978, Searchlight Archive.

57 On Rhodesia’s legacy since its collapse, see John Ismay, “Rhodesia’s Dead—But White Supremacists Have Given It New Life Online,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 10, 2018.

58 William Pierce, “America and the Third World,” *Attack!*, no. 24, 1973, University of Iowa Special Collections, Social Documents Collection [hereafter UISDC], MsC1075.

women who understand what it means to be white,” who still hoped to retain their biological supremacy as a “race of conquerors and masters.” Above all, they “understood that if they bare their necks to the enemy . . . they will have their throats ripped open” by marauding hordes of blacks. Therefore, they “will stand and fight, while everywhere else we are surrendering.” Indeed, Pierce said, “America’s fate” hung “on the same side of the balance with Rhodesia’s.” For the fall of Rhodesia would hasten the collapse of white power elsewhere. Whites would “keep retreating, keep surrendering, until there is no place left to retreat, no surrender to make but the final one.”<sup>59</sup> For him, the end of white rule in Rhodesia augured a most terrifying future for whites in the United States and Europe. They, too, would now face the specter of full-scale race war.<sup>60</sup> Yet Pierce also found inspiration in the kind of guerrilla warfare practiced by many African nationalists. Armed and mobilized cadres in Africa had overthrown minority regimes. Once non-whites had established their own dictatorships in the United States and elsewhere, whites would have no choice but to become guerrilla warriors.<sup>61</sup>

Published in 1978 amid the collapse of Rhodesia and growing fears of white decline in the United States and elsewhere, *The Turner Diaries* offered a tale of racial redemption. The book takes the form of a diary found in 2099, one hundred years after a cataclysmic war against a totalitarian American government known as the System. After the System confiscates weapons, roving gangs of African Americans terrorize the country, pillaging white homes and raping white women. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of whites are imprisoned. Earl Turner, the book’s protagonist, joins the Organization, a cell-based white liberation movement that wages guerrilla war against the System. Turner and his comrades rob liquor stores, hoard weapons, plot assassinations, and orchestrate the bombing of the FBI headquarters. As Turner is inducted into the movement’s elite inner sanctum, known as the Order, the revolution spreads. The insurgency lynches tens of thousands of “race traitors,” setting the stage for genocide against non-whites and

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59 William Pierce, “Crisis in Rhodesia: White Survival Is at Stake,” *Attack!*, no. 45, 1976, UISDC, MsC1075.

60 Pierce regularly explored the problems and parables of white power in Africa in his articles in the National Alliance’s main publication, *Attack!*, which was retitled *National Vanguard* in 1978. See “The Black Man’s Gift to Portugal,” *Attack!*, no. 6, 1971; “Subversion in South Africa,” *Attack!*, no. 16, 1972; “America and the Third World,” *Attack!*, no. 24, 1973; “Churches Bent on Suicide,” *Attack!*, no. 46, 1976; “Has the White Race Become Too Liberal to Survive,” *Attack!*, no. 54, 1977; “American Consumption, Conservation, & the Third World,” *Attack!*, no. 55, 1977; “Afrikaners O.K. Racemixing in S.W. Africa,” *Attack!*, no. 58, 1978; “The Great Trek,” *National Vanguard*, no. 59, 1978; “The Afro-Asian Invasion of Europe,” *National Vanguard*, no. 60, 1978; “South Africa Choose Suicide,” *National Vanguard*, no. 74, 1980; and “Learning to Get Along,” *National Vanguard*, no. 79, 1980, all in UISDC, MsC1075.

61 These included African nationalists and the Black Panthers. See the collection of “Revolutionary Notes” and the article “What We Must Do Now,” published in *Attack!* in 1971–1972 and reprinted in FBI Washington Field Office Report, William Luther Pierce, September 21, 1972, 27–35, in FBI Pierce File. Pierce was also inspired by the French OAS and its guerrilla war against the French state to keep French Algeria. See “Roger Deguldre and the O.A.S.,” *Attack!*, no. 57, 1977, UISDC, MsC1075.

Jews. Eventually, Turner receives orders to fly a plane loaded with a nuclear warhead into the Pentagon. He dies but the attack sparks a global nuclear war.<sup>62</sup>

In the aftermath, the Organization seizes control over the United States and then presses the white revolution into Western Europe. “A cleansing hurricane of change swept over the continent,” the book’s final narration explains. After the “blood flowed ankle-deep in the streets of many of Europe’s great cities,” the “great dawn of the New Era broke over the Western world.” To secure white rule across the planet, the Organization launched chemical, biological, and nuclear war throughout Asia. With billions dead and vast swaths of territory depopulated, a new transatlantic white state “spread its wise and benevolent rule over the earth for all time to come.”<sup>63</sup>

Advertised alongside graphic stories about Rhodesia’s faltering war in *Soldier of Fortune* and other paramilitary periodicals, *The Turner Diaries* became a kind of bible for white supremacists around the world. At once an ideological primer and a how-to manual, it situated revolutionary violence within a racial frame above and beyond the nation-state. The Organization did not only fight for whites in the United States but instead for all white people worldwide. Through its vision of race war and planetary white power, *The Turner Diaries* helped inspire armed groups across the United States and Europe, many of whom began to see themselves as guerrillas arrayed against their own governments.<sup>64</sup>

Yet *The Turner Diaries* owed much to leftist national liberation movements that had waged this kind of combat in the decolonizing world. It also borrowed the metaphors and modes of violence that some radical leftists in the United States and Europe had embraced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For groups such as the Weather Underground and the German Red Army Faction, violence against the state—especially bombings—appeared as an expedient to revolutionary change at home and in the international arena.<sup>65</sup> This kind of large-scale revolutionary violence might have been inspiring, but it

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62 Pierce published the book under the pen name Andrew MacDonald and serialized it in *Attack!* starting in 1975 before publishing it as a stand-alone book in 1978. See Andrew MacDonald [William Pierce], *The Turner Diaries* (National Alliance, 1978).

63 MacDonald [Pierce], *Turner Diaries*, 277–79.

64 See J. M. Berger, “The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism’s Deadly Bible,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, ICCT Research Paper, September 2016, <https://icct.nl/publication/turner-legacy-storied-origins-and-enduring-impact-white-nationalisms-deadly-bible>; Tanjev Schultz, “Transatlantic Ties of the Far Right: The NSU Case in Germany and Its Links to Actors and Incidents in the USA,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 7 (2023): 1468–85; George Michael, “The Revolutionary Model of Dr William Pierce,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 3 (2003): 62–80; and James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (Hill and Wang, 1994), 220–27.

65 On leftist revolutionary violence in the wake of 1968—its goals, contexts, and strategies—see Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary*

also came with significant risks, both political and personal. Therefore, for many, foreign battlefields offered a more viable path to actual war. Abroad, white supremacists could engage in armed action against threatening enemies while also gaining experience that could be deployed in the domestic struggle. This was particularly appealing for Americans, given the global scope of US Cold War interventions, but others joined too.

### *Central America*

In the early 1980s, Central America was the main attraction for US-based movements. There far-right groups cast their lot with El Salvador's right-wing state security forces and Nicaragua's anticommunist guerrillas, the Contras. Although neither force clearly served the ends of white supremacy at home or on the international stage, right-wing leaders and activists saw them as allies in the global struggle against communism, long viewed as the source of America's racial problems. Fighting communism on the front lines in Central America, they argued, would not only forestall its advance toward and within the United States.<sup>66</sup> It would also stamp out the flow of non-white migrants into the United States—who were often cast as tools of communist subversion—thereby preserving the nation's racial character and stock. Indeed, starting in the late 1970s, a string of white supremacist groups, led by the Ku Klux Klan, had devoted growing concern to the southern border, sponsoring months-long Border Watches. Through these efforts, armed Klansmen gained national notoriety as they captured and intimidated migrants crossing from Mexico into Texas and Arizona, efforts that inspired subsequent vigilante campaigns along the border.<sup>67</sup>

For American white supremacists, the primary conduit to the battlefields of Central America was through the group known as Civilian Military Assistance, or CMA. Taking shape in 1979, CMA was led by Tom Posey, a Vietnam veteran, member of the Alabama National Guard, and Klansman from Decatur, Alabama.

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*Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (University of California Press, 2004); Stefan Aust, *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Bryan Burrough, *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence* (Penguin, 2015); and Richard Vinen, *1968: Radical Protest and Its Enemies* (HarperCollins, 2018), 279–96. The Red Army Faction, ironically, served as an incubator for far-right politics. Horst Mahler, a founding member of the RAF, converted to the right while in prison. He later joined the far-right National Democratic Party and embraced Holocaust denial. See George Michael, "The Ideological Evolution of Horst Mahler: The Far Left–Extreme Right Synthesis," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 9 (2009): 346–66.

66 "Vigilantes in Arizona Capture 15 Illegal Aliens," *New York Times*, July 7, 1986; Peter Applebome, "Paramilitary Group That Caught 15 Aliens Plans More Patrols," *New York Times*, July 8, 1986; Dudley Clendinen, "Anti-Communism Called the Thread Binding Group That Captured Aliens," *New York Times*, July 11, 1986; and Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 96–98.

67 On the Klan's Border Watch, see "The Great White Hope," *Newsweek*, November 14, 1977.

Posey had participated in violent Klan actions in his hometown but believed his talents as a soldier were better utilized on the frontlines of the global struggle against communism, which he identified as the main force driving non-white immigration into the United States. Through CMA, Posey recruited likeminded veterans and aspiring warriors from the Klan, the National Alliance, and other right-wing groups, as well as active-duty soldiers and National Guardsmen.<sup>68</sup> By 1983, Posey claimed the group had more than five thousand members nationwide.<sup>69</sup> Soon the CMA was working with US officials in El Salvador to smuggle weapons and military equipment from the United States to the Salvadoran security forces.<sup>70</sup>

This campaign laid the foundations for a larger mission through which Posey and the CMA supplied weapons to—and occasionally fought alongside—Nicaragua's anticommunist Contra rebels. In sum, Posey bragged, CMA managed to transmit more than \$70,000 worth of guns and ammunition to the largest Contra group, the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense.<sup>71</sup> In Nicaragua, the CMA joined a rogue's gallery of freelancers and gun runners, including Belgian mercenaries and Rhodesian military pilots.<sup>72</sup> Yet the CMA operation soon collapsed after the Sandinistas shot down one of its supply flights in 1984, killing two Americans and causing a brief scandal for the Reagan administration.<sup>73</sup>

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68 See Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 77–100; Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right*, 152–53; and Larry Martz and Vincent Coppola, “The Shadowy World of America’s Mercenaries,” *Newsweek*, November 3, 1986. They honed their skills at a string of paramilitary camps that appeared across the nation but were especially prominent in the South. See Timothy K. Smith, “In Alabama Woods, Frank Camper Trains Men to Repel Invaders,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 1985. The CMA also recruited at *Soldier of Fortune* conventions and gun shows. See Iver Peterson, “Mercenaries in Fatigues Meet in Nevada Glitter,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1984.

69 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 98.

70 Philip Taubman, “U.S. Army Officers Helped Private Group in Salvador,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1984.

71 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 93. Here, too, Posey and the CMA maintained close connections with the CIA and the US military, which had turned to private groups to supply the Contras after Congress cut off all US aid to them in 1984. CMA contacts with US ambassador to Honduras John Negroponte and the CIA are documented in a series of cables from the US Embassy in Honduras. See cable from US Embassy Honduras to US Secretary of State, January 11, 1984, folder DRF/Contra-Military Activities 7, box 4, Oliver North Files; Cable from US Embassy El Salvador to US Secretary of State, January 26, 1984, folder DRF/Contra-Military Activities 7, box 4, Oliver North Files; Cable from US Embassy Honduras to US Secretary of State, September 3, 1984, folder DRF/Contra-Military Activities 7, box 4, Oliver North Files; Memo from CIA/DDO 7 to Robert McFarlane, September 11, 1984, folder DRF/Contra-Military Activities 6, box 4, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.

72 James Lemoyne, “Shipping Contra Arms by the Seat of the Pants,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1986; “U.K. Security Firm with Thatcher Ties Had Role in Contra Aid, Data Indicate,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 1987.

73 On the CMA crash and the public outcry that followed, see Michael Hirsley, “Paramilitary Free-

The failure of the CMA reinforced feelings of government betrayal and thus fanned anti-statist fantasies among the American right. Leader Tom Posey attributed the death of the CMA volunteers to weak-kneed liberals whose anticommunist resolve had crumbled in the wake of the Vietnam War. “You might say it was Congress that killed my men,” he declared, “because there would have been no reason for them to go if CIA funds had not been cut off.”<sup>74</sup> Posey’s frustration revealed a growing sense of disillusionment within the American movement. He and those around him had believed they were serving the ends of the state and its anticommunist mission. But when the Reagan administration distanced itself from their actions, Posey and others grew convinced that the government itself was an obstacle—not just to anticommunism but to the broader cause of white supremacy.

Other paramilitary schemes bore out similar patterns and generated similar resentments. In early 1981, federal authorities arrested ten men in Louisiana who were plotting to invade the tiny Caribbean nation of Dominica and overthrow its newly elected government. Dubbed the “Bayou of Pigs” by the press, this ill-conceived coup attempt had been organized through classified advertisements in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine that attracted a motley crew of Vietnam veterans, National Guardsmen, Klansmen, and neo-Nazis from the United States and Canada. The purpose of Operation Red Dog, as its participants called it, was to turn the island into a base for further offensives against leftist governments in the Caribbean. Its proponents also hoped to build hotel casinos and then use the proceeds, ideally millions of dollars in profits, to fund the Klan and other white supremacist groups back home, helping arm and train their members for future race war. Foiled at the last minute by an FBI infiltrator—the men were ready to set sail from Louisiana—authorities found dozens of guns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, Nazi and Confederate flags, and copies of William Pierce’s neo-Nazi newspaper, *National Vanguard*. Charged with violating the Neutrality Act, most pled guilty and received lengthy sentences.<sup>75</sup> Among those convicted was Klansman Don Black. Issued a nine-year sentence, Black was apoplectic. “What we were doing was in the best interests of the United States and its security in the hemisphere,” he told reporters. “We feel betrayed by our own government.”<sup>76</sup>

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lancers under Fire in Nicaragua,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1984; and “Senators Hear Official Story of Fatal Nicaraguan Adventure,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 1984.

74 Don Oberdorfer, “Two Americans Called Volunteers: Pair Died in Nicaraguan Crash,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 1985.

75 See Stewart Bell, *Bayou of Pigs: The True Story of an Audacious Plot to Turn a Tropical Island into a Criminal Paradise* (Wiley, 2008).

