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SYMPOSIUM ARTICLES

ASH ON THE SILLS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PATRIOT MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

David Neiwert*

I. INTRODUCTION

I remember a story a German professor of mine once told, on one of those sunny spring days all professors dread after a long gray winter. On this afternoon, the professor (who, I think, was rather fond of the curmudgeon's role) scanned the sun-drenched room, which remained sullenly silent in the face of his attempts to spur a discussion, saw us all slouching at our desks, and stopped. He set down his chalk and his book and looked at his feet. After a few moments more silence, he looked up at us and launched into a short history lesson.

When he was a young man, he told us, he served in the U.S. Army as part of the occupation forces in Germany after World War II. He was put to work gathering information for the military tribunal, which was preparing to prosecute Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. His job was to spend time in the villages adjacent to one concentration camp and talk to the residents about what they knew.

The villagers, he said, knew about the camp, and watched daily as thousands of prisoners would arrive by rail car, herded like cattle into the camp. Even though the camp never could have held the vast numbers of prisoners who were brought in, the villagers knew that no one ever left. They also knew that the

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smokestack of the camp's crematorium belched a near-steady stream of smoke and ash. Yet the villagers chose to remain ignorant about what went on inside the camp. No one inquired, because no one wanted to know.

"But every day," he said, "these people, in their neat Germanic way, would get out their feather dusters and go outside. And, never thinking about what it meant, they would sweep off the layer of ash that would settle on their windowsills overnight. Then they would return to their neat, clean lives and pretend not to notice what was happening next door."

"When the camps were liberated and their contents were revealed, they all expressed surprise and horror at what had gone on inside," he said. "But they all had ash in their feather dusters."

The professor looked out over the class, which now was more stunned than bored into silence. "We all like to think that what happened in Nazi Germany was something that occurred far away to people different from us, that it couldn't possibly happen here," he said. "But you're wrong. The German people are very much like us. If you don't believe me, all you have to do is look at yourselves now."

Silence fell over the class. Some of the students wore looks of disbelief, and a few shook their heads. The professor sighed, picked his book back up, and returned to his explanation of conjugation of verbs. When the lesson was over, I heard my classmates complain about Professor Reed's history lesson while exiting the room. "Why did he waste our time with that story?" one wondered. "That's not what he's paid to do," said another. "Who gives a damn about his opinion anyway? What a joke, comparing us to Nazi Germany."

I listened briefly and walked on my own way. The students may not have understood the professor's point, I thought, but they certainly were living proof of it.¹

I think about those students of the 1980s when I deal with the phenomenon of the Patriot movement in 1990s America, especially when I consider its significance and its sources. Americans today are like my college classmates and their German counterparts. When confronted with the hard reality and the

1. The professor was the late Dr. Eugene Reed, who taught German at the University of Idaho for over 20 years before retiring in 1986. None of Reed's former colleagues recall him retelling this anecdote, but his service time in the U.S. Army (1944-46) is consistent with the story.

immediate challenge the Patriots represent, they remain in denial. As the ashes of Oklahoma City, and the many other smoldering acts of violence the movement inspires, settle on our windowsills, we choose to merely sweep them off with our feather dusters and pretend it's nothing. And in doing so, we ensure that more ashes will fall.

We don't want to know about Patriots and militias and common-law courts because we can't be bothered with the rantings of right-wing ideologues. We don't think what they are doing is important until a bomb goes off somewhere and people are killed, or someone gets into an armed standoff with federal agents. Then we send out the media and they report on that day's event and wonder how it could happen. Before anyone can answer, though, we move on to the next day's disaster, feather-dusting yet another windowsill. No one makes the connections between the arsons of southern black churches and an armed standoff in Montana, between a pipe bomb at the Olympics and those used by bank robbers in Spokane.

Americans choose not to believe that what happened to Germany earlier this century could happen to them because it seems too horrible to contemplate; yet they underestimate the power of their own complacency, the desire and willingness to turn a blind eye to the violence that is growing within their own communities. It was this same trait that provided the fertile ground for Nazism in Germany, and now has allowed the politics of fear embodied by the Patriots to flourish in America's rural areas.

However, the Patriots are not Nazis, or even neo-Nazis. Rather, they represent a uniquely American brand of fascism. This is not a term I use lightly or facilely. This essay explains that the Patriot Movement not only fits precisely into the established socio-historical definition of fascism, but also that its significant growth in the nation's rural areas represents concrete advancement of the political agenda of the radical fascist right in America. These attributes of the Patriot Movement make it an important challenge to the nation's democratic foundations. Second, this essay details how the Patriot Movement has capitalized upon a nationwide groundswell of conservatism, while simultaneously taking advantage of widespread disenfranchisement in rural America. Finally, this essay explores the most effective demonstrated answer to the challenge the Patriots represent: the common-sense resistance of average people within our communities. This resistance, I will suggest, can only be made effective by: first, an awareness of the significance of the movement, and

second, by dismantling a society-wide bias that favors our urban areas at the expense of rural dwellers and by rediscovering our own rural values and roots.

II. THE PATRIOT MOVEMENT AS AN AMERICAN EXPRESSION OF FASCISM

A. *The Characteristics of Fascism*

There can be little mistaking the Patriot Movement as essentially fascist in nature. The beliefs it embodies fit the general definition of fascism: a philosophy of government that glorifies the nation-state at the expense of the individual² while also fitting the more particular definition of fascism offered by historians and sociologists, that is, a political ideology with a mythic core of populist ultranationalism, focused on an ideal of societal rebirth. As with previous forms of fascism, the Patriot Movement's affective power is based on irrational drives and mythical assumptions and its followers find in it an outlet for idealism and self-sacrifice. Its support, however, on close inspection, proves to derive from an array of personal material and psychological motivations.³

Patriot beliefs also perfectly embody the many traits of fascism as we have known it historically: the cult of tradition, the rejection of modernism, the belief in action for action's sake while simultaneously viewing the intellectual world with distrust, the view of disagreement as treason, the fear of difference, the appeal to a frustrated middle class, the obsession with an international conspiracy, the feeling of humiliation at the ostentatious wealth of their enemies, the belief that life itself is warfare, coupled with the rejection of pacifism, the contempt for the

2. This is the definition of fascism that most commonly appears in general references. *E.g.*, Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary 413 (1979).

3. See ROGER GRIFFIN, *THE NATURE OF FASCISM*, 26-27 (1991). Griffin, an Oxford historian, is widely credited as one of academia's foremost experts on fascism, and this text the definitive examination of its sources. In Chapter 2, "A New Ideal Type of Generic Fascism," Griffin appears almost to be describing the Patriot movement two years before it arose, particularly in his description of populist ultranationalism, which he says

repudiates both 'traditional' and 'legal/rational' forms of politics in favour of prevalently 'charismatic' ones in which the cohesion and dynamics of movements depends almost exclusively on the capacity of their leaders to inspire loyalty and action. . . . It tends to be associated with a concept of the nation as a 'higher' racial, historical, spiritual or organic reality which embraces all the members of its ethical community who belong to it.

Id. at 36-37.

weak, the glorification of heroism, with its inherent dynamic of creating an enemy,⁴ the rejection of "rotten" parliamentary governments coupled with a selective populism, and the use of Orwellian Newspeak to obfuscate their agenda and provide code words to the like-minded.⁵

This last trait is embodied in the very title the movement gives itself. Patriots, as their name suggests, like to claim a love of America and the Constitution, but in reality they are reactionary revolutionaries, seeking to eliminate the barrier between church and state and establish a fundamentalist theocracy.⁶ At the core of the movement, the goal is to establish a white Christian Identity theocracy. To get there, it is their wish to roll back the clock on the following advances in the nation's practice of democracy: the protection of civil rights for all citizens equally, the vote for women (and certainly their right to choose an abortion), even the abolition of slavery. Their agenda includes the utter destruction of such modern democratic innovations as progressive taxation, gun control, open international trade, affirmative action, and especially equal rights for gays and lesbians.⁷

4. See generally JAMES A. AHO, *THIS THING OF DARKNESS: A SOCIOLOGY OF THE ENEMY* (1994) (exploring the dynamic of hero versus enemy as central to the radical right and the Patriot movement).

5. See Umberto Eco, *Eternal Fascism*, *THE UTNE READER*, Nov/Dec 1995, at 57-59. Eco is an artist/philosopher with personal experience regarding fascism. While he is considered one of Europe's leading intellectuals, he is not technically an expert on the subject, but his summary of traits accurately reflects the same traits discussed by sociologists and historians, and it is useful for our descriptive purposes here.

6. See David Neiwert, *God and Country: How the Militia Movement Undermines Separation of Church and State*, *FREEDOM WRITER MAGAZINE*, July 1996, at 3 (discussing the theocratic agenda of the Patriot movement).

7. There is not complete agreement in the Patriot movement on these subjects, but there is a widespread antipathy among Patriot leaders toward "liberal" positions on them. A sampling of Militia of Montana positions on these issues is fairly representative: they are especially vociferous on the subject of gun control, claiming the Second Amendment is designed to provide for armed insurrection against the established government (see *Militia of Montana Information Networking Manual 2* (on file with the author), the bulk of which is dedicated to making this argument); they argue that free-trade measures such as the North American Free Trade Agreement are part of a "New World Order" conspiracy to impoverish and enslave Americans (Interview with John Trochmann, Leader of Militia of Montana [hereinafter MOM], in *Noxon, Mont.* (Nov. 15, 1994); and that gays and lesbians should be jailed under existing sodomy laws. See *id.*; see also PETE PETERS, *DEATH PENALTY FOR HOMOSEXUALS IS PRESCRIBED IN THE BIBLE* (1992). Virtually all Patriots, from MOM leader Trochmann to militia promoter and Identity minister Pete Peters to the Montana Freeman, believe the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution is a travesty that should be repealed, and consequently, they believe affirmative action is actually racist in nature. See John Trochmann's remarks on *Nightline* (ABC television broadcast, Apr. 3, 1996). The subject of progressive taxation is addressed in the MOM catalog, where books such as *WAR AND EMERGENCY POWERS* by Eugene

B. *The Twin Impulses of Revolution*

Revolutionary fervor is a feature the Patriots share with other fascists, especially the Nazis of post-Weimar Germany. Like Hitler's followers, the Patriot revolution has two fundamental, related impulses. The first impulse involves a destructive enterprise, which is essentially an outright revolt against civilization itself, particularly such "degenerative" humanist manifestations as democracy and parliamentary government.⁸ The second impulse involves a constructive enterprise, which is defined by the desire to build a new body politic in which white Christians have complete control.⁹

These similarities are not merely coincidental. The Patriot Movement is the manifestation of a parallel two-pronged strategy undertaken in the last decade by the self-proclaimed American radical right. The first prong involves attempts to subvert democratic institutions by forming secretive groups whose ultimate goal is to spread terror and the belief that the government no longer can keep people safe. This tactic is similar to that taken by the Nazis when they set the Reichstag ablaze in 1933 and perpetrated *Kristallnacht* in 1939. Both of these events had the effect of rebounding the blame onto the perpetrators' enemies.¹⁰ The second prong involves presenting a normative face,

Schroeder are advertised. Schroeder also speaks on the Patriot circuit, propounding the concept that the income tax is illegal, and that "sovereign citizens" are exempt from it. These are only evidentiary samples of these beliefs, which are widespread throughout the movement, and multiple examples can be found.

8. Note the frequent distinction Patriots make between a "Republic" and a "Democracy," suggesting a deep hostility to democratic principles. See MILITIA OF MONTANA, ENEMIES: FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC 6 (on file with the author). Some Patriots are outspoken in suggesting democracy is a failed system and must be replaced. See, for instance, the correspondence between Patriot attorney Kirk Lyons, who helped negotiate the end of the Freeman standoff with Alabama militia leader Mike Vanderboegh, in which Lyons baldly states: "Democracy in America is a farce and a failure [sic]. It has led us to the brink of a police state. Am I wrong?" Kirk Lyons & Mike Vanderboegh, (visited Aug. 21, 1996) <<http://unreconfed@aol.com>> (on file with the *Montana Law Review*).

9. See DANIEL J. GOLDHAGEN, HITLER'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS: ORDINARY GERMANS AND THE HOLOCAUST 455-58 (1996). Goldhagen's thesis—that the Holocaust was a unique event arising under unique circumstances—is often misinterpreted as suggesting that fascism was only possible in Germany at that time, when the recurrence of fascism in other places at other points in history clearly would disprove such a thesis. See *id.* Within the narrow parameters of the Nazi revolution itself, Goldhagen's thesis is probably accurate. The conditions he describes—a combination of fascism and eliminationism—as bringing about the Holocaust, though, are probably replicable under other circumstances, particularly with a different target and a different palingenetic myth.