76 David Schwab Abel, “The Racist Next Door,” *Miami New Times*, February 19, 1998.

### *United Kingdom*

Black's sense of governmental betrayal reverberated across the Atlantic, most resoundingly in Britain. Since the 1960s, a growing racist populism had registered throughout much of the political landscape, driven mainly by fears about the large numbers of non-white Commonwealth migrants arriving in Britain. In the eyes of many Britons, especially those who supported Conservative MP Enoch Powell and the right-wing Monday Club, British elites were in cahoots with the migrants, whose presence threatened the racial composition and identity of Britain. Mainstream politicians were, in that sense, traitors to their own people. The suspicion that political elites—especially liberals—had sold out white British citizens to accommodate non-whites echoed the claims made by many Rhodesians whose sense of Britishness, always imbued by race, had demanded rebellion against the British government.<sup>77</sup>

When Rhodesia collapsed, the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland took its place as the clearest battleground upon which white Britons could wage combat in defense of their rights, privileges, and way of life against ethnic foes. For Protestant leaders such as the Reverend Ian Paisley, Northern Ireland was but one front in a global struggle to defend Anglo-Saxon societies and traditions. “The war is . . . everywhere,” one writer declared in Paisley's newspaper, *The Protestant Telegraph*. Its dimensions could be glimpsed in Africa, the United States, and the United Nations and now “in the training of young Roman Catholic men in Ulster in Black Panther urban guerrilla tactics.”<sup>78</sup> Loyalist paramilitaries drew the same links between domestic and overseas battlefields. As one put it, “The struggle of free people against communist revolution and liberal terrorism is the struggle of the Ulster Loyalist as much as it is the struggle of the white Rhodesians.”<sup>79</sup> This view rendered the Irish Republican Army (IRA) within the field of leftist revolutionaries worldwide, and figured Northern Ireland's Catholics as an alien enemy within Britain. As the IRA turned to guerrilla warfare against loyalists and the Northern Irish state, many on the British far right reckoned the struggle through the lenses of government betrayal and decolonization run amok. As in Rhodesia, they said, loyal British subjects were being abandoned by their own state and their own leaders.<sup>80</sup> The IRA's bombing campaign in London and other cities gave these appeals

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77 Schwarz, *White Man's World*, 35–52, 425–38; Schofield, *Enoch Powell*, 264–318.

78 Michael Clark quoted in Daniel Geary, “From Belfast to Bob Jones: Ian Paisley, Protestant Fundamentalism, and Transatlantic Right,” in *Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump*, ed. Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield, and Jennifer Sutton (Manchester University Press, 2018), 131–54, quote at 149.

79 Member of the Ulster Volunteer Force quoted in “What Their Papers Say,” *Searchlight*, April 1975, Searchlight Archive.

80 There was indeed a long history of symbiotic grievance and parable between Ulster and Rhodesia, dating back to the early twentieth century. See Donal Lowry, “Ulster Resistance and Loyalist Rebellion

a deeper sense of urgency. Decolonization had come home in the form of guerrilla war on the mainland—violence that unfolded at the very same time as many non-white immigrants arrived and many industrial jobs disappeared.<sup>81</sup>

In that climate, the National Front, the country's leading far-right white supremacist party in the late 1970s and early 1980s, published story after story about Northern Ireland, urging Britons to come to the aid of its loyalist community.<sup>82</sup> Leader John Tyndall, long a supporter of both Rhodesia and Northern Ireland, had cut his teeth in the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement and World Union of National Socialists before softening his public image in the National Front. Yet he was still bound up with the international neo-Nazi movement, corresponding frequently with William Pierce and others abroad.<sup>83</sup>

The National Front cultivated a hypermasculine and martial visage, and was thus especially fond of loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).<sup>84</sup> In turn, small but significant numbers of UDA and UVF men joined the National Front or flitted on its edges, even as loyalist paramilitary leaders sought to distance themselves from the National Front, which they deemed a “neo-Nazi movement.”<sup>85</sup> At the same time, National Front leaders talked of forming a “private army” from their ranks to fight alongside, or in lieu of, the British Army.<sup>86</sup> Such schemes did not pan out.<sup>87</sup> But in National Front strongholds,

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in the Empire,” in *“An Irish Empire”? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Sally Visick (Manchester University Press, 1996), 191–215, esp. 203–8.

81 Geary, “From Belfast to Bob Jones,” 144–47.

82 “The UDA and the National Front—The Killers and the Thugs,” *Searchlight*, July 1975; Martin Durham, “The British Extreme Right and Northern Ireland,” *Contemporary British History* 23, no. 2 (2012): 195–211.

83 Indeed, Tyndall had once explained to William Pierce that his shift into the National Front would achieve his aim of national socialism “without the open Nazi label.” See Letter from John Tyndall to William Pierce, 1967, quoted in Editorial, “The Two Levels of National Front Policy,” *Searchlight*, August 1978, 2.

84 One National Front member, neo-Nazi Steve Brady, sought to connect the UDA with a series of far-right terror groups in Europe. See “Brady Forgings Nazi Links for Loyalists,” *Searchlight*, August 1982, Searchlight Archive. Meanwhile, the UVF forged its own links with overseas neo-Nazi groups, such as Belgium's VMO (Flemish Militant Order), from which UVF men tried to purchase weapons in 1980. Arrested and indicted, the orchestrators received lengthy prison sentences. See “The Men Who Wanted the UVF to Bomb British Jews,” *Searchlight*, May 1983, Searchlight Archive.

85 Martin Walker, *The National Front* (Fontana, 1977), 160; “UDA and the National Front.”

86 “Northern Ireland: The Third Force,” *Nationalism Today*, no. 8, 1982, Series 13, Sub-series 2, box 1, Searchlight Archive; “Front Try Orange Card in Scotland,” *Searchlight*, April 1980, Searchlight Archive; “UDA Rebuffs YNA,” *Searchlight*, September 1981, Searchlight Archive.

87 See “NF Setback in Ulster,” *Searchlight*, May 1984, Searchlight Archive.

especially in England's northwest, where deindustrialization and burgeoning immigrant communities produced for many working-class whites a kind of siege mentality, the willingness of Ulster men to take up arms in defense of their communities was nothing short of inspirational. In the words of Martin Webster, deputy leader of the National Front, Ulster loyalists could teach something to British men who "had lost their guts to fight against the black invasion."<sup>88</sup> And so, in addition to dramatizing the cause of loyalist paramilitaries, the National Front sought to make war by raising funds, smuggling weapons, hosting UVA and UDF leaders, and urging British soldiers to view the war as one to save Britain itself.<sup>89</sup> In turn, members of the National Front saw the war in Northern Ireland as a way to "strike back against the perceived downfall" of the United Kingdom.<sup>90</sup>

### Leaderless Resistance in the United States

In Britain and the United States, then, a growing sense of anomie, alienation, and anger pervaded far-right politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, sentiments that were catalyzed by the contraction of the welfare state amid the shocks of deindustrialization. Feeling pushed aside or ignored by their governments, and deeply troubled by the legacies of the civil rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements, many concluded that their nations had fundamentally changed. What had once been white countries—or more precisely white men's countries—they reasoned, were no more. Far-right white supremacist leaders were keen to exploit that rancor and rage. In their eyes, even conservative leaders such as President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher offered little salvation since both were devoted to neoliberal policies that sacrificed the working class on the altar of profit and privatization. One former Klansman, speaking in 1984 at a paramilitary convention, put it bluntly: "They don't take on the international bankers and the Federal Reserve; they think that's part of our glorious capitalist heritage. . . . They don't take on the Zionists at all because they are the Chosen and our Number One ally in the Middle East." And thus, they would not "take any stand for the white race and its preservation either."<sup>91</sup>

Only a violent revolution, it seemed, could set things right. To accomplish that, far-right leaders and activists worked toward a more decentered and destructive form of

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88 "Webster Recruiting Drive Hits Ulster," *Searchlight*, September 1983, Searchlight Archive.

89 As an editorial in the National Front's *Nationalism Today* newspaper put it, "the war in Ulster is a war of national unity." See "Casting Eyes Across the Water," *Searchlight*, June 1984, Searchlight Archive.

90 Quote from James Bright, "Hands Across the Sea: Paramilitary Loyalism in England and Scotland," *Writing the Troubles*, April 1, 2019, <https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com/2019/04/01/paramilitary-loyalism-in-england-and-scotland/>. See also Martin Durham, "The British Extreme Right and Northern Ireland," *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 2 (2012): 196–97.

91 Former Klansman Robert Weems quoted in Thomas Meaney, "White Power," *London Review of Books*, August 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n15/thomas-meaney/white-power>.

violence called “leaderless resistance.”<sup>92</sup> Chief among them was Louis Beam, a Vietnam veteran and Klansman from Texas. Beam had outlined the strategy of “leaderless resistance” in an influential tract that quickly spread far beyond the small Klan newsletter in which it first appeared. “America is quickly moving into a long dark night of police state tyranny, where the rights now accepted by most as being inalienable will disappear,” he warned in 1983. Sensing that the armed right in the United States had been fractured by years of infighting and infiltrators, Beam saw an opportunity. Rather than unite disparate bands under a single leader, Beam urged white supremacists to form a vast underground of independent cells, capable of working toward a common cause but self-reliant enough to withstand the collapse of other cells—a “thousand points of resistance,” as he put it.<sup>93</sup> Modeled on how Beam understood communist undergrounds, as well as the guerrilla heroics of *The Turner Diaries*, “leaderless resistance” refracted the wars of the decolonizing world into domestic terrorism. As one of Beam’s close allies explained, “Much of what we will have to learn has actually been well articulated by the leftist national liberation movements. What that entails is a resistance battle which partakes of guerrilla warfare techniques in every possible aspect.”<sup>94</sup>

The American neo-Nazi group known as the Silent Brotherhood—or, reflecting its Germanophilia, the Brüder Schweigen—was among the first to explicitly take up the mantle of leaderless resistance. Led by Robert Mathews, an ardent white supremacist who had grown tired of the empty bombast emanating from many movement leaders, the Silent Brotherhood comprised Vietnam veterans, Klansmen, and members of the Aryan Nations, a neo-Nazi group headquartered in the mountains of Idaho. Starting in 1983, Mathews and his band of followers—never more than twenty men—launched a war against the federal government. Their ultimate goal was to spark a race war in the United States and then establish a white ethnostate in the Pacific Northwest. To that end, the Silent Brotherhood began robbing banks and armored cars, heists that yielded more than \$4 million, which Mathews circulated throughout the broader white supremacist movement. Mathews and his men also assassinated Alan Berg, a Jewish talk radio host in Denver who liked to antagonize white power groups. Soon Mathews and his dozen or so followers began to refer to their group as the Order, taking the name of the elite cadre of white warriors from *The Turner Diaries*.<sup>95</sup>

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92 Beam borrowed the term and basic strategy from an obscure essay by Ulius Louis Amoss, who had argued in the early 1960s for the use guerrilla tactics in the event of a communist takeover. See Jeffrey Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (1997): 80–95.

93 Louis Beam “Leaderless Resistance,” *The Seditonist*, February 12, 1992, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~satran/Ford%2006/Wk%202-1%20Terrorism%20Networks%20leaderless-resistance.pdf>. This is a longer, republished version of an essay Beam published in 1983. See Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Inter-Klan Newsletter*, n.d. (circa Spring 1983), accessed December 8, 2025, [https://simson.net/ref/leaderless/1983.inter-klan\\_newsletter.pdf](https://simson.net/ref/leaderless/1983.inter-klan_newsletter.pdf).

94 John Newell, “Past Lessons & Today’s Reality,” *White Aryan Resistance* 9, no. 3, Radicalism Collection, Michigan State University Library Special Collections, East Lansing, MI [hereafter RCMSU].

95 See Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America’s Racist Underground*

The group collapsed in 1984 after Robert Mathews died in a fiery shootout with FBI agents on an island in Puget Sound. Over the next two years, the FBI rounded up its members, who were then convicted and sentenced to decades in prison—although an attempt to try them for sedition, alongside other white supremacist leaders, failed in 1988.<sup>96</sup> David Lane, one of Mathews's closest comrades and the man who drove the getaway car at Berg's assassination, soon became a global far-right celebrity and intellectual, all from the confines of prison, to which he was incarcerated for life. Since the 1980s, his Fourteen Words—"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children"—has served as a rallying cry for militant white supremacists across the world.<sup>97</sup> He would also work to popularize leaderless resistance through his own esoteric white supremacist philosophy called Wotansvolk.<sup>98</sup>

The Order—its violent example and the personal sacrifice of its members—elicited sympathy and support from kindred spirits abroad.<sup>99</sup> In the 1990s, Colin Jordan, the erstwhile leader of Britain's defunct National Socialist Movement and former deputy of the World Union of National Socialists, sent money to help Robert Mathews's widow. In 2004, Jordan would dedicate his novel *The Uprising*, a tale of white revolution against a Jewish government that derived much of its plot from *The Turner Diaries*, to Robert Mathews and imprisoned Order members David Lane and Richard Scutari.<sup>100</sup> Like Lane, Scutari also cultivated connections with white supremacist groups overseas. His influence was particularly strong among groups in Sweden and Finland, whom he encouraged to create a pan-Nordic neo-Nazi group called the Nordic Resistance Movement. Through regular correspondence from his prison cell, Scutari provided both ideological and tactical guidance. He recommended reading *The Turner Diaries* and other texts so that the Nordic Resistance Movement could learn the strategy of leaderless resistance. "There will come a time when all you guys have to go underground and operate covertly," he warned. "This is why it is important that we should all be networking with others in other countries."<sup>101</sup>

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(The Free Press, 1989); Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, 96–106, 301–7; Tom Stites and James Coates, "Siege Over, Neo-Nazis Surrender," *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1985; Wayne King, "23 in White Supremacist Group Are Indicted on Federal Charges," *New York Times*, April 6, 1985; Wayne King, "Neo-Nazi Dream of a Racist Territory in Pacific Northwest Refuses to Die," *New York Times*, July 5, 1986.

96 Flynn and Gerhardt, *Silent Brotherhood*, 393–98; Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 171–84.

97 "Terrorist, '14 Words' Author, Dies in Prison," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 1, 2007, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/terrorist-14-words-author-dies-prison/>.

98 Kaplan, "Leaderless Resistance," 89–90.

99 See for instance "Get Ready for War!," *White Aryan Resistance*, July 2002, RCMSU.

100 Macklin, *Failed Führers*, 309; Colin Jordan, *The Uprising* (NS Publications, 2004).

101 Scutari quoted in Jeff Tischauser and Hannah Geis, "Neo-Nazi Order Member Released from Prison after Radicalizing Terrorist Group," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/neo-nazi-order-member-released-from-prison-after-radicalizing-terrorist-group/>. That group was based upon a Swedish organization that took the same name as

The Order represented the most violent vanguard of the American right in the 1980s. Beneath it lay a dispersed but increasingly radical constellation of old and new mobilizations.<sup>102</sup> These included a more militarized version of the Klan that shed the white robes for combat uniforms, as well as the growing skinhead movement, which arrived in the United States in the early 1980s. First appearing in Britain, skinhead music—and the violent gangs that sprung up around it—provided another major conduit through which US far-right leaders and activists connected with kindred movements across the ocean.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, many saw skinhead music as the ideal way to radicalize young men and guide them toward violent action. As National Front organizer Eddy Morrison explained, it was a “powerful weapon for anyone who could turn it politically.”<sup>104</sup> Moreover, it served to inculcate a warlike mentality. “The skinhead revolt is a natural and inevitable development,” one National Front writer explained. “It is the return of the warrior.” In an “effete, over-civilized and self-abasing society,” skinheads rekindled “ancient barbaric qualities.” This is just what British society needed “in order to revitalize it and steel it for the coming struggle for survival.”<sup>105</sup>

The skinheads’ emergence in the United States delighted American far-right leaders like Tom Metzger, founder of White Aryan Resistance (WAR), a neo-Nazi group headquartered in southern California.<sup>106</sup> An Army veteran and television repairman, Metzger had formed White Aryan Resistance after breaking from the Klan. He imagined his movement as a violent vanguard of racial revolution and saw white

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Tom Metzger’s US-based skinhead movement: White Aryan Resistance. On the group’s formation and embrace of leaderless resistance, see Tore Bjørge and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “Why the Nordic Resistance Movement Restrains Its Use of Violence,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 6 (2020): 37–48.