10. See WILLIAM SHIRER, BERLIN DIARY: THE JOURNAL OF A FOREIGN CORRE-

appearing to share mainstream values by focusing on political discontent and avoiding matters of race and religion. Again, the Nazis adopted such a strategy when they railed against Jews and “degenerates,” while focusing on a bright Aryan future that would arrive when these influences were eliminated. The Nazis never described in detail what form such “extermination” would take.¹¹

1. *The Destructive Impulse*

The strategy of secret, subversive armed resistance and guerrilla warfare has a long history in the American radical right, dating back to the right-wing 1960s terrorist group called “The Minutemen.” A blueprint emerged in 1979 with the publication of *The Turner Diaries*; a novel that forecasts a future race war ending in the elimination of all minorities, Jews and “race traitors” in America.¹² Others in the radical right also urged violent underground activity. Robert Miles, for example, ran a Ku Klux Klan chapter in Cohoctah, Michigan, and frequently appeared at Aryan Nations gatherings in Hayden Lake, Idaho.¹³ He told the 1983 Aryan Congress, “[i]f we were half the men the leftists are,” referring to a recent Black Panther robbery, “we’d be hitting armored cars too.”¹⁴

Out of this rhetoric was born another organization called The Order. Before its yearlong campaign ended in a fatal, fiery FBI shootout with its leader Robert Mathews, The Order had piled up a string of robberies and pipe bombings, culminating in the assassination of radio talk-show host Alan Berg. The activities of this group made any leftist terror gangs look like kindergartners. Robert Miles, who was the beneficiary of some of The Order’s robbery-obtained wealth, continued to urge a stealth war, stating: “[i]nvisibility is a weapon. It is the characteristic of the Order It does work. It can work. It shall work again.”¹⁵

SPONDENT 1934-1941 (1988) (discussing life in Germany during the 1930s, as the Nazis tightened their grip on the nation). Nazis led by Hitler also attempted the military overthrow of the Weimar government in 1922. There are many accounts of this and other indications of the Nazis’ predisposition toward violence, though WILLIAM SHIRER, *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH* (1960) is probably the most authoritative and complete account from a general approach.

11. See GOLDHAGEN *supra* note 9, at 131-63 (examining the character and evolution of the Holocaust).

12. See WILLIAM PIERCE, *THE TURNER DIARIES* (1979).

13. See KEVIN FLYNN & GARY GERHARDT, *THE SILENT BROTHERHOOD: INSIDE AMERICA’S RACIST UNDERGROUND* 90-91 (1989).

14. See *id.*

15. Letter from Robert E. Miles to the Invisible Empire of the Knights of the

2. *The Constructive Impulse*

At the same time they sought invisibility, Miles and others developed a strategy for gaining broader mainstream appeal by presenting themselves as normal Americans. Miles urged his followers to keep a low profile and never to let their racist beliefs appear in conversation before a potential recruit had been brought along far enough. Similarly, Miles discouraged talk about violence: "Most Americans avoid trouble. Most already have trouble with dissimilar ethnic groups. Most do not want trouble. Yet when push comes to shove, even mice have teeth. Don't be the one to advocate violence."¹⁶

The smiling, normal face of the radical right was first presented in 1988 by former Klansman David Duke when he ran for the presidency on the Populist Party ticket, with Bo Gritz as his original running mate. A year later, Duke was elected to the Louisiana Legislature, and in 1990 was only narrowly defeated for a Louisiana seat in the U.S. Senate. In fact, he collected a majority of the state's white votes, but was swamped by black voters who chose the incumbent J. Bennett Johnston.¹⁷ However, Duke's limited victories were relegated to a single state, while the leaders of the radical right remained in search of a larger national following.

Even neo-Nazis began to realize that their emphasis on racial issues was hurting their cause. At the 1990 Aryan Congress, John Trochmann¹⁸ urged his compatriots in the radical

Ku Klux Klan, *THE KLANSMAN*, Sept.-Oct. 1988, reprinted in JAMES RIDGEWAY, *BLOOD IN THE FACE* 104 (2d ed. 1995).

16. Robert E. Miles, *The Outrek* (Outrek, Cohoctah, Mich.), Jan.-Feb. 1991, at 6. This newsletter was geared to "white racialists" who were considering moving to the Pacific Northwest to establish a "white homeland," a concept Miles advocated heavily before his death in 1992. See *BLOOD IN THE FACE* (First Run Features 1991) (a documentary featuring a weekend retreat at Miles's Cohoctah home. Several of the speakers caught on film advocate the Northwest Aryan Nation, (a map is shown for its suggested borders)). The film also contains a debate sparked by a Southerner who said he had no intention of leaving his home country. See *id.*

17. See JAMES RIDGEWAY, *BLOOD IN THE FACE* 164-75 (2d ed. 1995).

18. Trochmann claims he only spoke to the Congress about "morality" and that he was there to preach to the Aryans about not abusing their wives. Interview with John Trochmann, Leader of Militia of Montana, in Noxon, Mont. (Nov. 15, 1994). But his account does not square with witnesses who were present for the speech, including current and past Aryan Nations staff members. One of these, Floyd Cochran, left the movement 1992 and became an advocate against hate groups. His recollection of the speech during an interview with the author provides the basis for this description. Telephone interview with Floyd Cochran (Sept. 26, 1996). See also MORRIS DEES & JAMES CORCORAN, *GATHERING STORM AMERICA'S MILITIA THREAT* 88-90 (1996); *Racist to the Roots: John Trochmann and the Militia of Montana*, SPECIAL REPORT

right to drop the Nazi symbolism, Hitler worship and Klan robes, and revert instead to things Americans can relate to: the Constitution, the American flag, and the Bible. It was more important to talk about politics, he said, because race was a turnoff to most ordinary citizens.

3. *The Impulses Combine*

The twin impulses of the Patriot Movement coalesced in 1992 in the structural strategy that former Klansman Louis Beam outlined for Christian Identity minister Pete Peters for a gathering in Estes Park, Colorado. Beam advocated leaderless resistance, the formation of small cells of like-minded Christian Patriots into diffuse militia units that would be difficult to infiltrate. He also advocated creating a movement that could not be toppled from the top. Within the year, militia groups were springing up around the nation, particularly in the Pacific Northwest.¹⁹

Beam's strategy worked well for both prongs of the fascists' drive for power. The violent underground warriors now had a formal structure that soon manifested itself in the clique of conspirators, men with no formal connection to Beam and only informal ties to anyone else in the Movement's national leadership. These groups worked in small numbers, like Timothy McVeigh and Mike Nichols²⁰ who are accused of bombing the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, as well as in groups like The Order, but calling themselves the Phineas Priesthood and the Aryan Republican Army.²¹ At the same time, this strategy provided a form for the essentially political units of the public face of the Militia Movement, attracting followers by tapping into mainstream discontent and arming themselves as a response to what they saw as encroaching government oppression. Thus, the Patriots are able to weaken the foundations of popular approval for democratic institutions by exposing the public's vulnerability to the threat of violence, and, at the same time, gaining wider acceptance in the political arena. This strategy is similar to that of the Nazis during their ascent in 1930s Germany.²²

(Coalition for Human Dignity, Portland, Or., and Montana Human Rights Network, Helena, Mont.) 1995, at 6.