102 Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 103–34; Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, 27–106.

103 See Ryan Shaffer, “The Soundtrack of Neo-Fascism: Youth and Music in the National Front,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 17, nos. 4–5 (2013): 458–82, esp. 472–75; Ryan Shaffer, “British, European, and White: Cultural Constructions of Identity in Postwar British Fascist Music,” in *Cultures of Post-War British Fascism*, ed. Nigel Copsey and John E. Richardson (Routledge, 2015), 144–45; Timothy S. Brown, “Subcultures, Pop Cultures, and Politics: Skinheads and ‘Nazi Rock’ in England and Germany,” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (2004): 164–65; and “Blood & Honour,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/blood-honour>.

104 Morrison quoted in Robert Forbes and Eddie Stanton, *The White Nationalist Skinhead Movement: UK & U.S.A., 1979–1993* (Feral House, 2015), 10.

105 “The Return of the Warrior,” *Nationalism Today*, no. 9, 1982, Series 13, Sub-series 2, box 1, Searchlight Archive. It is likely that this was written by Derek Holland or Nick Griffin, editors of *Nationalism Today*.

106 As the FBI noted in 1989, a growing number of “skinheads are currently associated with WAR.” FBI, San Diego SAC, Domestic Security–Terrorism, “White Aryan Resistance, also known as White American Resistance,” May 19, 1988, 4, in the FBI’s FOIA Reading Room. Tom Metzger would later boast that he “was the first in the country to recognize skinheads and befriend them.” See “Tom Metzger,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed August 14, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/tom-metzger>.

power music as the best way to politicize young, disillusioned white men. It was, simply, “the most powerful message in the country today for the white race.”<sup>107</sup> He labored to link White Aryan Resistance to American skinheads and, through them, to kindred movements in Britain and Europe. He hawked a growing catalog of neo-Nazi music and sponsored international white power music festivals, which drew new recruits at home while boosting his profile abroad.<sup>108</sup>

As Metzger sought to mobilize skinheads as shock troops for race war, he also embraced leaderless resistance. He like to call Robert Mathews the “father of America’s Second Revolution,” and conducted a pilgrimage to the cabin on Puget Sound where Mathews had died.<sup>109</sup> With Mathews in mind, Metzger advised his skinhead recruits on how to launch a violent revolution, and lionized the personal sacrifice that entailed.<sup>110</sup> One article in his group’s eponymous newspaper explained that “[y]oung terrorists, or freedom fighters, gain eternal glory by joining the fight, and reverence toward them is amplified by martyrdom or sainthood if they perish in the course of violent duty.”<sup>111</sup>

Others also saw the skinhead movement as a means of leaderless resistance. For William Pierce, the author of *The Turner Diaries*, the skinheads would be the vanguard of the coming race war in America. “We will win the war only by killing our enemies,” he proclaimed in 1989. Skinheads were poised to spearhead that campaign through

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107 Metzger quoted in Martin Durham, *White Rage: The Extreme Right and American Politics* (Routledge, 2007), 31.

108 These festivals began in 1989. See Andrew Pollack, “Boredom and Rain End Racist Rally,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1989; “Aryan Fest, ‘89,” *White Aryan Resistance* 9, no. 3, 1989; Tom Metzger, Editorial, *White Aryan Resistance* 9, no. 3, 1989, RCMSU. By the late 1980s, Metzger had formed a friendship with Nick Griffin and several other young National Front activists. See Nick Griffin, “An Interview with Tom Metzger,” *Nationalism Today*, no. 31, Series 13, Sub-series 2, box 1, Searchlight Archive. Metzger also subscribed to neo-Nazi band leader Ian Stuart’s Blood & Honour newsletter, and published ads for Skrewdriver in WAR’s newspaper. See “Pan-Aryanism Binds Hate Groups.”

109 Tom Metzger, Editorial, *White Aryan Resistance*, October 1997, University of Michigan Library Special Collections, Ann Arbor, MI [hereafter UMLSC]. For more on Metzger’s praise for Mathews, see Raphael S. Ezekiel, *The Racist Mind: Portraits of American Neo-Nazis and Klansmen* (Viking, 1995), 79. On Mathews and DePugh, see Form Letter from Tom Metzger, *White Aryan Resistance*, February 22, 1988, White Aryan Resistance records, page 0033, The Gordon Hall and Grace Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, Providence, RI [hereafter GHGHC].

110 See “Tom Metzger’s Message to the Gathering of the Klans,” WAR flier, September 14, 1992, White Aryan Resistance records, page 0077, GHGHC. See also the seven-part series by Edward Kerling titled “Whitey Revolutionary,” published in *White Aryan Resistance* between November 1995 and August 1996; WAR Staff, “Why I Believe in Murder,” *White Aryan Resistance*, July 1996; James Mason, “The Revolutionary Position,” *White Aryan Resistance*, August 1996; Daniel Kuehne, “Thoughts on the Militia,” *White Aryan Resistance*, August 1997; and “Why Racist Cells Are Hot in Canada,” *White Aryan Resistance*, April 2000, all in UMLSC.

111 Quote from “The Potential Terrorist,” *White Aryan Resistance*, November 1995, UMLSC.

low-level assaults by vigilantes—someone who “cracks the enemy’s skull in the street with a baseball bat, rips his face open with a bicycle chain, or breaks his legs across a curbstone.” For that was a “healthy red-blooded response to the current situation in America’s cities.”<sup>112</sup>

Pierce’s embrace of the skinheads reflected his deepening belief that individuals could and should undertake racial violence on their own accord, independent of any group or organization, including small terrorist cells such as the Order.<sup>113</sup> His 1989 novel, *Hunter*, a kind of prequel to *The Turner Diaries*, told the story of a Vietnam veteran who murders interracial couples and civil rights leaders.<sup>114</sup> Pierce dedicated the book to Joseph Paul Franklin, a former member of the American Nazi Party who killed at least twenty-two people—the very same kinds of people targeted in *Hunter*—over the course of ten years in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Pierce put it, Franklin knew “his duty as a white man and did what a responsible son of his race must do.”<sup>115</sup> By the mid-1990s, William Pierce had also started his own record label, Resistance Records, which imported and sold vinyl and cassettes to and from Europe and Canada. It was, in his eyes, the ideal recruiting tool. “Music speaks to us at a deeper level than books or political rhetoric: music speaks directly to the soul,” he explained in 1999. “Resistance Records will be the music of our people’s renewal and rebirth. . . . It will be music of defiance and rage against the enemies of our people. It will be the music of the great cleansing revolution which is coming.”<sup>116</sup>

Resistance Records helped Pierce cultivate and correspond with a cluster of far-right figures in France, England, and Germany. That, in turn, enabled him to secure European-based publishers for his books. As a result, said one expert, Pierce became “undoubtedly the most well-known American right-wing figure in Europe.”<sup>117</sup> Indeed, by 1993, *The Turner Diaries* had been translated into a half-dozen languages, selling hundreds of thousands of copies in Europe, South Africa, and elsewhere. The international skinhead movement known as Blood & Honour hawked copies in the back pages of its monthly

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112 William Pierce, “Guest Commentary,” *White Aryan Resistance* 9, no. 3, 1989, RCMSU.

113 Durham, *White Rage*, 107–9.

114 Pierce also published this novel under his pen name. See Andrew MacDonald [William Pierce], *Hunter* (National Vanguard Books, 1989).

115 Quoted in “Murder’s Price,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 25, 2014, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/murders-price/>. Pierce denied that *Hunter* advocated murder or leaderless resistance as viable strategies. See Michael, “Revolutionary Model,” 70–71.

116 Quoted in Nancy S. Love, *Trendy Fascism: White Power Music and the Future of Democracy* (State University of New York Press, 2016), 2.

117 “National Alliance Leader, William Pierce, Looks to Build Far-Right Alliances,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, March 15, 1999, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/national-alliance-leader-william-pierce-looks-build-far-right-alliances/>.

magazine. Free versions of the novel also circulated as samizdat via personal networks and was serialized in white power periodicals.<sup>118</sup>

### Leaderless Resistance in Europe

Through these networks and connections, leaderless resistance crossed the Atlantic. In Britain, it was picked up by the neo-Nazi skinhead group Combat 18—the 1 and the 8 stood for the first and eighth letters of the alphabet, A and H, the initials of Adolf Hitler—which began as the armed wing of the British National Party (BNP). The BNP had split from the National Front to become the nation's most prominent far-right party in the early 1990s. Among Combat 18's founders were Harold Covington, an American who had joined the successor to the American Nazi Party before emigrating to Rhodesia, where he claimed to have fought in the Rhodesian Army, and Charlie Sargent, a neo-Nazi thug who ran an illicit white power music business.<sup>119</sup> Under their leadership, Combat 18 spiraled beyond the control of the BNP. At that point, Combat 18 rejected the path of electoral politics and embraced revolutionary violence and terrorism.<sup>120</sup> A “big nationalist party or movement winning power via the polls is not going to happen,” Charlie Sargent explained. Instead, leaderless resistance was the proper path. In its publications and internal communiques, Combat 18 explicitly modeled itself on both *The Turner Diaries* and the Order, Robert Mathews's neo-Nazi terrorist group.<sup>121</sup>

In 1992 and 1993, Combat 18 launched a string of violent attacks on liberal politicians, leftist organizers, South Asian and West Indian immigrants, and other foes.<sup>122</sup> This set the stage for larger aspirations. By 1997, the group explained, “active members of

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118 See Blood & Honour catalog, undated, circa 1992, Series 12, Sub-series 2, box 1, Searchlight Archive. Colin Jordan, erstwhile leader of the National Socialist Movement, sold *The Turner Diaries* in the back pages of his *Gothic Ripples* magazine, a revival of fascist Arnold Leese's publication. See Macklin, *Failed Führers*, 309.

119 On the founding of Combat 18, see “Assault, Arson and Death Threats in Combat 18 in Operation,” *Searchlight*, April 1993, 3–11; “Drug Dealers, Thieves and Boot Boys. C18's Leadership Exposed,” *Searchlight*, April 1993, 7–9; and “Covington: Mastermind of Terror,” *Searchlight*, April 1993, 12–13. On Covington's past, see “Top Nazi Poses and Early Problem for New MI5 Boss,” *Searchlight*, June 1992, 3–5.

120 “The Aims of Combat 18,” *Combat 18*, no. 3, n.d., Series 12, Sub-Series 12, box 1, Searchlight Archive.

121 As one Combat 18 flyer indicated, “The Turner Diaries and The Order is the C18 role model.” C18 Pamphlet, n.d., Series 12, Sub-Series 12, box 2, Searchlight Archive.

122 See Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 65–66; and Daniel Trilling, *Bloody Nasty People: The Rise of Britain's Far Right* (Verso, 2013), 68–70.

C18 were making contact with likeminded people across Europe and forming cells, procuring explosives and weapons.” The goal was to launch “an international terror/sabotage campaign by TOTALLY autonomous groups and cells.”<sup>123</sup>

This strategy, it was hoped, would bring maximum violence while shielding its perpetrators from outside scrutiny. As one pamphlet outlined, “The police and Searchlight,” the country’s leading anti-fascist group, “would find it impossible to infiltrate the activities of each or estimate the numbers involved in the movement.” Indeed, Britain’s skinheads had already formed “an underground network of national socialist papers and fanzines” that Combat 18 cells could utilize to “keep in touch,” in much the same way that Tom Metzger’s White Aryan Resistance had worked through American skinhead groups. “Back in the USA,” said one Combat 18 writer, “White Aryan Resistance has been pioneering the ‘cell system’ whereby local WAR chapters acted largely autonomously.” Members turned to the WAR headquarters in Fallbrook, California, “for literature, tapes, and technical advice” but “devised their own particular strategy and operations.” It did not matter whether one was “setting up propaganda or a paramilitary cell.” The “principle remains the same. Small, decentralized, discreet.”<sup>124</sup>

Meanwhile, neo-Nazi skinheads made dramatic progress in reunified Germany after 1990, especially in the former East, where the dissolution of communist rule and state-run industry triggered soaring unemployment and frustration among young men. In that climate, far-right groups from the former West—some legal, others underground—found thousands of eager recruits. Looking back on the grandeur of the Third Reich, which few neo-Nazis had any direct experience living under, they turned their ire against Germany’s growing migrant population. In 1991, in Hoyerswerda, neo-Nazi toughs attacked Vietnamese refugees and tried to set fire to their homes. In 1992, several hundred neo-Nazi skinheads launched an orgy of violence in the coastal city of Rostock, home to a few thousand Romanian and Turkish migrants, who sheltered in dilapidated apartment blocks. Starting on August 22 and continuing for three days and nights, gang of skinheads pummeled migrants and threw petrol bombs and Molotov cocktails at their residences. Thousands of onlookers cheered them on. The German neo-Nazi skinhead movement had burst into the national consciousness in the most provocative fashion, at once escalating fears and fantasies of race war.<sup>125</sup>

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123 Combat 18, “Which Way Now White Man?,” *Strikeforce*, no. 1, circa 1997, Series 12, Sub-Series 12, box 2, Searchlight Archive.

124 Combat 18 flyer, n.d., Series 12, Sub-Series 12, box 2, Searchlight Archive.

125 On Hoyerswerda and Rostock, see Panikos Panayi, “Racial Violence in the New Germany 1990–93,” *Contemporary European History* 3, no. 3 (1994): 265–87; Ester Adaire, “This Other Germany, the Dark One: Post-Wall Memory Politics Surrounding the Neo-Nazi Riots in Rostock and Hoyerswerda,” *German Politics and Society* 37, no. 4 (2019): 43–57; and Landis MacKellar, “*Ausländerfrei!* The Hoyerswerda Pogrom, 1991,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no.1 (2025): 210–20. Skinhead bands beyond Germany seized on the riots as an exemplar of action and valorized them in song. See,

As these movements and modes of violence coalesced, the skinhead movement served as a conduit to war in Eastern Europe. In the early 1990s, neo-Nazis affiliated with Combat 18 and Blood & Honour made their way to splintering Yugoslavia, where they joined and fought alongside Serbian and Croatian forces.<sup>126</sup> Their ranks comprised Germans, Americans, Britons, Austrians, and others, and they viewed the struggle in stark political and racial terms. No matter which side they joined, Croat or Serb, they believed they were helping save white civilization against alien Muslim enemies. As one volunteer who served with the Croatia Defense Association explained, “Even though political warriors at home have enough urgent tasks to perform, we view the support of the valiantly fighting and suffering Croatian people as an important issue.”<sup>127</sup>

Although the impact of the neo-Nazis on the Yugoslav wars was negligible, their presence stemmed from the diffuse patterns of collaboration that had come to define the transnational white power movement at the close of the twentieth century. In the early 1990s, stories of the war in Yugoslavia circulated through white power publications in the US and Europe, suggesting that new lands were now ripe for white supremacist mobilization. Indeed, far-right groups in the West were thrilled by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. For many white power leaders and ideologues, the Cold War had divided white peoples in the West and East for too long. But now the end of the Cold War raised hopes for a great unmixing of the world’s peoples through the establishment of ethnostates.<sup>128</sup> In that regard, ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia—as well as Chechnya—foretold the arrival of a long-awaited outcome.<sup>129</sup> Speaking about the potential for vast bloodshed in his country, one Norwegian right-wing leader claimed, in a mix of fear and anticipation, that “Norway will become the next Yugoslavia.”<sup>130</sup> Many others felt the same.

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for instance, No Remorse, “Barbeque in Rostock,” *Barbeque in Rostock*, ISD Records, 1996.

126 See “Yugoslavia: Fascists Get In On the Act,” *Searchlight*, October 1991, 18; “Yugoslavia: Nazi Legion Goes to War,” *Searchlight*, November 1991, 16. “Yugoslavia: Neo-Nazis Behind Journalists Death?,” *Searchlight*, April 1992; “Germany’s Secret Balkans Plan,” *Searchlight*, July 1992, 12–16; and “Fascist Mercenaries Fight for Serbs,” *Searchlight*, August 1993, 14.

127 Lee, *Beast Rearwakens*, 297–98.

128 See the four-part series on “Russian Nationalist & Separatist Organizations” that ran in *White Aryan Resistance* from June through September 1994 in UMLSC.

129 See “Fascist Terror Boils Over,” *Searchlight*, October 1992, 18–21; “Former Soviet Bloc Ravaged by Nationalism” *Searchlight*, January 1992, 16–17; “How Jews Inflamed the Balkans,” *White Aryan Resistance*, May 1994; Dragan Petrovic Bajba, “From Serbia,” *White Aryan Resistance*, February 1995, UMLSC; “From Chechnia with Love by an Associate,” *White Aryan Resistance*, January 2003, RCMSU. Bosnia remains an important zone of neo-Nazi and far-right organization and violence. See Hikmet Karcic, “Bosnia and Herzegovina Is Fertile Ground for the Far Right,” *Newsweek*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/bosnia-herzegovina-fertile-ground-far-right-opinion-1579508>.

130 Carl Hagen quoted in “Nazi Jailed for Refusing Military Service,” *Searchlight*, March 1993, 22.

Even though the transatlantic contingent of neo-Nazis had mainly fought against Muslims in Yugoslavia, many in the broader white supremacist movement admired Islamist terror groups whose campaigns against the United States escalated in the early 1990s. Violent Islamists intrigued white power leaders not only for the use of decentralized violence but also for their hostility to the state of Israel, which Islamists and neo-Nazis identified as the head of a global Jewish conspiracy. Neo-Nazi affinity for Islamist violence reached a peak after the car bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. The explosion killed six people and injured thousands. If the bomb had been slightly more powerful or positioned closer to the concrete foundation, it would have demolished the central support columns of the North Tower and sent it crashing into the South Tower, destroying both and killing tens of thousands of people. Tom Metzger, leader of White Aryan Resistance, was impressed and inspired. “A handful of Arab Semites did more damage in one operation than the entire racial right-wing has accomplished in decades,” he wrote. For too long, “misguided young Aryans” had been throwing “their lives away on absolute suicide missions” or doing “decades of prison time for having machine guns they will never fire and grenades they will never throw.” Meanwhile a “few so-called inferior ragheads” caused massive “panic with one operation. Had these people been a bit more sophisticated, the entire center would have collapsed in a pile of New Order rubble.”<sup>131</sup> As Metzger’s comments suggested, Islamist radicals such as Ramzi Yousef, who had plotted the attack with only minimal connection to formal Islamist groups, embodied the kind of leaderless resistance that white supremacists could and should enact. Yousef’s choice of target and weaponry and his desire to inflict mass destruction—these were the things to follow.

## Conclusion

In all these ways, visions of race war—the circulation of stories and strategies, fears and fantasies, means and missions—wove the fabric of the global white power movement after 1945. Over time, this activity became increasingly decentralized. Rather than a single overarching organization such as the World Union of National Socialists, it took shape as a set of loose and overlapping networks. It flew under the radar of state authorities and was therefore hard to slow or stamp out. Coursing through the channels of “deviant globalization,” it forged the common language and strategies through which white supremacists enacted violence in pursuit of a transnational campaign to defend or reclaim white power worldwide.<sup>132</sup> It pulled disparate groups and actors together

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131 Tom Metzger, Editorial, *White Aryan Resistance*, May 1994, UMLSC. See also “Can We Learn from Hamas,” *White Aryan Resistance*, December 1994, UMLSC.

132 I borrow the notion of “deviant globalization” from Nils Gilman and his edited volume on illicit markets in oil, animals, body parts, drugs, sex, weapons, and other commodities. See Gilman,

and guided young men—including many veterans and aspiring warriors—into white supremacist politics. And it drew heavily on the memories and metaphors of war that connected the battlegrounds of Rhodesia, Central America, Northern Ireland, and Yugoslavia with the apparent decline of white societies in the United States, mainland Britain, and Europe. In the view of many in the white power movement, each place was but one battleground in a planetary race war.

The multifaceted and increasingly interconnected global white power movement of more recent decades stemmed from these roots. Starting in the mid-1990s, the emergence of the internet dramatically enhanced the ability of leaders and activists to connect, collaborate, and disseminate their ideas globally—often without leaving their home countries.<sup>133</sup> In conjunction with an ever more globalized mass media landscape, the internet also helped popularize the strategy of leaderless resistance, producing a mimetic process of copycat violence that stretches from Robert Mathews to Timothy McVeigh to David Copeland to Dylan Roof to Anders Breivik to Brenton Tarrant, with many others in between, and that includes more structured terrorist cells such as Germany’s three-person National Socialist Underground. They were not “lone wolves” but rather members of a decentralized movement that spanned states, nations, and borders.<sup>134</sup> Whether deeply embedded or only loosely connected, they all saw themselves as soldiers in a global struggle to save the white race.

As in earlier years, visions of global race war remained bound up with actual war. Nowhere was this clearer than in the global “war on terror,” which amplified militarized thinking and action and further eroded the boundaries between war at home and abroad.<sup>135</sup> Through it, white supremacists found new enemies—Islamists in particular, Muslims more generally—who joined the old cast of villains: leftists, communists, immigrants, and non-whites. At the same time, varied armed conflicts in northern Africa and the Middle East triggered swelling flows of mainly Muslim refugees into Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States, heightening white supremacist fears of

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*Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st Century* (Continuum Books, 2011).

133 As one American activist put it, cyberspace allowed white supremacists to “spread ourselves across the planet” since no one could “arrest our thoughts.” Carl Abrahamson, “Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace,” *White Aryan Resistance*, March 1996, UMLSC.

134 See Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, “The New Face of Global White Nationalist Terror,” *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2015; Kathleen Belew, “There Are No Lone Wolves: The White Power Movement at War,” in *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, ed. Kathleen Belew and Ramón A. Gutiérrez (University of California Press, 2021), 312–24.

135 See Michael Sherry, *The Punitive Turn in American Life: How the United States Learned to Fight Crime Like a War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Osamah F. Khalil, *A World of Enemies: America’s Wars at Home and Abroad from Kennedy to Biden* (Harvard University Press, 2024); and Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (Verso, 2015).

invasion and replacement.<sup>136</sup> Large-scale wars—particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan—left behind a substantial pool of combat-experienced veterans, which far-right and white supremacist groups on both sides of the Atlantic sought to recruit. Many veterans who joined up were inclined to view their own societies through the prism of war and were eager to undertake warlike action against domestic enemies. In recent years, the Atomwaffen Division, a neo-Nazi “accelerationist” terror group, has worked to recruit veterans in its quest to overthrow the US government by fomenting mass unrest and race war.<sup>137</sup> A similar story has unfolded in Canada, Britain, Germany, and other countries where far-right movements have sought out veterans or worked to radicalize active-duty soldiers.<sup>138</sup>

From this vantage, the Azov Battalion and its network of overseas supporters and allies does not appear to be particularly novel. Rather, it signifies the culmination of a historical process that dates back nearly seventy years. For decades, white supremacists have mobilized for real and imagined combat in defense of a shared racial identity that, although rooted in blood and soil, transcended national borders. Grasping the full dimensions of this requires a global frame of understanding.

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136 Such fears had deep roots, stretching back to the age of decolonization, but they gained more adherents across the right around the turn of the twentieth century. Two influential iterations are Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (St. Martin's Press, 2001); and Renaud Camus, *Le Grand remplacement* (David Reinharc, 2011). On the impact of the “great replacement” and notions of “white genocide,” see Sarah Bracke and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar, “The Politics of Replacement: From ‘Race Suicide’ to the ‘Great Replacement,’” in *The Politics of Replacement: Demographic Fears, Conspiracy Theories, and Race Wars*, ed. Sarah Bracke and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar (Routledge, 2023), 1–19.

137 US Congress, Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on Armed Services, *Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military—How to Stop It?* 116th Cong., 2nd Sess., February 11, 2020, Report no. HASC 113-63 (US Government Printing Office, 2021); A. C. Thompson, “Ranks of Notorious Hate Group Include Active-Duty Military,” *ProPublica*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/atomwaffen-division-hate-group-active-duty-military>; Christopher Mathias, “Army Investigating Soldier’s Alleged Leadership In Neo-Nazi Terror Group,” *HuffPost*, May 3, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/atomwaffen-division-army-soldier-investigation-corwyn-storm-carver\\_n\\_5cb5350e4b0e4d7572fde38](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/atomwaffen-division-army-soldier-investigation-corwyn-storm-carver_n_5cb5350e4b0e4d7572fde38).

138 Philip McCristall, David C. Hofmann, and Shayna Perry, “The Nexus of Right-Wing Extremism and the Canadian Armed Forces,” in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada in the United States*, ed. Ryan Scrivens, Jeff Gruenewald, and Barbara Perry (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 409–42; Claudia Wallner, Jessica White, and Simon Copeland, *Defending Our Defenders: Preventing Far-Right Extremism in UK Security Forces* (Royal United Services Institute, 2024), <https://static.rusi.org/defending-our-defenders-final-proof.pdf>; Ben Quinn, “Attractiveness of British Military for Far Right Continues to Be a Threat,” *Guardian*, May 31, 2021; Peter Kuras, “How Right-Wing Extremists Infiltrated Germany’s Armed Forces,” *1843 Magazine (Economist)*, October 21, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/10/21/how-right-wing-extremists-infiltrated-germanys-armed-forces>; and Florian Flade, “The Insider Threat: Far-Right Extremism in the German Military and Police,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 5 (2021): 1–10.

## ARTICLE

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## “Chased from the Mainstream”

### *Tito Perdue and Far-Right Fiction Read via Bourdieu’s Field Theory*

SOF SABBIONI

University of Basel

**Abstract:** *This article examines the transformation of the position of far-right fiction writer Tito Perdue in the transnational and US-based book business from the 1990s to the early 2020s using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field. It considers the author’s career as a case study to examine how the transnational far right set up its own publishing infrastructure in the late 2000s following its exclusion from the mainstream literary world and turn toward metapolitics. Enabled by new possibilities brought about by the digital revolution, these actors gained visibility, while increasingly embracing their outsider position by capitalizing on what Bourdieu describes as the anti-commercial principles of the field. Faced with the problem of insufficient consecration by the literary establishment from which they have been ostracized, people like Greg Johnson of the multimedia project Counter-Currents have created an elaborate network of far-right cultural counter-institutions to obscure their actual lack of symbolic capital. While these events have launched Perdue from a struggling writer to one of the most widely published literary authors of the contemporary anglophone far right, the article concludes that the avant-garde performance of these metapolitical actors remains, obscuring their dominated position within the field.*

**Keywords:** Tito Perdue, Greg Johnson, far-right fiction, Pierre Bourdieu, literary field, metapolitics

This article examines the transformation of the position of white supremacist and neo-Confederate fiction writer Tito Perdue in the transnational and US-based book business using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the *literary field*. It analyzes Perdue’s rise from struggling to publish to becoming one of the most widely published authors on the US literary far right.<sup>1</sup> This change reflects the wider far right’s metapolitical

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1 The “far right” is understood here as defined by Cas Mudde (2022, 103), incorporating both the extreme right (i.e., antiliberal and antidemocratic) and radical right (i.e., antiliberal but still democratic).

shift to establishing its own counter-institutions in order to avoid exclusion from the mainstream mechanisms of literary production and dissemination.

The twenty-first-century rise of a transnationally connected far right has been analyzed by researchers from a variety of disciplines (e.g., Mudde 2019; Sedgwick 2019; McAdams and Castrillon 2022; Hermansson et al. 2020; Maly 2024). However, an area that has received only sparing attention is far-right fiction, despite its role in mythmaking and its affective potential. Pioneer of literary anthropology Wolfgang Iser notes that the dichotomy of fact and fiction is unhelpful, as fiction must be understood as “a means of overstepping the given, which is bound to cause a transformation of what is” (1989, 268). Far-right fiction, Christoffer Kølvrå and Bernhard Forchtner write, is thus not only a way of “imagining alternative worlds” but always contains an element of “seepage—from a space of play/fiction to one of life/reality—of desires and fantasies, anxieties and hopes, identification and enmities, now no longer merely imaginary, but imagined as real” (2025, 6). An example of this porous boundary in far-right fiction is the antisemitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which was received as true by some readers even after proof emerged that it was largely plagiarized from earlier works of fiction, and which still inspires the far right today (Segel and Levy 1996; Jacobs and Weitzman 2003). While generally considered relatively harmless when compared to, say, political manifestos, far-right fiction has the potential to move readers, radicalize them, and, in rare cases like William Luther Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries* (1978), inspire individuals and groups to commit acts of violence.

This article focuses less on the contents of this fiction than on the changing conditions enabling its production and dissemination. Considering his publishing history as a case study of the new opportunities available to far-right articulations of culture, I trace Perdue’s career back to the early 1990s, showing how the “metapolitical turn” of the far right (Ravndal 2023, 2121) influenced his rise. Perdue has moved from being barely able to publish his numerous manuscripts in the 1990s and 2000s to becoming one of the contemporary anglophone far-right literary authors with the highest visibility.