19. See DEES & CORCORAN, *supra* note 18, at 49-67.

20. See KENNETH S. STERN, *A FORCE UPON THE PLAIN: THE MILITIA MOVEMENT AND THE POLITICS OF HATE* 179-199 (1996).

21. See generally DEES & CORCORAN, *supra* note 18.

22. Goldhagen observes that popular German reaction to Nazi violence remained

Most significantly, the Patriots' nominal normalcy, particularly their focus on political issues that often cross into mainstream conservatism, has enabled them to recruit people otherwise disinclined (or forthrightly opposed to) racist or violent agendas. Once recruited, these followers are drawn into a kind of alternate universe populated by evil government conspirators and sheeplike citizen-slaves. The Patriots' decentralized revolution, after all, is essentially a belief system rather than a system of organizations. And these beliefs also have a tendency to eventually spin out of control, as once-normal citizens begin engaging in activities ranging from armed standoffs with federal authorities to constructing pipe bombs in their basements.²³

II. NAZISM DISTINGUISHED

A. *The Theocratic Impulse*

While there are striking similarities, it is important to distinguish the Patriots from their fascist forebears, especially the Nazis. The Patriots do not worship race or an ideal of an

largely negative even through the Nov. 9-10 Kristallnacht events. Their rise through the 1920s was remarkably similar to the Patriots of the 1990s—starting out as a small, at times laughable, grass-roots organization and gradually rising over a 10-year period to a substantial enough minority to take control of the government by 1933. See GOLDHAGEN, *supra* note 9, at 85-87, 99-103.

23. Two recent instances will illustrate this propensity. Emmett Clark, one of the Montana Freeman engaged in an armed standoff in Jordan for 81 days, was by all accounts of his neighbors a no-nonsense, taxpaying citizen who ran a financially sound ranch for years and was esteemed by his neighbors and family as hard-working and down-to-earth. See Interviews with Cecil and Ada Weeding, brother-in-law and sister of Emmett Clark, and Nick Murnion, County Attorney of Garfield County, Mont., in Jordan, Mont. (July 5-7, 1996). Clark was persuaded to join the Freeman by his son, Richard, at which point his family observed a dramatic change in his personality and behavior, culminating with his arrest on a range of federal charges. See *id.*

Another recent instance occurred in Washington State, when eight Patriots were arrested by the FBI on a range of weapons charges, notably constructing pipe bombs. See Carol M. Ostrom and Danny Westneat, *Anti-government Conspiracy Alleged: Militia Leader Sought 'Peaceful' Image for Group*, SEATTLE TIMES, July 30, 1996, at A1. Among those arrested was John Pitner, president of the Washington State Militia, who had been adamant in all his public appearances and interviews that his organization was strictly "defensive" in nature and was designed more as a regional Block Watch. See *id.* Pitner, too, had up until his involvement with the Patriots been an apparently normal citizen, and his organization emphasized recruitment of followers from the mainstream. See *id.* But in the wake of the arrests, the author, through interviews with former participants, discovered that the group had begun secretly engaging in paramilitary training exercises in addition to the bomb-building sessions. See *id.* One member specialized in converting semi-automatic guns to illegal fully automatic weapons. See *id.*

ubermensch,²⁴ neither is it their intent to establish an essentially secular society built around a singular figure of authority like Hitler. Rather, the nation-state that is their ideal is a theocratic "Christian nation" in which there is no church-state separation, and in which race is a key component.²⁵

Patriots, especially at the leadership level, believe the national constitution should be brought into line with "God's laws:" they see America as the true "Promised Land," and their hope is to transform the nation so that its biblical covenant can be fulfilled.²⁶ At the ideological core of Identity Christianity, this means a separated white ruling class that secures the nation from the supposed depredations of Jews, gays and lesbians and minority races.²⁷ The Nazis were essentially anti-intellectual social Darwinists, while the Patriots' impulses are even more severely reactionary, positing a return to an Old Testament society.²⁸ Like the leaders of the Catholic Church who wrought the Dark Ages, the Patriots give religious faith supreme social primacy and are overtly hostile to reason and intellect as works of evil that lead people astray from God by undermining their faith.

B. *The Choice of Tactics*

The German Nazis were quite overt in expressing their bigotry, especially their anti-Semitism, while the Patriots obfuscate the racial and religious implications of their agenda, focusing instead almost purely on tapping into fear of, and discontent with, the government. When asked about matters of race and religion, the Movement's leaders usually resort to disingenuousness so they can maintain their mainstream image.

24. The Nazis' absorption of the Nietzschean philosophical ideal of an "ubermensch," or superman, emerging to lead mankind into a new age, as an extension of their drive to create a racially pure Aryan state, has been well-documented by many scholars and observers. One source is Adolf Hitler's own *Mein Kampf*, while a general reader may consult WILLIAM SHIRER, *RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH* (1960).

25. See JAMES AHO, *THE POLITICS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: IDAHO CHRISTIAN PATRIOTISM* 106-131 (1991).

26. See *id.*

27. See *id.*

28. See, for instance, the Freemen's proposal for a Biblical society based on small communities that revolve around their church, outlined in numerous documents authored by Rodney Skurdal. See e.g., *Our De Jure County Government Pursuant to the Word of Almighty God ("Common Law" Court in Musselshell County, Montana)* (filed Jan. 8, 1995).

A master of these tactics is John Trochmann, the leader of the Militia of Montana, which is the nation's largest and most significant purveyor of militia materials, from warfare and weaponry manuals to conspiracy tomes to survival gear, and is the most active organizer of militia gatherings in the Pacific Northwest. Trochmann denies that he is a bigot, or that his desire to eliminate the Fourteenth Amendment is racist, or that his belief in a Jewish banking conspiracy is anti-Semitic.²⁹ Trochmann also denies that Christian Identity, the religion to which he ascribes, is racist.³⁰ But Trochmann's definition of racism itself is very limited in scope: "I don't hate anyone because of their race," he told me once when I asked him about these accusations.³¹ And I believe he means what he says. Racism as we know it in America, means much more than simple hatred of people according to race. It extends to the belief that, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., we can judge the content of a man's character by the color of his skin. And it is unquestionable that Christian Identity, despite its believers' protests to the contrary, is deeply racist in this context. Its dogma that only white people are the true children of Israel, its "two-seed" theory that minorities are the descendants of soulless "mud people" and that Jews are literally the spawn of Satan,³² and even its "one-seed" belief that an ordering of the races (with white people on top, naturally), are simply matters of knowing one's place in the natural order decreed by God.³³ All of these beliefs hearken to an Old World view of the universe to which racism was second nature, and which many Americans believed died with Adolph Hitler in his bunker in 1945, and vanished utterly after the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Christian Identity, the underlying ideology of the Patriot Movement, is living proof that it has not.