In this article, I want to make four points concerning Perdue’s career as a far-right writer and the evolution of the metapolitical far right’s relationship to the transnational US literary field: (1) Perdue was only able to attain his current level of visibility within the US far right because of transnational metapolitical publishing projects such as *Arktos* and *Counter-Currents*; (2) using what Bourdieu characterizes as the inverse logic of the literary field and its emphasis on anti-economic principles, Perdue and others are able to capitalize on their marginal position within the field; (3) in the early 2010s these far-right cultural institutions set up their own infrastructure that imitates the mechanisms necessary for what Bourdieu (2009, 167) terms “consecration,” that is, the granting and transferal of literary legitimacy and

symbolic capital; and (4), they have created a microcosm within the literary field consisting of publishers, literary journals, and literary prizes, which have the function of “*anti-institutional institutions*,” meaning that they define themselves in opposition to the dominant institutions of the literary field (258, original italics). Hence, this article does not give a systematic overview of far-right publishing nor an empirical field analysis but interprets one author’s changing position in the literary field as a paradigmatic example of the broader metapolitical development of the transnationally connected US far right.

The article is divided into four parts. After briefly elaborating on the far right’s metapolitical development, the first section introduces Perdue and his work, and outlines his publishing history. The second part theorizes the globalized US literary field in relation to Bourdieu’s field framework and considers how the digital revolution created new opportunities for the dissemination of far-right literature. Then, the article considers the way Perdue and other far-right cultural actors like US-based publisher Greg Johnson emulate the strategies of the mainstream literary field. Finally, it considers how Perdue’s career as a writer of far-right fiction illuminates the larger literary far right’s development from exclusion to capitalizing on their counterposition.

### **Background: Metapolitics**

The globally linked far right has increasingly adopted a metapolitical approach as one of its main strategies (Ravndal 2023; Maly 2024; Bures 2023; Hermansson et al. 2020; Teitelbaum 2019). The concept of “metapolitics” was first articulated in the 1960s by French New Right thinker Alain de Benoist and his think tank GRECE (Groupement de Recherche et d’Études pour la Civilisation Européenne / Research and Study Group for European Civilization) (Camus 2019, 74), appropriating Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as articulated in the *Prison Notebooks*. This “right-wing Gramscism” (Van Kranenburg 1999, 14), based on the idea that cultural and ideological hegemony and the creation of consent by the bourgeoisie precede and underlie political dominance, is just one of the many “appropriations of leftist language and postures” that accompanied the repackaging of the post-World War II far right (Bures 2020, 36). It proved to be a fruitful approach. Faced with the difficulty of normalizing far-right politics after the world had witnessed the horrors of the Shoah (Mudde 2019, 10–11), these movements were in a defensive position and forced to play a long game by focusing on ideas, culture, and institutions rather than street actions and parliamentary politics. Roger Griffin argues that the novelty and efficiency of the French New Right’s approach lay in the “regular appearance in quality newspapers and academic press of its disquisitions on a vast range of issues . . . based on an ‘anti-egalitarian,’ ‘anti-materialist,’ ‘anti-universalist,’ ‘anti-

individualistic worldview” (2000, 45). Ico Maly claims that the French New Right’s metapolitics is more indebted to Richard Wagner’s cultural nationalism and Armin Mohler’s idea of the interwar Conservative Revolution than to Gramsci, and that metapolitics was originally conceived as an intellectual movement for an elite and not a general strategy. Thus, they focus solely on ideas at the expense of the underlying materialist and class analysis of Gramsci’s theorization (Maly 2024, 67).

Jacob Ravndal has quantitatively and qualitatively demonstrated that metapolitics has become the prevalent strategy of the twenty-first-century revolutionary right. He explains its adoption of this strategy as being facilitated by “(1) limited opportunities for armed resistance; (2) a subcultural style shift from violent skinheadism to bookish Identitarianism; and (3) new opportunities for promoting alternative worldviews online” (2023, 2121). As will become clear, the accessibility of digital technology played a key factor in the transformation of the US far right in the literary field. Ravndal (2023, 2130) describes this strategic development as the “metapolitical turn” of the 2000s and 2010s, which has widely influenced the appearance and rhetoric of a transnationally connected far right. This is visible in the emergence of groups such as the Europe-based Generation Identity movement and the alt-right in the US, which have received a lot of media attention for their purportedly more palatable aesthetics and rhetoric, generally replacing neo-Nazi symbolism with appealing graphics and memes (Hermansson et al. 2020, 15). This change in style rather than content was embodied by Richard Spencer, whose preppiness was a constant point of debate in much media coverage of the movement in the mid-2010s. Twenty-first-century far-right activists and thinkers such as Identitarian Martin Sellner, author of *Regime Change from the Right* (2023), and publisher Daniel Friberg, author of *The Real Right Returns* (2015), have articulated their own updated versions of de Benoist’s theory, with metapolitics becoming the “common ground” for a plethora of different far-right groups, political parties, and activist individuals (Maly 2024, 81). Examples of applied metapolitics are the founding of digital media enterprises, the organization of cultural events, and, relevant for this article, the creation of publishing houses.

Importantly, despite the approach’s focus on culture and nonmilitant activism, metapolitics bears a “dormant violent potential” as it is a “pre-revolutionary” strategy that has historically been accompanied by violent and terrorist actions (Ravndal 2023, 2139). Further, while future research will determine the influence metapolitics has had on what Cas Mudde (2022, 104) calls the “mainstreaming and normalization” of far-right politics in the twenty-first century, it is undeniable that contemporary far-right parties and politicians incorporate, consciously or not, some metapolitical elements in their emphasis on shifting the boundaries of the acceptable. Relatedly, metapolitical groups have actively supported far-right parliamentary struggles, visible, for instance, in the symbiotic relationship between Sellner and the far-right party Alternative for Germany (Hahne 2024).

The notion of metapolitics has influenced the sale and distribution of far-right literature in the US and elsewhere, as has recently been shown by Anna Karakatsouli (2025) in relation to Greece. Figures such as Spencer at the now defunct far-right think tank National Policy Institute, writer Tomislav Sunić, Daniel Friberg at his publishing house Arktos, and Greg Johnson of the publishing and media project Counter-Currents are among those who can be credited with popularizing metapolitics in the US (Hermansson et al. 2020, 15–16). Arktos and Counter-Currents will be briefly introduced below. As mentioned, the North American metapolitical movement greatly overlaps with the alt-right. However, these US activists have not succeeded in devising a truly American version of metapolitics, instead mostly cherry-picking elements from the European New Right while ignoring disagreements, such as the latter’s anti-Americanism and frequently deliberate de-emphasis on race (18). Furthermore, in relation to their intellectual forefathers, the alt-right variant of metapolitics is “sorely lacking in originality, depth, and sometimes even understanding of the ideas they co-opt” (19).

Metapolitics has become the key principle of internationally connected anglophone far-right book production and distribution. However, while it provided the ideological foundation, it was only with the advent of new self-publishing technology in the late 2000s that literary production on a larger scale took off. The almost simultaneous founding of the far right’s two major metapolitically motivated publishing and media companies—Arktos and Counter-Currents—which coincided with the launch of Amazon’s self-publishing services, testifies to that. Perdue’s career took a new turn with the emergence of these publishing houses, which launched him from a struggling writer to one of the most widely published literary authors of the contemporary anglophone far right.

### **Tito Perdue: The Career of a Far-Right Writer over Three Decades (1991–2021)**

Tito Perdue (born 1938), a self-proclaimed “problematic author” and member of the white supremacist, neo-Confederate, and pro-secessionist League of the South, has written over twenty novels to date.<sup>2</sup> Most of them feature Lee Pefley, the author’s alter ego, a misanthrope depicted at various stages of his life but always trying to resist what the books describe as post-1950s degeneracy. In their monograph on far-right fiction, Kølvrå and Forchtner characterize Perdue’s novels as pervaded by a sense of nostalgia expressed in mourning for lost rural Southern spaces and “bourgeois patriarchy” (2025, 28, 123). Descriptions of small towns are connected to

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2 For Perdue’s self-description, see “Welcome,” Tito Perdue (personal site), accessed February 18, 2025, <https://titoperdue.com/>. See also “League of the South,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/league-south/>.

the palingenetic yearning for a golden age (29), and are contrasted by the perceived decadence of the “postmodern,” which includes queerness, Black people in formerly segregated spaces, women who do not meet the protagonists’ tradwife standards, and rock music (Perdue 2014b).

Contrary to the often straightforward and artistically unremarkable writing that characterizes a lot of contemporary anglophone far-right fiction, Perdue writes in a peculiar style that renders his texts easily recognizable: In his sentences, the subject and main verb are often doubled (“He daren’t, dare not Reuben, to possess himself . . .”) (Perdue 2014b, 203). Also, the subject is frequently omitted (“Wanted a delimited country . . .”), which results in a supposedly sophisticated and somewhat archaic prose style (207). Further, the same idiosyncratic expressions are repeated throughout the novels, for instance that since the 1950s women have decided to “be like men” (208). The books are written in an ironic and “humorous’ tone” (Kølvraa and Forchtner 2025, 94). Humor and irony, which became key ingredients of far-right discourse with the advent of the alt-right, preemptively defend against charges of racism and other forms of discrimination. Kølvraa and Forchtner note that another characteristic of Perdue’s writing is episodes where the protagonist—almost exclusively a man—looks at people around him in disgust, followed by racist, misogynist, and generally dehumanizing “disdainful observation[s]” of their misconduct (94–95). The following, from Perdue’s 2014 novel, *Reuben*, is a good example: “He saw a woman who, very obviously, had been implanted with one of the new vibrators. Saw people who looked like baboons. Saw a child slurping on the snot that rilled her upper lip” (Perdue 2014b, 208). The reader, adopting the protagonist’s focalization, (involuntarily) becomes complicit in sharing this sentiment.

The novels are interspersed with occasional acts of violence, with *Reuben* probably the most explicit example. *Reuben* tells the story of Lee’s protégé, Reuben, orchestrating a violent racial and sexual cleansing of the US, and the installment of what is essentially a white ethnostate in the “Northern Hemisphere,” which is something Perdue has advocated on his blog (Perdue 2012). While most of Perdue’s novels do not relate the genocidal fantasies that can be found in the books of some of his peers (e.g., the Northwest series by neo-Nazi Harold Covington), his texts are permeated by explicit racism, heterosexism, antisemitism, and a South-specific traditionalism. This clear political alignment is reflected in Perdue’s publishing opportunities.

While Perdue’s career as a published author spans over three decades, with the first novel, *Lee*, published in 1991 and the most recent in 2021, the majority of his novels were published in the 2010s. Figure 1 gives an overview of the publication timeline of Perdue’s novels. Several works have been reprinted by different publishers. If a book has undergone several print runs or different editions within the same publishing company, only the date of the first is listed.

TITLE	YEAR	PUBLISHER	LATER EDITIONS
<i>LEE</i>	1991	FOUR WALLS EIGHT WINDOWS	OVERLOOK PRESS, 2007 ARKTOS, 2019
<i>OPPORTUNITIES IN ALABAMA AGRICULTURE</i>	1994	BASKERVILLE PUB.	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2023
<i>THE NEW AUSTERITIES</i>	1994	PEACHTREE PUB.	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2023
<i>THE SWEET-SCENTED MANUSCRIPT</i>	2004	BASKERVILLE PUB.	ARKTOS, 2019
<i>FIELDS OF ASPHODEL</i>	2007	OVERLOOK PRESS	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2023
<i>THE NODE</i>	2011	NINE-BANDED BOOKS	
<i>MORNING CRAFTS</i>	2012	ARKTOS	
<i>REUBEN</i>	2014	RADIX/WASHINGTON SUMMIT PUB.	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2022
<i>THE BUILDER (WILLIAM'S HOUSE I)</i>	2015	ARKTOS	
<i>THE CHURL (WILLIAM'S HOUSE II)</i>	2015	ARKTOS	
<i>THE ENGINEER (WILLIAM'S HOUSE III)</i>	2016	ARKTOS	
<i>THE BACHELOR (WILLIAM'S HOUSE IV)</i>	2016	ARKTOS	
<i>CYNOSURA</i>	2016	COUNTER-CURRENTS	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2020
<i>PHILIPP</i>	2017	ARKTOS	
<i>THE PHILATELIST</i>	2017	COUNTER-CURRENTS	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2020
<i>THOUGH WE BE DEAD, YET OUR TIME SHALL COME</i>	2017	COUNTER-CURRENTS	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2020
<i>THE BENT PYRAMID</i>	2018	ARKTOS	
<i>THE SMUT BOOK</i>	2019	COUNTER-CURRENTS	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2020
<i>THE GIZMO</i>	2019	COUNTER-CURRENTS	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB., 2020
<i>LOVE SONG OF THE AUSTRALOPITHS</i>	2020	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB.	
<i>MATERIALS FOR ALL FUTURE HISTORIANS</i>	2020	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB.	
<i>JOURNEY TO A LOCATION</i>	2021	ARKTOS	
<i>VADE MECUM</i>	2021	STANDARD AMERICAN PUB.	

**Figure 1.** List of all published books by Tito Perdue (1991–2021).

The frequency of publishing, the dates of publication, and the profiles of the publishing houses shine a light on the effect of the far right's metapoliticization on the opportunities for ideologically aligned writers. The lengthy list of twenty-three books arguably creates an impression of legitimacy: For someone to publish so many books in the US they must be an accomplished writer, regardless of the nature of the publishing

houses or the books' literary quality. The first step in creating respectability is founding publishing houses that produce an illusion of social acceptability and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 17).

What is notable is the increasing frequency of publications: In the 1990s, three novels were published, and just two in the 2000s, all of them by small independent houses with ideologically inconspicuous profiles. Judging by descriptions of these early novels, their publication was possible because the texts did not yet carry the explicit far-right content that would come to define the later novels. Perdue also does not seem to have been publicly associated with any far-right groups at that point. In the 2010s, things changed, with eighteen books published between 2011 and 2021. At first glance, this seems to be the effect of an immense artistic productivity. It was made possible, however, because many of the books were written beforehand (Johnson 2017). Perdue has been committed to novel writing full time since the early 1980s.<sup>3</sup> What changed, then, was the willingness of others to publish his work.

### **Perdue and the Publishers**

The first indication of the turning point is the publication of *The Node* in 2011 by Nine-Banded Books. This small imprint describes its books as “exist[ing] at the murky borderlands, at the prickly edge of acceptable discourse where no dogma is safe” (“About Nine-Banded Books,” n.d.).<sup>4</sup> In practice this means books ranging from studies about the historical Jesus to open Holocaust-denial literature. Its founder, Chip Smith, was interviewed by Greg Johnson from Counter-Currents, which the latter explained by saying that he wanted to acquaint himself and his audience “with a colleague in Alt-Right publishing” (Johnson 2013b). Smith mentioned that it was Perdue who contacted him and asked whether Nine-Banded Books wanted to publish his novel. After Smith indicated that Perdue’s reputation might suffer from being associated with the press, Perdue reportedly replied that “he had already written himself into a corner and to hell with the big houses anyway” (quoted in Johnson 2013b). This quote illustrates the counter-institutional self-presentation of much of the twenty-first-century literary far right.

After 2011, the books were issued by publishers with explicit far-right and metapolitical profiles: Arktos, Counter-Currents, Washington Summit Publishers, and Standard American Publishing Company (SAPC), the latter of which reprinted

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3 “About Tito,” Tito Perdue (personal website), accessed February 18, 2025, <https://titoperdue.com/tito.php>.

4 “About Nine-Banded Books,” Nine-Banded Books, accessed May 6, 2024, <https://www.nineband-edbooks.com/about-nine-banded-books/>.

several of Perdue's works in the early 2020s. The increase in publication is connected to structural changes in the far-right book business, specifically to the forming of the biggest and most important anglophone and transnational far-right publishing houses and multimedia projects, Arktos and Counter-Currents. While this article does not provide a full or empirical field analysis, these publishers are briefly introduced here, as especially Counter-Currents' and SAPC's involvement in Perdue's career illuminates the mechanisms of the metapolitical far right.

Washington Summit Publishers, now disbanded, was a "white nationalist publisher specializing in eugenics, anthropology, and human biodiversity," led by alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer (May and Feldman 2018, 29). It was founded in 2005 as part of what was to become the leading alt-right hub, the National Policy Institute, and both ventures were heavily funded by white supremacist millionaire William Regnery II ("The New Racialists" 2006).

Arktos, founded in 2009 by Swedish former neo-Nazi Daniel Friberg, is widely credited with being the largest contemporary distributor of far-right literature and has been fundamental to the metapoliticization of the movement (Valencia-García 2020; Teitelbaum 2019; Hermansson et al. 2020; Burley 2020; Schaeffer 2018). Friberg, who had a metapolitical approach to far-right politics before he ever encountered the term, is a key figure in the gradual intellectualization and turn toward Identitarianism that the transnational far right underwent in the early 2010s (Teitelbaum 2019, 260). The physical relocation of the publishing house with its "aggressive metapolitics" (Bures 2020, 49) reflects this role: Founded in Denmark, Arktos moved its base to India, then Budapest, and is now led from Sweden, the UK, and Washington, DC, with its editors and contributors working from across the globe (Valencia-García 2020, 305). The initial books published reflected who would become the favorite thinkers of the twenty-first-century metapolitical far right—works by Julius Evola, Guillaume Faye, and de Benoist are presented in aesthetically appealing copies and English translations.

Counter-Currents is an explicitly metapolitical multimedia project that was cofounded in 2010 by Greg Johnson and Michael Polignano, but it is really the former's personal project (Macklin 2019, 204). Johnson, who has become one of the most important US-based metapolitical actors, formed Counter-Currents with the idea of introducing European New Right thought to the US, and he planned on the publishing house's first books being English translations of French New Right theorists (Macklin 2019, 206; Hermansson et al. 2020, 15). When Arktos was quicker to do that, Johnson had to conceive a new profile for his publishing house and hoped to find a way of working with Arktos (Macklin 2019, 206), which became impossible due to numerous feuds between the two heads (Lawrence 2019).<sup>5</sup> Counter-Currents'

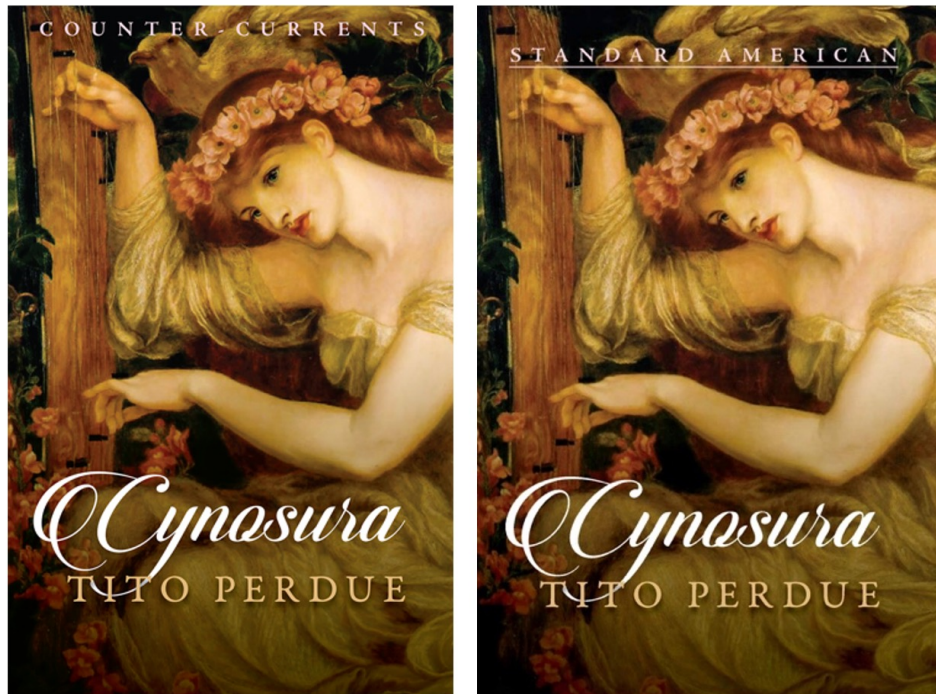
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5 On recent feuding within Arktos, which may presage a new split in far-right publishing, see Piero Gayozzo, "A Threatening Rupture in Postfascism? Arktos Media vs. Constantin von Hoffmeister," *On the*

slogan became “Books Against Time,” which refers to the characterization of Hitler as a “man against time” by the esoteric fascist Savitri Devi, whose revival in US far-right circles is attributed to Johnson (Hermansson et al. 2020, 243). Devi’s books, alongside many others by various authors, prominent among them Perdue, can be bought from the website’s shop. Many of Counter-Currents’ books are authored and/or edited by Johnson himself, sometimes under his pen name, Trevor Lynch, most notably *The White Nationalist Manifesto*, which has been translated into several European languages.

Today, Counter-Currents hosts several forms of media—not only countless articles with daily updates, but also a podcast. Counter-Currents is different from other metapolitical and New Right projects in that Johnson does not shy away from openly engaging with National Socialism (see the introduction to Sedgwick 2019, xxi–ii). It presents itself as in touch with both high and pop culture (Macklin 2019, 216). In a sense, Counter-Currents mirrors elements of online alt-right pop culture and fuses this with academic pretense. Counter-Currents has been hit by a series of deplatformings from several payment services over the years, the worst coming from PayPal after the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville (Maly 2024, 267), which left protester Heather Heyer dead and several others injured. It is difficult to estimate how widely read Counter-Currents actually is. In its (apparently most recent) publicly available newsletter from August 2021, Johnson states that, between January and August of that year, the website had between 246,560 and 453,940 unique visitors each month (Johnson 2021).

In contrast, there exists very limited public information about Standard American Publishing Company, though it can be seen that it is located in Brent, Alabama, where Perdue presumably lives today on his family’s property (“Opportunities,” n.d.; Noble 2008). Also, it has only ever published his books. This makes it seem like SAPC is a self-publishing imprint formed to disseminate Perdue’s work. Perdue’s involvement in the ownership is supported by the fact that all SAPC reprints of former Counter-Currents publications look the same as their originals, except for the name of the publisher on the cover. Only an agreement between Johnson and Perdue could explain the use of the same design and format for the later editions, which is made plausible by their mutual support (“Novel Takes,” n.d.; Johnson 2024). The appearance of SAPC also coincides with Counter-Currents’ announcement that it will be retiring from book publishing in 2020 (“It’s Okay,” n.d.). While this has since turned out to be untrue, it would explain the founding of SAPC as ensuring the availability of Perdue’s work.



**Figure 2.** The two versions of Perdue's *Cynosura*, the first one published by Counter-Currents (2016), the second one by Standard American Publishing Company (2020).

The structural changes in far-right publishing, enabled by the digital revolution that accompanied the metapolitical turn, made it possible for the majority of Perdue's books to be published and disseminated much more widely in the 2010s, with several of them having second editions to date. During that time, he was discovered by metapolitical far-right actors, deemed useful, and given a platform. Perdue thus went from barely being published in the 1990s and 2000s to being fully embraced by the metapolitical publishers, which, in turn, allowed the writer to openly embrace far-right positions. The founding of these institutions had a profound impact on his place in the book business and changed the trajectory of his career. Indeed, the founding of Arktos and Counter-Currents coincided with the discovery of Perdue, and resulted in him being collectively stylized into a sort of cultural trailblazer for the far right. Johnson, in a review of Perdue's *Morning Crafts*, describes Perdue's value and the importance of the new publishing houses:

[British far-right cult figure] Jonathan Bowden once said that the overwhelming decadence of our culture does not mean that the creativity of our race has disappeared. It has simply been marginalized and disprivileged. Thus there must be great white novelists, painters, poets, composers, and other creators out there. We simply have to find them, publish them, and promote them. We have to create new

cultural spaces where the greatness of our people can flourish. Tito Perdue is proof of this. Chased from the mainstream, he continued to labor in solitude until the New Right finally caught up with him. He has now found a community of writers, publishers, and readers who love his work and wish to share it with the world. You, dear reader, need to join them. (Johnson 2013a)

Johnson emphasizes the urgency of creating “new cultural spaces” for far-right artists whose presence is not tolerated in the “mainstream.” He also stresses the importance of the far right having its own publishing houses: Once these artists have been spotted, they need to be published and promoted—which is what publishers do. These publishing houses made it possible for Perdue to find, in Bourdieu’s words, his “*natural place*” within the literary field, whose prior absence rendered him “more or less condemned to failure” (Bourdieu 2009, 165, original italics). Because the logic of the literary field predetermines a position for each cultural actor, the creation of what Johnson calls a “community of writers, publishers, and readers” where someone like Perdue is favorably received was a necessary component of the metapolitical far right’s strategy (165).

Perdue’s books were only made available to a larger audience once the far-right publishers Counter-Currents and Arktos were founded. What Johnson describes as “the New Right finally [catching] up” with Perdue would not have been possible without the founding of the two publishers. Nor would Perdue have found a “sympathetic public” (Bourdieu 2009, 165), whose consolidation throughout the 2010s enabled subsequent publication through an unknown (and probably self-publishing) imprint. Indeed, according to Bourdieu’s theory of the development of the literary field, a marginal position can be capitalized upon, as Johnson observes in judging positively Perdue’s exclusion from the “mainstream.”

### **A Bordieuan Analysis of the Metapolitical Far Right in the Globalized US Literary Field**

In Bourdieu’s field theory, consideration of literary productions should not be made in isolation but in reference to their position in the greater literary field and to the “social conditions underlying the production of the work and those determining its function” (Bourdieu 1993, 140). To contextualize Perdue’s career and the emergence of far-right literary institutions, I will here briefly outline the state of the globalized US book business and introduce Bourdieu’s field theory. While Bourdieu’s framework is informed by a qualitative and quantitative approach, this article’s focus is purely qualitative due to the inaccessibility of most data related to far-right publishing.

In his book *Big Fiction*, Dan Sinykin argues that the US publishing and book market as we know it today is the result of several decades of conglomeration. Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the focus at US publishing houses

shifted from what they understood as advancing culture to the “neoliberalization of publishing” (Sinykin 2023, 21). Big publishers started swallowing up smaller houses, all but eliminating independent publishers and merging into the “Big Five” of Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Simon & Schuster, and Hachette Book Group. With the last big merger in 2013, when the German mega-conglomerate Bertelsmann acquired Penguin and Random House, Bertelsmann now holds almost 40 percent of the Big Five’s revenue (2). These developments show that literary fields are not mainly structured by national processes anymore as in Bourdieu’s theory but are increasingly shaped by globalization, which recently has caused literary sociologist Gisèle Sapiro to speak of a “*transnational literary field*” (2020, 487, original italics).

In general, actors in this globalized US literary field, and especially publishers, have shied away from more explicit and violent forms of far-right literature.<sup>6</sup> While this might have various causes—lack of quality, fear of repercussions, or not wanting to give a platform to far-right content—it leaves the literary and metapolitical far-right and its writers in a tight spot, as the dissemination of their texts has long been made difficult. Carol Mason documents the existence of a US tradition of institutionalized and influential right-wing literature since the 1960s, which includes Barry Goldwater’s *Conscience of a Conservative* (1960) and Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)—a tradition that continues today (2018, 1–22). The more extreme far-right producers of literature, however, have historically had no other choice but to self-publish their books (Kaplan 2018, 504). Until recently this was connected to the high cost of printing infrastructure, and dissemination remained limited. Pierce’s aforementioned *The Turner Diaries* was first serialized in *Attack!*, a journal produced by his National Alliance party, and then self-published in book form (510) and sold through what Pierce himself called the “underground market”—via his own National Vanguard Books, at gun shows, and through ads in magazines (quoted in Griffin 2001, 141). Until the 2000s, far-right fiction was either not published at all or self-published and passed from “hand to hand through the magic of mail order and the availability of a mimeograph or Xerox copier,” often with a very limited reach (Kaplan 2018, 504).

The advent of the internet and the concomitant accessibility of commercial self-publishing solved many of these problems for the metapolitical far right. After publishing conglomeration stabilized in the 1990s, the next big change was the 2008 financial crisis and the almost simultaneous launching of Amazon Kindle, which was accompanied by the rise of the e-book and Amazon’s affiliate program. Once the book world understood how to adapt to that change, e-books and Amazon simply became

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6 It must be noted, though, that several of the Big Five have “conservative” imprints. Simon & Schuster’s Threshold has published books by right-wing figures such as Rush Limbaugh, Ben Shapiro, and Donald Trump; and Penguin Random House’s Sentinel bears titles by Abigail Shrier, Nikki Haley, and Marco Rubio. Many of these publishers focus exclusively on nonfiction texts and seem to shy away from including writers openly associated with fascism and neo-Nazism, such as Evola, Friberg, or Johnson.

part of how the conglomerates operated. One change that Amazon brought about, however, is the popularity of self-publishing: In the US, the number of self-published books grew from ten thousand in 2000 to over a hundred thousand in 2020 (Sinykin 2023, 212, 217).

Geoff Boucher and Helen Young note the importance of these new digital possibilities for the production and dissemination of far-right literature (2023, 141). In particular, print-on-demand services made it significantly easier for far-right writers to publish their texts in book form (143). Though he had uploaded a couple of his novels to the internet in 1999, the aforementioned Covington (2005, 175), a dinosaur of US neo-Nazi activism and a literary trailblazer, claimed that it was only in 2000–2001 and through a print-on-demand company that he “had the incredible experience of publishing a lifetime of literary work in a period of about eighteen months.” He concluded that likeminded writers will no longer need huge amounts of money for printing, storing, and reprinting, noting that these companies seem to not care about the contents as long as they get their money (176).