C. *The Choice of Targets*

While the Nazis' overt anti-Semitism and racism are missing from the Patriot Movement's public face, the widespread eliminative impulse that empowered the Nazis and manifested in the

29. Interview with John Trochmann, Leader of Militia of Montana, in Noxon, Mont. (Nov. 15, 1994).

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. See Susan DeCamp, *Grace, or Race: The Fundamentals of Christian Identity Theology* (Montana Ass'n of Churches), Feb. 1996.

33. See GOAL, *God's Order Affirmed in Love (GOAL)* (visited Mar. 7, 1997) <<http://www.melvig.org>> (on file with the *Montana Law Review*).

Holocaust³⁴ is also present today in America. This impulse is a key focus of Patriot ideology. The difference, however, is in the target: whereas the Nazis focused almost solely on Jews as the object of their drive to expunge corruptive influences from the country, the Patriots draw from a broader menu, reflective of their larger religious agenda. Evil government conspirators and their pawns top the list, followed closely by gays and lesbians, and then by liberals in general.³⁵

Eliminationism almost always seems to focus on the respective popular mythologies of the cultures in which they take root. For Germany, where anti-Semitism and the belief that Jews controlled the economy were commonplace, the Holocaust was the natural product of this impulse. In America, a common mythology has evolved since the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 that the federal government is inherently bad and irreversibly corrupt. Additionally, the emergence of AIDS among gay men has made gays and lesbians widespread objects of fear, loathing and gay-bashing that most often finds voice among fundamentalist Christians who consider such behavior immoral. Therefore, it is not surprising that while the Patriots and their leaders run from any talk of the racial and religious agendas that lie just under the surface, they freely spew venom about

34. Goldhagen offers a complete examination of the eliminative impulse of Nazi anti-Semitism. See GOLDHAGEN, *supra* note 9, at 49-79.

35. I place government officials at the top of this list, because they are the primary targets of the Patriots' anger; the movement's materials, from Militia of Montana to the Michigan Militia to Texas and California, groups are all preoccupied with the federal conspiracy to enslave them, referring almost universally to government officials as "traitors," and some (especially the Freemen) making explicit reference to the traditional punishment for treason: hanging (a favorite Patriot song, available on audiocassette through numerous catalogs and on the tables at most Patriot events, is Carl Klang's "Hang 'Em High," directed at federal officials). However, gays and lesbians are the targets of some of the most vicious slanders and implied threats, elucidated through Patriot materials and at their gatherings. See *supra* note 7. Many Patriots believe gays and lesbians are condemned to death for their behavior and some groups (like the Phineas Priesthood—responsible for pipe bombings and bank robberies in Spokane, Wash. (See *Three Plead Innocent to Federal Indictments*, THE MISSOULLAN, Dec. 13, 1996, at A6.)) state as their mission the execution of gays and lesbians. Bill Morlin, *The War Within*, THE SPOKESMAN REVIEW, Dec. 29, 1996 at A1. Finally, liberals are connected ideologically with both the federal government and gays and lesbians by most Patriots, and receive for their share of derision and threatening rhetoric at Patriot gatherings. The Patriot's kindest characterization of liberals compares them to sheep, while some Patriot speakers even suggest liberals, and especially environmentalists, have Satanic agendas. See HELEN CHENOWETH, *America in Peril* (Militia of Montana tape of a speech given in Boise, Idaho in 1991) (the then-timber consultant baldly stated that environmentalists were followers of an occult religion. Chenoweth is currently Idaho's 1st District congressional representative).

government officials, ranging from the President to their children's schoolteachers, gay activists, liberal politicians and members of the media. At the most extreme ends of the spectrum, they talk about shooting FBI agents and enforcing the death penalty for gays and lesbians. However, this facet generally remains well-hidden from the image they present for public consumption; it is only when overt radicals like the Freemen emerge that the anti-Semitism and racism becomes explicit.³⁶ Not only does the Movement's leadership distance itself quickly from these radical elements, the Patriots cloak these aspects of their beliefs with the flag-waving paranoia of their political agenda which appears, to many, to be not far removed from the conservative beliefs held by many.

III. THE PATRIOT MOVEMENT'S CAPITALIZATION ON MAINSTREAM CONSERVATISM

A. *Conspiracies in the Air*

Most of the Patriots' rhetoric taps into a groundswell of conservatism that has charged the American political scene in recent years. This conservatism is prevalent among rightist radio talk-show hosts who spread their ideologies over the airwaves to nationwide audiences. Rush Limbaugh and a horde of imitators have persuaded millions of their listeners that liberalism in general, and the government in particular, is not only flawed but oppressive and anti-American. Although most of these radio show discussions take place in a context of legitimate political discourse, in some cases they tread into outright hate and fear-mongering. For example, Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy told his audiences how to respond if federal agents came to arrest them: "They've got a big target on there, ATF. Don't shoot at that because they've got a vest on underneath. Head shots. Head shots."³⁷ Similarly, Bob Mohan, a Phoenix talk-show host, told his audience that Sarah Brady, the wife of former Reagan press secretary Jim Brady and a national spokesperson for gun control,

36. See Rodney O. Skurdal v. de facto Corporation State of Montana, et. al., Common Law Aff. in Supp. of Common Law Mem. and Judicial Notice in Law ("Common Law" Court in Musselshell County, Montana (filed Oct. 28, 1994) (discussing the "two seed" theory of Identity, claiming that Jews are the descendants of Satan and that blacks and other minorities are soulless "pre-Adamic" people. These beliefs appear throughout Freemen documents). See also FREE[MAN] NEWSLETTER (Aug.-Sept. 1995).