Given the profit-driven nature of the contemporary literary field, the results of globalization, neoliberalization, and digitization on literary production have significantly transformed the transnational far-right book business. Most of Counter-Currents’ and Arktos’s books and countless others with far-right contents are available not only on Amazon but via mainstream booksellers like Barnes & Noble—indicative not necessarily of these businesses’ far-right views but of the neoliberal logic of a globalized US literary field, where even fantasies of racial genocide can be made into a commodity as long as they create profit. Amazon in particular has received repeated criticism from activist groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Hope Not Hate, and from journalists, for its reluctance to remove books containing far-right ideology, which it only does after substantial pressure from the public (Diamond 2022; Dewey 2015; Hayden and Gais 2022; “Turning the Page” 2018). Despite its content policy banning different forms of intolerance, Amazon was providing a stable platform and source of income to publishers like Counter-Currents through its affiliate links program. It only stopped following an article by the *Washington Post* in 2015 (Dewey 2015), even though the SPLC had been alerting Amazon about the connection for years (Partnership for Working Families and ACRE 2018, 5). To this day, Amazon continues to sell most books by Counter-Currents, Arktos, Washington Summit Publishers, and other explicitly far-right publishers and authors.

The results of globalization on the availability of far-right literature have been recognized by the producers themselves: Arktos’s new website bears the slogan “Making Anti-Globalism Global Since 2009,” which, while perhaps inflating its reach and importance, is not a bad summary of its efforts. Ironically, reaching an international community was only possible, as Louie Dean Valencia-García writes, by “heavily rel[ying] upon technology and globalism to both communicate amongst each other and to connect to potential customers” (2020, 311). Through these developments,

far-right actors have formed what Valencia-García, drawing on Benedict Anderson, calls “digital imagined communities” (309). However, this kind of literature and the structures enabling it occupy a marginal position in the literary world: books by Arktos and Counter-Currents remain niche, and non-far-right actors, not to mention the Big Five, rarely interact with them.

In the world of literature, though, this relative exclusion is not necessarily a bad thing. Bourdieu, in *The Field of Cultural Production* and *The Rules of Art*, puts forward a theory of the fields of cultural production as structured by an “inverse economy” based on the rules of “symbolic goods” (Bourdieu 2009, 141). Tracing how the French literary field gained its relative autonomy from political and economic pressure in the late nineteenth century, Bourdieu argues that the literary field is part of the greater “field of power” and the social space (161). In this greater power structure, the literary field is in a dominated position (215). Today it is structured by two opposing poles, or “modes of production and circulation obeying inverse logics” (142). One is an “economic’ logic” that treats literature like any other good in the market and is interested in generating as much profit in as short a time as possible, while the other pole relies on an “anti-‘economic’ economy of pure art” (142). This, in a way, is reflected in Sinykin’s characterization of the US book market as “split in two, into popularity and prestige” since the 1980s (Sinykin 2023, 43).

I argue that it is this second principle of “pure’ art” that the cultural far right is able to (ab)use to gain legitimacy within the world of literature (Bourdieu 2009, 148). The “autonomous” pole, which producers of far-right culture are closer to, is based on an “inversion of the fundamental principles of the field of power and of the economic field” and is characterized by a “disinterestedness” in economic capital, like in the “game of loser takes all” (216–17). It favors smaller structures of literary production and “tends to pit success and intrinsic artistic value against each other” (146). Literature close to this pole is considered rich in symbolic capital, which, in the long run, can be transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu 1993, 75) and is especially prestigious in a literary field characterized by a high level of commercialization. The metapolitical far right’s exclusion from the mainstream book business, structured by neoliberalization and profit-driven conglomeration, can be worn as a badge of honor. However, even the most “revolutionary” and “pure’ art” has to “secure for itself the ‘economic’ means to realize an ambition irreducible to the ‘economy’” (Bourdieu 2009, 148–49). In the case of far-right literature, this in part means securing the financial means from acceptable right-wing businesses.

The field’s inversed logic allows dominated producers “to make of temporal failure a sign of election and success a sign of compromise” (Bourdieu 2009, 217), while drawing on the tradition of the “cursed artist” who has been misjudged by the institutions and field actors of their time (219). This history of the field lets “writers without publications or even without a public play on the ambiguity of the criteria of success which allows them to confuse the elected and provisional failure of the ‘cursed artist’ with the naked

failure of the simply unsuccessful” (219). Thus, Perdue and other metapolitical actors are able to capitalize on their marginal position within the literary field. In the above quote by Chip Smith, the Nine-Banded Books editor, Perdue’s defiant stance recalls the posture of this cursed artist, where failure to secure a contract with “big houses” (quoted in Johnson 2013b) is entangled with notions of “pure production,” or uncompromised art mostly produced for other producers (Bourdieu 1993, 121). Importantly, this is often but a performance. Perdue specifically seems to hold a grudge against the publishing world that rejected him repeatedly: In a 2013 speech for the H. L. Mencken Club, Perdue complained that publishers have “become parts of conglomerates and are interested solely in being able to report good profits to their ownerships[, which deem it] more profitable to publish mid-brow pulp aimed at well-dressed semi-educated feminist career women domiciled in the big coastal cities” (Perdue 2014a). In the novel *Reuben*, several episodes describe the protagonist disgusted or in tears of laughter after reading passages from contemporary fiction, while one passage describes Reuben violently punishing “the country’s most egregious publishers, editors, and mainstream readers” for their incompetence (2014b, 257). The performance of economic disinterestedness is often combined with an instrumentalization of the alleged political repression these writers are under, even though their books are widely available from mainstream booksellers. They can present themselves as part of a misunderstood avant-garde, regardless of the actual quality of their products. Some of these writers and publishers are thus able to posture as the vanguard of a right-wing cultural revolution and of literature in general.

Claiming avant-garde status, however, is not sufficient for the creation of authority, which the metapolitical far right needs if it wants to be successful in its endeavor. If these producers want their literature to be read widely, they also need to gain the larger field’s approval to heighten their visibility, gain symbolic capital and literary authority, and demonstrate that their works of literature are, in fact, literature.

### **The Far-Right Consecration Loop**

“I’m an old-fashioned person, I like books, and I think there’s something added, value added, when you bring out an actual physical book. . . . All these things have been published on the internet before . . . for free, but I think putting them between covers gives them a sense of legitimacy and it gives them a new life.”

—Greg Johnson (2025)

Because of their position of relative exclusion, proving their value is not easy for far-right producers of culture. Bourdieu posits that in any field of artistic production the *illusio*, the “collective adhesion to the game that is both cause and effect of the existence of the game,” is enabled by the “charismatic” belief in the creator, the “apparent producer” of a work of art (2009, 167). In his anti-charismatic theory, it is not the writer, however, who creates that value “but the field of production as a universe of belief” (229). A work

of literature does not exist as such “unless it is known and recognized” by other actors endowed with the necessary symbolic capital (229). Bourdieu writes that

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the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, i.e., *inter alia*, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorized to call themselves writers; or, to put it another way, it is the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products (we are dealing with a world of belief and the consecrated writer is the one who has the power to consecrate and to win assent when he or she consecrates an author or a work—with a preface, a favourable review, a prize, etc.). (Bourdieu 1993, 42, original italics)

The founding myth of the author as sole creator of a literary text hides the fact that behind the writer, there stands a whole network of other agents who consecrate them. This is echoed in Sinykin’s description of contemporary US literature: “Conglomerate ownership, conglomerate authorship” (2023, 21). Value is given to a book through the “collaboration” of various actors of the field, who in turn are consecrated by the same network (Bourdieu 2009, 169). Consecration thus emerges in “relationships” of these various participants of the literary field, and it is cyclical (168). Hence, an assessment of the network that surrounds actors in the field is the next step in trying to understand the mechanisms of legitimization in the globalized far-right book business.

Far-right writers like Perdue have for a long time been excluded from most forms of consecration. His consecration as an author, at least in far-right circles, relied on the founding of Arktos and Counter-Currents, what Bourdieu would call the “creator[s] of the creator” (2009, 168). The mere publication of his books, however, is not sufficient to consecrate Perdue: Firstly, more actors than the editors or publishers are needed to grant legitimacy; and secondly, the publishing houses and their editors’ symbolic capital also stems, in turn, from consecration. In order to understand how authority is created on the metapolitical far right, the different agents of the US literary field and their relationships must be analyzed. By considering Perdue, one can argue that far-right producers are aware of their relative “displacedness” (165), and that as a response they imitate the discourse and strategies of consecration of the US mainstream literary field that mostly excludes them.

This short biographical note on Perdue by Greg Johnson, which accompanied a review of the 2023 reissue of Perdue’s novel *Opportunities in Alabama Agriculture*, illustrates this imitation:

[Tito Perdue’s] first novel, 1991’s *Lee*, received favorable reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Reader*, and *The New England Review of Books*. In addition to the present volume, his novels include *The New Austerities* (1994), *The Sweet-Scented Manuscript* (2004),

*Fields of Asphodel* (2007), *The Node* (2011), *Morning Crafts* (2013), *Reuben* (2014), the *William's House* quartet (2016), *Cynosura* (2017), *Philip* (2017), *Though We Be Dead, Yet Our Day Will Come* (2018), *The Bent Pyramid* (2018), *The Philatelist* (2018), *The Smut Book* (2018), *The Gizmo* (2019), *Love Song of the Australopiths* (2020), *Materials for All Future Historians* (2020), *Journey to a Location* (2021), and *Vade Mecum* (2021)—which have been praised in *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, *The Quarterly Review*, *The Occidental Observer*, and at *Counter-Currents*. In 2015, he received the H. P. Lovecraft Prize for Literature. (“Opportunities,” n.d.)<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, the text follows the norms of authorial biographical notes. The first sentence mentions that Perdue’s first novel, *Lee*, was positively reviewed by three mainstream periodicals, which was possible because, in the words of neo-Confederate editor Thomas Fleming, these reviewers “seemed to miss . . . the obvious fact that Lee was the most reactionary fictional hero since Ignatius in John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*” (Fleming 1996). And while these reviews were indeed positive, what is not mentioned is the fact that, in similar journals, *Lee* was also negatively discussed. A *Publishers Weekly* review describes the novel as “sink[ing] under the weight of its own pretensions” (“Lee” 1991). The selective naming of these periodicals gives Perdue an aura of legitimacy, and the authority and cultural capital associated with traditional media is invoked and transferred to the writer via the reviews.

The long list of books creates the impression of high literary productivity, which supports the hunch that the first step toward legitimacy and consecration by the far right is founding its own publishing houses, which feign social acceptability and generally “function as a label of quality” (Sapiro 2003, 454). After this list, four journals and media projects are mentioned that favorably reviewed Perdue’s novels: *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, *The Quarterly Review*, *The Occidental Observer*, and *Counter-Currents*. In contrast to the ones named at the beginning of the paragraph, these are neither well known nor renowned because they are explicitly far-right publications. Their structural entanglements with each other give insights into the consecration mechanism of the far right, which is why, with the exception of *Counter-Currents*, they will be introduced briefly here.

*The Quarterly Review* was a far-right magazine headed in the late 2000s and early 2010s by literary author Derek Turner, an Irish neo-Nazi with close ties to the US (Collins 2022). Turner reviewed one of Perdue’s novels, while Turner’s own novel—including a preface by Perdue—had been published by Washington Summit Publishers (Turner 2008). *Chronicles* is a paleoconservative periodical published by

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7 The publication dates given here at times differ from the ones I found to be correct (see figure 1).

the Charlemagne Institute (“Charlemagne Institute” 2023), which merged with its original publisher, Rockford Institute, in 2018 (Foley 2019). Its editor in chief is Paul Gottfried (“Editorial Team” 2022), former mentor of Richard Spencer. Until 2015, Thomas Fleming headed the magazine for thirty years (Beirich and Potok 2004). Fleming is also the founder of League of the South, where Perdue is a member (“Obiter Dictum” 2015). The mention of *Chronicles* invokes far-right cultural capital accumulated over generations. There also exist ties to more traditional publishing: Henry Regnery, the founder of the ultraconservative Regnery Publishing empire, previously sat on the boards of directors of *Chronicles* and the Rockford Institute in the 1980s and 1990s (Carlson 1996).

*The Occidental Observer* is a web journal championing pseudoscientific racism headed by the academic antisemite Kevin MacDonald. The online publication comes out of the Charles Martel Society, which was founded and funded by Henry Regnery’s nephew, the late white nationalist and multimillionaire William Regnery II. This “heir to the Regnery publishing fortune” (“Occidental Observer” 2012) in the late 1990s “set up and fund[ed] a network of racist and antisemitic groups, websites, publishers and conferences” (“William H. Regnery II,” n.d. ). He also openly embraced the idea of a white ethnostate and founded the aforementioned National Policy Institute.

What is striking here is the legacy of right-wing publishing that backs several of these publications from the 2000s and 2010s. Not only can knowledge and already established connections be used, but generations of old money back Perdue’s consecration. The SPLC describes Regnery as a “right-wing publishing dynasty that continues to wield tremendous influence among both mainstream conservatives and far-right extremists” (“William H. Regnery II,” n.d. ). The founder Henry’s father, William H. Regnery, cofounded the isolationist and partially pro-fascist America First Committee (Beirich and Potok 2004). His grandson, the aforementioned William Regnery II, is credited with having funded much of US white supremacist activism in the twenty-first century until his death in 2021. William II’s cousin Alfred, heir to the publishing house, distanced himself from the more extreme William on the grounds that the latter is “obviously racist” (Roston and Anderson 2017). But the Regnery family and the influence of their business demonstrate a closeness between conservatism and the far right in the US that reflects what Mudde identifies as the increasingly “[p]orous boundaries” between the two (2022, 104).

While the interpersonal entanglements are numerous, a lot of the effort behind Perdue’s consecration comes from the same few people. This results in what I term a *consecration loop*, which creates the illusion of an endorsement by more actors than are actually involved. Various figures give him their approval, while they in turn are consecrated by the same few actors, who are granted legitimacy by the former, and so on. An attempt at visualizing some of these connections and the consecration loop can be found in figure 3.



By including reviews of Perdue's books, these journals and media projects participate in the consecration of the author. Some of the reviews were even written by other far-right literary authors like Tomislav Sunić or Johnson, which increases the symbolic capital transferred. It is through them that the "artist who makes the work is himself made" (Bourdieu 2009, 167), and the work of art is "made not twice, but hundreds of times, thousands of times, by all those who have an interest in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, decoding it, commenting on it, reproducing it, criticizing it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it" (171). The entanglements make visible what happens all over the globalized far-right book business: A far-right author, in this case Perdue, is published, disseminated, and reviewed by the same people, creating a self-reinforcing structure that uses the mechanisms of the literary field to consciously create literary legitimacy and authority.

Because of the cultural far right's relative exclusion, what Bourdieu describes as consecration's cyclical nature is not only emulated but almost parodied, visible in the relationship between Perdue and Johnson (Bourdieu 2009, 168). Johnson has published, edited, reviewed (under his own name and a pseudonym), and prefaced several of Perdue's books. Perdue, in turn, has penned several blurbs for Johnson's nonfiction books (Johnson 2024; "Novel Takes," n.d.). The far-right network of consecration around Perdue also shows that he is seen as a great asset to the white nationalist cause, with several high-profile cultural figures betting on and investing in him. Indeed, Perdue is the fiction author with the most books published by both *Arktos* and *Counter-Currents*.

This is not to say that people like the Regnerys, Spencer, Johnson, Friberg, and many others actively work together—some of them do, some of them do not—but that they see similar efforts as useful and necessary. Still, even someone as prominent as Perdue is largely unknown outside of this sphere, which speaks to the nicheness of far-right literature. The consecration loop can be understood as a strategy to obscure the lack of field-specific capital, rather than as an adherence to the rules described by Bourdieu. The loop's creation reflects the recent history of the far right in the literary field, which went from being mostly excluded from both dominant and dominated literary institutions in the 1990s to, as will be addressed in the next section, founding its own counter-institutions in the mid-2000s, and consolidating them in the 2010s.

### **From Exclusion to Anti-Institutional Institutions**

As if we weren't already in the most serious civilizational crisis in the whole history of The West, consider how much more serious would be our plight in the absence of *Counter-Currents* and the sort of unafraid people like Greg Johnson. Fast forward a couple of generations and your grandchildren's textbooks (assuming our

demographic actually survives), will cite this publisher as one of those who were willing to stand against the diseases of our dwindling age.

—Tito Perdue (Johnson 2024)

The need for metapolitical far-right institutions to symbolically turn their cultural producers into artists and writers despite the defensive position they still occupy has led these houses and journals to present themselves in opposition to the structures that will not let them participate. I call these far-right institutions, following Bourdieu, “*anti-institutional institutions*” (Bourdieu 2009, 258, original italics). He uses the term to explain how producers at the dominated pole often build their own institutions in opposition to the ones structuring the dominant part of the field. Here, “freedom from institutions is found inscribed *in* those institutions” (258, original italics). And because of specific field movements, these new anti-institutional institutions might eventually become the next dominant institutions. Although Bourdieu only mentions this in passing, it is helpful when trying to conceptualize what the literary far right is doing, considering that the metapolitical goal of people like Johnson or Friberg diverges from their posture of cultural rarity and opposition. The tension between trying to gain cultural hegemony, their de facto marginal position within the literary field, and the field’s tradition of favoring anticommercial positions encouraged their building of counter-institutions.

The literary far right’s building of anti-institutional institutions is illustrated by the last sentence of Perdue’s biographical note. It mentions that he was awarded the H. P. Lovecraft Prize for Literature in 2015. Prize-giving is an important part of legitimization in literature (Bourdieu 1993, 101). Drawing on Bourdieu, James English argues that prizes are “a claim to authority” that create symbolic worth (English 2008, 51). Being awarded a prize named after another canonized author such as Lovecraft is a sign of distinction—until one takes a closer look, for the prize was bestowed by Counter-Currents. English writes that prize-giving is a way for institutions to control the field and determine what is considered good art, and that this necessarily provokes the forming of “hostile counter-groups” that create their own prizes (51–52). The Lovecraft is such a counter-prize. Its creation coincides with a similar far-right reaction to the mainstream US literary scene, the so-called Sad and Rabid Puppies campaign, which was an attack on the prestigious speculative fiction prize, the Hugo Award. Anna Oleszczuk describes in detail how, between 2012 and 2016, the award procedures were attacked for their supposed leftist bias. A campaign to get right-wing (e.g., Larry Correia) to far-right (e.g., Vox Day) writers awarded the prize was started through the involvement of alt-right figureheads like Milo Yiannopoulos (Oleszczuk 2017). Gregory Goalwin argues that “Puppygate” can be seen as an attempt at what Bourdieu describes as a “symbolic revolution” (Goalwin 2023, 3; Bourdieu 2009, 132). Symbolic revolutions emerge when the social field changes and actors within a specific field, endowed with the necessary forms of capital, use this moment to transform their

field (Goalwin 2023, 3). The campaign, fueled by the rightward shift in the lead-up to Trump's 2016 election, challenged the field's orthodoxy by openly gaming the award's procedures. Out of that cultural momentum, the Dragon Awards were founded as an alternative to the Hugos. One of the first Dragons was awarded to Nick Cole, who had just lost his contract with HarperCollins, allegedly over an anti-abortion scene in his tech dystopia novel *CTRL-ALT REVOLT!* (Cole 2019).

The Lovecraft Prize emerged out of a similar reaction. The World Fantasy Award, a prestigious award for fantasy literature since 1975, used to have a Lovecraft bust as the award trophy. This was contested in the early 2010s, when people began criticizing using the image of a writer known for his racist views and endorsement of fascism. When it was announced in 2015 that a new trophy would be used, this proved to be perfect feeding ground for the cultural branch of the far right. Johnson wrote in a blog post that Counter-Currents "saw this coming," and that Lovecraft's demotion prompted him to create the H. P. Lovecraft Prize for Literature "to be awarded to literary artists of the highest caliber who transgress the boundaries of political correctness" (Johnson 2015). The first award had been given to Perdue earlier in 2015. The award trophy, which is also a Lovecraft bust, was created by ceramicist Charles Krafft, a famous artist who was excluded from the mainstream art scene after being exposed as a white supremacist and Holocaust denier. Johnson wrote several articles about how Krafft had fallen prey to what he calls political correctness, conducted interviews with him, and later edited a posthumously published essay collection about Krafft titled *An Artist of the Right* (Krafft 2022).

This episode shows how the culturally interested far right founded institutions (prizes, publishing houses, journals, reviews, etc.) in opposition to the dominant ones from the late 2000s to the mid-2010s. Johnson specifically seems to possess a good instinct for exploiting cultural-political momentum and appropriating certain discourses for his own cause. Counter-Currents presents itself as a last refuge for artists shunned by the culture business because of their far-right views, capitalizing on the notion of censorship. Thus, in a description of the new award given to Perdue, Johnson writes:

As the Left continues to hollow out and destroy institutions, corrupt minds and culture, and denigrate white greatness in art, science, statecraft, and the culture at large, Counter-Currents and other New Right organizations will construct new institutions and honors to carry forward the greatness of European man. For us to carry on, however, we depend on the donations of readers like you. (Johnson 2015)

Declaring Counter-Currents one of the last bastions of "white greatness," Johnson presents the culture and literature business as ruled by leftist bias, which excludes great artworks; and he presents Counter-Currents as a white supremacist counter-institution. Indeed, this sentiment is inscribed in the very name of the project. This differs from Bourdieu's description of the avant-garde's anti-institutional institutions, as the far

right tries to free itself from the dominant institutions to be able to produce politicized forms of literature, not autonomous or “pure’ art” (Bourdieu 2009, 148). Freedom, here, means the freedom to spread white supremacist content, not, as in Bourdieu’s theory, freedom from bourgeoisie norms.

## Conclusion

The transnational metapolitical turn of the 2000s and 2010s has deeply impacted the standing of US far-right producers of culture like Tito Perdue. Thanks to the founding of far-right counter-institutions with a global reach, above all Counter-Currents and Arktos, Perdue has become something of a literary celebrity within ideologically aligned circles, with many important North American and European metapolitical figures having interacted with his work. The establishment of these cultural institutions has changed the trajectory of his career, and Perdue, after almost two decades of struggling to get his politically less explicit works published with small houses, finally found a Bordieuan “*natural place*” in the literary field (Bourdieu 2009, 165, original italics). The founding of counter-structures was necessary for the metapolitical far right and was the first step in creating respectability. Over the past fifteen years, they have been able to appropriate and (ab)use what Bourdieu describes as the specific mechanisms of the literary field. They rely on the anticommercial stance of the avant-garde and other producers close to the dominated pole of the field, capitalizing on this tradition to justify their literature in a field characterized by conglomeration and neoliberalism. Because of their exclusion from most literary institutions and thus mechanisms of consecration, they have set up their own structures to create authority and legitimacy,<sup>8</sup> which, on closer inspection, are enacted by only a handful of people, creating a far-right consecration loop that reproduces itself repeatedly. Several of the counter-institutions described here, which are defined in opposition to mainstream institutions, are dependent on old right-wing or far-right publishing money associated with the Regnery family. These institutions perform the role of refuges for far-right authors shunned and supposedly censored by society and most of the literary field. Despite culturally remaining in a dominated position, the metapolitical far right has established its own microcosm within the literary field. This reflects Eliah Bures’s observation that one of the European New Right’s “dual countercultural styles” is the taking of a “refugium” position (as opposed to a more militant “beachhead” stance),

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8 Anecdotal evidence from teaching a seminar about US far-right fiction suggests that this artificial consecration and institutionalization can have the desired effect on people unfamiliar with these structures and names. Thus, several students took this inflated performance at face value and commented on how, for instance, the H. P. Lovecraft Prize must be a sign that Perdue is considered a good writer by parts of the literary establishment. The creation of this infrastructure has also led to a steadily increasing scholarly engagement with this kind of literature, which also creates more visibility and, arguably, is in itself a form of consecration.

which, as a far-right post–World War II strategy, harks back to Evola and Armin Mohler, two New Right favorites (Bures 2020, 54).

However, using Bourdieu’s theory also has important limitations when it comes to these highly political actors. The forming of counter-institutions and claiming of an avant-garde tradition fundamentally contradict the metapolitical mission, which aims to conquer the cultural mainstream. These positionings are thus an instrumentalization of what actors like Johnson, consciously or not, recognized as the mechanisms of the literary field, while their actual goal is more in accord with the logic of the neoliberal market, or with what Sapiro describes as the “competition between publishers for the largest public that conditions the supply” (2003, 460). These metapolitical actors have understood how to play on the connection between belated success and failure, and to present political transgression as literary novelty. Their politics propel their activities, visible in the often bad literary and editorial quality of the books in question. This is not to say that far-right artists in general are incapable of producing artistically interesting works; one only has to consider Ezra Pound or Yukio Mishima. While Bourdieu’s extremely anti-charismatic theory—and, relatedly, his critique of taste (see Bourdieu 2002)—mostly disregards questions of artistic quality, it is undeniable that the current generation of writers published by these metapolitical houses is mostly lacking in artistic skill. They do not have what Sabine Cofalla describes as the “necessary stakes for the literary field” (2005, 359, translation mine). In these aspects, they diverge from Bourdieu’s theory as their avant-garde stance does not aim to introduce novelty to the field—many of their texts, and all of Perdue’s writing, adhere to realist standards—but rather relies on tried-and-tested artistic forms in their quest for hegemony. Setting up this literary structure is antithetical to the principles of pure art and is better understood as a far-right strategy that appropriates what it deems useful. The looming presence of explicitly political figures like Fleming, Turner, Spencer, and William Regnery II in Perdue’s consecration weakens the claim to symbolic capital in a field that values autonomy from politics and economics.

Thus, since the 2010s, actors like Perdue and institutions like Counter-Currents have not actually been perceived as avant-garde by anyone but themselves. Their self-presentation artificially inflates their actual significance within the literary field, reflecting Cofalla’s insight that when trying to understand internal “power struggles,” one should not take “group-specific games of deception” at face value (2005, 365, translation mine). Despite their improved situation since the late 2000s, US far-right literature, exemplified here by Perdue’s fiction, remains in a very dominated position in the literary field. As long as consecration remains within a far-right microcosm that is low in symbolic capital, this literature is not recognized as such by relevant actors. It is impossible to know how widely Perdue is actually read because of a lack of transparency regarding print and sales numbers, and also because of the easy and free downloadability of these texts from the Internet. However, the overwhelming lack of

engagement by field actors and the reading public suggests that Perdue's audience is relatively small.<sup>9</sup> In the US and elsewhere, other forms of media like television and social media are much more relevant in disseminating far-right thought, and the broader role of the internet in radicalizing people has been noted widely (Maly 2024; Ravndal 2023; Hermansson et al. 2020; Strick 2021; Leidig 2023; Blazakis 2022). These developments suggest that the idea of political struggles for dominance within the literary field is increasingly anachronistic. They also, to some degree, challenge Bourdieu's thesis that changes in the political field are reflected in the literary field, for Trump's election and the United States' subsequent shift toward the far right did little to improve these metapolitical actors' position, nor did it help far-right literature gain traction. In contrast, the effects of transnationalization and digitalization on the field cannot be denied, as in Arktos's mission to translate far-right thinkers into English, the language of globalization. The tension between the globalized nature of the far-right publishing business and the nostalgic imagery of a clearly localized Southern rurality that pervades all of Perdue's novels promises to be an interesting avenue for future research on the topic.

Finally, while a writer like Perdue and his arguably outdated style might never be consecrated by anyone outside of his own circles, and while Johnson and Counter-Currents remain too stigmatized for the larger field to engage with them, they can be considered trailblazers that paved the way for a newer generation of metapolitical-literary activists. In the 2020s, more companies with slick aesthetics and updated versions of far-right ideology are appearing. Newer publishing houses like US-based Antelope Hill and Passage Publishing are able to build on earlier achievements and avant-garde discourse. Thus, Passage Publishing, founded in 2022, publishes far-right icons like neoreactionaries Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land, and describes itself on its website as "an alternative to the increasingly closed-minded worldview of modern mainstream publishing." Indebted to decades of metapolitical struggle within the literary field is Passage's further declaration that "[e]nough on this topic has already been written. We take it as self-evident."<sup>10</sup> A 2023 article published by established leftist publisher Verso describes Passage and Yarvin as part of a "Right-Wing Avant-Garde" (Boyle 2023), indicating a new respectability that was not reached by Perdue and Johnson, or Arktos and Counter-Currents. This suggests that these actors' efforts, even if they did not come to fruition, provided a model for future generations.

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9 Judging from the low number of Amazon reviews, Perdue's books are not widely read. As of November 20, 2025, his most-reviewed novels are *Morning Crafts* and *Philip*, with thirteen and fourteen reviews respectively. The others have fewer than ten reviews, or none at all.

10 "About," Passage Publishing, accessed November 19, 2025, <https://passage.press/pages/about>.

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## God's Soldiers

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

ALEX MCPHEE-BROWNE

King's College, University of Cambridge

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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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 conceptual 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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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\\_FULLL.pdf](https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULLL.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 conservatism'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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup>

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-fascist, 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>10</sup>

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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.

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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.”<sup>12</sup> While economic themes remained a staple of his stump speeches, after

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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.<sup>13</sup>

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."<sup>14</sup>

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."<sup>15</sup> In 1963, Swift founded the Christian Knights of the Invisible Empire (CKIE), a Klan offshoot that emerged as a nexus of theological innovation and

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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.”<sup>16</sup>

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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.”<sup>17</sup>

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.”<sup>18</sup>

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

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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."<sup>19</sup>

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."<sup>20</sup>

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

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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."<sup>21</sup> In a 1960 speech, Goff claimed that "Hitler and Eichmann are both Jews," and asserted that "Six million Jews were never killed."<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup>

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."<sup>26</sup>

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."<sup>27</sup>

DePugh's 1966 manifesto, *Blueprint for Victory*, articulated a vision of America under imminent threat. The text'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."<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup> 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.'"<sup>31</sup> 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."<sup>32</sup> More troubling, these same Americans prove roughly twice as likely as others to believe political violence may

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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.<sup>33</sup> 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 antistatistism 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 antistatistism 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

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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.