37. See *The G. Gordon Liddy Show* (Infinity One Broadcasting, Aug. 26, 1994).

was a candidate for elimination: "You know, she ought to be put down. A humane shot at a veterinarian's would really be an easy way to do it. Because of all her barking and complaining, she really needs to be put down."³⁸

Following the lead of these conservatives, Militia leaders such as John Trochmann, Linda Thompson, and Mark "from Michigan" Koernke began appearing as guests on radio shows from Colorado to San Francisco to New York. These leaders not only echo their mainstream counterparts but also take their disdain for the government one step further: not only is the government corrupt, it is conspiring to enslave us all.³⁹ Their messages include warnings of an impending apocalyptic crackdown, and, in one instance, Thompson advocated an armed march on Congress to arrest and hang members of Congress they considered traitors.⁴⁰

In the wake of the Oklahoma City massacre, President Clinton pleaded for the nation to stand up to this tide of unreason. He denounced the "loud and angry voices in America today whose sole goal seems to be to try to keep some people as paranoid as possible . . . they leave the impression, by their very words, that violence is acceptable."⁴¹ Clinton's remarks were promptly and angrily denounced by radio talk-show hosts and commentators around the nation as an attempt to censor criticism of his administration.⁴² Limbaugh himself complained that Clinton was smearing honest dissent by linking it to hate groups and nut cases.⁴³

Conservative political rhetoricians, especially those on talk radio, cannot absolve themselves of all complicity in the violence and social upheaval erupting from the Patriot Movement. They have poured their share of gasoline on the Patriot's fires of ha-

38. See Timothy Egan, *Talk Radio of Hate Radio: Critics Assail Some Hosts*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 1, 1995, at 22.

39. See KENNETH STERN, *A FORCE UPON THE PLAIN: THE AMERICAN MILITIA MOVEMENT AND THE POLITICS OF HATE* 221-24 (1995) (discussing the broad nature of the Patriots' radio appearances. As Stern indicates, while a number of Patriot leaders, especially John Trochmann and Norm Olson of the Northern Michigan Militia, have made a number of mainstream radio and television appearances over the years, ranging from *Nightline* to *20/20* to a number of local talk shows, their chief presence is on short-wave radio. Figures from James "Bo" Gritz to Mark Koernke to Pete Peters continue to broadcast regularly on short-wave radio shows.

40. See *id.* at 133-34 (detailing Linda Thompson's aborted campaign).

41. Michael K. Frisby and Joe Davidson, *Clinton Continues Attack on Hate Speech as Hunt for Bombing Suspect Intensifies*, WALL ST. J., Apr. 25, 1995, at A5.

42. See *id.*

43. See *id.*

tred. The hyperbolic and irresponsible demonization of their political opponents, a characteristic common to the talk-show genre, becomes fodder in the hands of people who seek revolution instead of political solutions. The wild charges levied against bureaucrats are dangerous not only because they may be inaccurate,⁴⁴ but also because they inflame the irrational fears of people already inclined to believe the world conspires against them.

B. Free Speech and the Media

There is an important difference between free speech and fear-mongering, between open discourse and the deliberate spread of outright falsehoods and groundless rumors. The American creed binds us to tolerate all kinds of speech, but it also requires us to stand up to bald-faced distortions of the truth. So far, we have failed in general to heed Clinton's plea to confront these voices of unreason, whether they come from Rush Limbaugh or LeRoy Schweitzer.

The nation's mainstream media shares much of the blame for this failure. They have dealt piecemeal with the Patriot Movement when it erupts in violence, but they have essentially remained in a state of denial about its spread into the nation's rural areas and the larger challenge the Movement itself poses. Usually reporters are equipped only to comprehend the immediate aspects of the Patriots, whether it is a town-hall meeting where a hundred people gather, or an eruption of violence like a pipe bombing or a robbery. Editors, at the same time, are careful about the potential for spreading groundless rumors and wild conspiracy theories, as they are legally obligated to be as factual as possible. Editors tend to shy away when a reporter suggests exploring the Movement more deeply because the simple act of reporting on the Patriots can be a way for these "nut cases" to spread their beliefs. This certainly was my own thinking in 1979, when I chose, as editor of the *Sandpoint Daily Bee*, not to cover the new Aryan Nations church that had just established itself in Hayden Lake, Idaho. That was the last time I would make that

44. Limbaugh, although not as outrageously hyperbolic as some of his imitators, is likewise guilty of gross misrepresentation of government officials' motivations. For example, on his March 29, 1996, daily radio show, Limbaugh flatly stated that there are bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. who would prefer to do away with democracy. The author has known many bureaucrats over the years, and while he has encountered many who would fairly be characterized as incompetent, he has never met any who are opposed to democracy, nor does he believe Rush Limbaugh would be able to name any who are.

mistake.

The Patriots' beliefs grow in a vacuum of public awareness. When their outlandish claims—United Nations troop movements, charges that the President is a murderer and a traitor engaged in a massive conspiracy to destroy our freedoms, suggestions that there is no separation of church and state or that the income tax is unconstitutional—are dismissed out of hand and ignored by the community at large (and especially by the media), they also go unchallenged. The Patriots tell their recruits that this silence is proof they are actually right, and when the recruits believe these words, the result is an increased population of ordinary people who begin to believe that government is indeed conspiring to enslave the world.

C. An Urban Bias

The bias that creates this vacuum is not simply a matter of East Coast media failing to understand a threat emanating from obscure Pacific Northwest states, but a reflection of a larger bias native to the media generally: an urban one. The sheer numbers of people in urban areas translate into greater attention to urban issues in the media. Moreover, relatively few media types are genuinely familiar with rural lifestyles and values. They, like many urbanites, often joke and engage in caricatures of rural dwellers that, if used to depict an ethnic group or a religious minority, would be considered serious social gaffes.

This is as true in Seattle as it is in New York City. The desire and ability to comprehend and report on rural phenomena is limited or non-existent at the major media outlets even though such outlets possess the resources to pursue this type of comprehensive journalism. In the rural areas, the media is generally limited to small weeklies and tiny AM stations which might have reporters in close contact with these issues, but are usually too underfunded to attempt any in-depth investigation.

D. The Fertile Soil of Discontent

This urban bias has prevented the media from understanding what the Patriots understand innately and exploit to the fullest: a knowledge of just how widespread the feeling of disenfranchisement is in rural America and how removed the nation's farmers, ranchers, loggers and miners feel from mainstream political discourse. The bias of political power toward urban areas has particularly fed this feeling. Rural dwellers often fear

that their fates rest in the hands of people who dismiss them as irrelevant and disposable, particularly in matters of land policy and economics.

It is doubtful that the nation at large can comprehend the words of Gilles Stockton, a Montana rancher who counts Freemen as neighbors and has incurred their wrath by standing up to them:

My neighbors and I may not understand how the Freemen got where they are, but I think we do understand their anger. Because we too, are angry: about an economic system where each generation of farmers and ranchers must buy the land again; where more money leaves the farm to pay interest than ever stays; a system where any disaster, a sick child, a blizzard, a flood, or a hailstorm can tip the balance towards foreclosure.

So the Freemen come from a society that has turned its back on its rural roots; where agricultural policy is designed by and for investment bankers, stockbrokers and corporate lawyers of Westchester County, New York—not for the farmers and ranchers of Garfield County, Montana; where the North American Free Trade Agreement and the globalization of the U.S. economy affirm that rural America is just a colony. We natives happen to speak English and the toilets flush, but like all colonies, rural America supplies raw materials at a net loss to its inhabitants and to the land.

The corporations steal my labor, my produce, and my land. Society at large insults me as being obsolete and ignorant. Every day there are fewer and fewer farmers. But we are not obsolete, and it is society at large that is ignorant. The cheap food will not last because corporations control the worldwide distribution of food. The name of the game is money and power.

I make no apology for the "Freemen." We don't need more racism, threats of violence and extremist rhetoric. But there is a sickness when the people who work the land are abandoned and abused.⁴⁵

Society at large may have failed to recognize this sickness, but the political opportunists of the radical right have not. By the 1970s members of these rightist groups had already identified the Pacific Northwest as the future home of the Aryan Nations,

45. Gilles Stockton, *Where Did the Freemen Come From?* (High Plains News Service radio broadcast, May 10, 1996).

at least partly because they recognized that the fertile ground of discontent was everywhere to be found in the vast rural landscape.

By the mid-1980s, rightist groups began developing strategies for obtaining political power in the region, and seized the opportunities proffered by the incidents at Ruby Ridge and Waco to enact them. Patriot meetings started out in small meeting halls in tiny towns, but gradually came to fill school gymnasiums and conference halls with hundreds in attendance. Some Patriot members even enjoyed political success: Helen Chenoweth, an overt supporter of the Movement, was elected to Congress from Idaho's First District in 1994.

Though the depth of the Patriot Movement has not been great, its breadth has been remarkable. Once the Patriot Movement took root and blossomed in the Northwest, its tendrils quickly spread to the rest of the nation. Militia units now can be found in upstate Pennsylvania and New York, the Florida swamps, the plains of Oklahoma and Nebraska, the oilfields of Texas and the farm country of California. Additionally, Patriots began declaring themselves sovereign citizens and forming common-law courts in virtually every state. Most significantly, their ranks began to fill not just with the usual professional bellyachers who always seem to find someone else to blame for their problems, but with upstanding citizens, regular people from next door who have never had much truck with radical politics but who have had their fill of frustration and are looking for answers.

IV. RESISTANCE TO THE MOVEMENT

Even in the midst of this disenfranchisement, however, the Northwest's rural areas are nonetheless largely populated by great numbers of people of great common sense and generosity. These people understand that the snake oil offered by the Patriot Movement will only poison their communities. They understand that to meet the challenge the Patriots present and to counter the fraying of the social fabric these beliefs cause, society should not attempt to suppress or intimidate or censor the Patriot voice. Rather, society should simply stand up to the Patriots and say, "no, you're wrong." Respectfully, but firmly, society should explain that as a whole, "it will not succumb to wild fantasies and anger." Moreover, society should dare the Patriots to once again reside in the real world rather than that they've created.

The people who have had the courage to stand up to the

Patriots in this manner have defused the Movement in their communities by meeting it head-on, refuting its false logic and distortions of the truth, and banding together the rest of the community in a show of solidarity within the courts, law enforcement agencies and other the institutions of democracy whose very authority the Patriots challenge. When the Movement's followers come to understand that they have raced out onto one of life's long tree limbs, and that no one else, not even their friends, their families, or their neighbors will ever join them, there is, perhaps, a chance that they will realize the ludicrous nature of their assertions and recant them on their own.

Just as the Northwest has a long history of radical right activity, it also has a tradition of local citizens standing up to such activity and diffusing it. This tradition dates back to the 1920s, when the Ku Klux Klan arose as a political power in Oregon and Washington only to be faced down by local citizens who challenged the organization's wild slanders against the Catholic Church.⁴⁶ Even today, this tradition can be found in the work of Coeur d'Alene's Kootenai County Task Force on human relations, which through the 1980s effectively raised awareness of the threat posed to its community by the activities of the Aryan Nations.

In Montana, this tradition is embodied in the paper menorahs the residents of Billings posted in their front windows as a show of solidarity with a local Jewish family whose own window was shattered by a brick and whose home was sprayed with anti-Semitic graffiti. Living practitioners of this tradition are the residents of Jordan, Montana, who organized their community to oppose the Freemen, many of whom were their own family members and longtime neighbors. Most striking of this group are people like Cecil and Ada Weeding. Ada is the sister of Freemen Ralph and Emmett Clark, and Cecil had been their schoolchum. The Weedings not only refused to condone what the Freemen were doing, they spearheaded the community-wide effort to stand up against the threats and violent rhetoric that emanated from both the Freemen and the Patriots from elsewhere who hovered near the scene.⁴⁷

The human-rights activists who have shouldered the burden

46. See LAWRENCE J. SAALFELD, FORCES OF PREJUDICE IN OREGON 1920-1925 16-18 (1984).

47. Interviews with Cecil and Ada Weeding, brother-in-law and sister of Emmett and Ralph Clark, in Jordan, Mont. (July 5-7, 1996).

of monitoring and opposing the Patriot Movement are part of this tradition, too. Bill Wassmuth, who heads the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment in Seattle, is an Idaho native who grew up in a small Camas Prairie town. Ken Toole, director of the Montana Human Rights Network, is the son of a much-beloved Montana historian, with family ties dating back to the state's origins (Montana's first governor was a Toole). The Portland-based Coalition for Human Dignity is staffed primarily with Northwest natives. Local organizations like the Montana Association of Churches that have been in the front of the fray likewise draw on their long and deep ties to the mainstream communities to counter the radical revolutionarism of the Patriots.⁴⁸

All these people, however, are only a bulwark against the rising tide of the Movement. Until the conditions that make America's rural landscape such fertile ground for these beliefs are eliminated or at least mitigated, the Patriots will continue to grow, splitting families and communities apart and destroying our nation's sense of security, as the most violent followers wreak havoc through threats, bombings, robberies and murders. Changing those conditions is a task that befalls all Americans.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR A LARGER RESPONSE

A. *The Political Arena*

The work begins on the largest social level, in the arena of national and state politics, where Patriot-inspired fear-mongering spreads as far as the halls of Congress and state legislatures. The need to confront such rhetoric and to counter its distortions with facts and hard reality should be self-evident, but in the course of political debate it is often neglected. Politicians who play to Patriots' sensibilities by feeding their fears of government should be held accountable for their irresponsibility, yet they rarely are.

These political failures have done a great deal to fuel the Patriots' self-justifications, as silence from the mainstream is often misinterpreted as assent. When the Patriots and their

48. The Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations is at P.O. Box 2725, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, 83816. The Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment can be reached at P.O. Box 16776, Seattle, WA 98116. The Coalition for Human Dignity is at P.O. Box 40344, Portland, Or, 97240. The Montana Human Rights Network's address is P.O. Box 1222, Helena, MT, 59624. The Montana Association of Churches is at 100 24th Street West, Suite G, Billings, MT, 59102.

sympathizers in politics suggest that freedom in America is somehow endangered or nonexistent, someone needs to stand up and point out that the United States is still the freest nation on Earth (otherwise movements like the Patriots would never be allowed to vent their views) and that the few restrictions we place on those freedoms almost always boil down to the matter of enforcing responsibility.

B. The Media

The more deafening silence emanates from the nation's mainstream media: newspapers and television. Reports on the Patriots and their beliefs in general have been sporadic at best, confined to a few sensational events like the Oklahoma City bombing, the Ruby Ridge hearings, and the standoff in Jordan. Numerous local media outlets have done a generally sound job of reporting on the Movement's growing influence, though they often lack the investigative resources to check the factual grounding of the Patriots' claims or to examine its larger sources.

The urban-oriented media, however, has largely failed to disseminate this information to the general population. And when the media does report on the Movement, it almost invariably engages in shallow stereotyping of the Movement's followers, dismissing their often legitimate (though inelegantly voiced) concerns as the products of hopelessly backwards buffoons. The image of the Movement currently portrayed by the media is dangerously shallow, comprised of the lunatic rantings of an insignificant smattering of yahoos in the distant woods. In turn, the reality that the Patriot Movement is widespread—though not yet particularly deep—throughout most of rural America escapes the attention of most Americans.

C. Government and the Legal Community

The national legal community, state and local governments, and particularly law-enforcement personnel, must also be prepared to deal with the Patriot Movement. This is especially true because the Movement involves the strategy of establishing common-law courts. As of last count, these courts have been organized in forty states, and they appear to be growing county by county throughout the Northwest. With these courts comes a deluge of obscure paperwork and legal threats, including phony liens filed against prosecutors and judges and mayors. These common law courts validate the once-taxpaying citizens' declara-

tions of "sovereign citizenship," which purportedly exempts them from the jurisdiction of the American court system. To confront these frivolous claims and these common law courts, American courts must be empowered, through legislation already in use in some states, to dismiss these liens easily. At the same time court officials should have the ability to refuse to file Patriots' pseudo-legal documents. Normal legal avenues should remain open to all citizens, but an already-strained court system should not be burdened with having to process the legal nonsense that passes for "constitutionalist" filings, nor should taxpayers be burdened with the costs of handling them.

To facilitate these ends, there should be some preparation and training as well. Prosecutors, clerks who work in governmental offices, and officers who work at banks handling liens and other aspects of the banking system used by the Patriots in their illegal schemes, should be trained to identify the Patriots' phony legal papers and to implement the proper and legal methods for handling them. These people may also require some training in handling the physical intimidation and threats that often result from interaction with members of the Patriot Movement. Similarly, law-enforcement officers need specialized training for dealing with Patriot followers when they come up against the law, as they frequently do. As the Ruby Ridge and Order cases suggest, a traditional approach geared to criminal behavior does not work with true believers of the Patriots' stripe (indeed, it is a recipe for disaster). More appropriately, other approaches such as those embodied by the resolution of the Freemen stand-off are emerging in law enforcement.

D. The Personal Response

Finally, it is at the human level where the Patriot Movement hits the hardest, where all relationships, families, friendships and entire communities are riven by the stream of poison springing from Patriot beliefs. Unfortunately, this is also the level from which the Movement grows in its most fundamental way. Small daily steps take followers further into the alternative universe of radical beliefs, especially when these steps are unimpeded by wives, brothers, lifelong friends and neighbors who have the best chance to bring these followers back to the real world. Because we care about these people and cherish our good relations with them, we choose not to confront their "crazy" ideas. We know that such a confrontation will likely result in an unpleasant argument which not only would be futile for purposes

of persuasion, but would only plant a wedge that would make reaching them even harder.

While the propensity to turn a blind eye in our personal dealings is understandable, it is at best a mere delaying tactic. The course of radical beliefs inevitably runs to a breaking point where people close to the true believers are forced, usually by the followers themselves, to choose between their friends and the real world. What people find, after all those years of letting Uncle Joe run at the mouth, is that he has come to believe that everyone—even those closest to him—either is with him or against him. Pretending not to hear him, dismissing his conspiracy theories as something he just indulges in, as something not to take seriously—these silences bear dark fruit.

The only answer is to confront the Patriot Movement when it reaches someone close to us, when it touches our homes, when our friends darkly suggest the government is conspiring to implant the “Mark of the Beast” on every person, or when our grandfathers proclaim that the whole system is set up by and for Jewish bankers. The inflammatory nature of such talk usually inspires one of two responses: an equally heated counterargument, or stony silence, neither of which is effective in the least.

There is a third course: to respond with respect and courtesy, but firmly, with facts and reality. Point out that there is a legitimate, perfectly rational explanation for literally every piece of evidence the Patriots can produce for their theories that the government is part of a grand conspiracy to destroy the nation. Explain that the legal arguments they present for their constitutionalist beliefs have long been answered by real court rulings, many dating back to the Civil War, and that the web of pseudo-legal theory the Patriots espouse is a sham with no recognizable legitimacy, especially not in the body of law as practiced in America today. If they have fallen into the snare of Christian Identity and begin claiming that white people are the true children of Israel, discuss with them the fact that such beliefs have been held by Christian leaders and theologians, since as far back as the third century, to constitute an egregious heresy, a blasphemy that runs counter to the spirit of Christianity itself.

VI. CONCLUSION

The spirit of respect has been notably absent from most discussions of the Patriots, in large part because the Patriots themselves are so openly contemptuous of everything outside their belief system that it is difficult not to respond in kind. The Movement challenges so many of Americans' everyday assumptions about the core foundations of society that it is often difficult to even begin to respond. But that response ultimately, to be effective, must reflect the very values the Patriots' beliefs most deeply corrode: a public discourse based on mutual respect; a sense of fair play and decency; and an appreciation of the value of community and cooperative action.

These are the same values that people in rural areas see as integral to their everyday lives, in contradistinction to the ragged social fabric that often passes for urban life. These are the values that they most fear are being destroyed in the tide of urban dominance over our culture. Their view of the depths of this decay is reflected in the growth of the Patriot Movement because it means they have come to believe the urban sickness can only be cured by destroying it.

Patriots are dangerous not only because the essence of their Movement is fascism, with more than passing similarities to the Nazis of 1920s Germany, but because they have proven so capable of insinuating themselves within rural communities and the working class in general. This has been made easier by tapping into a nationwide conservative groundswell, a reaction to an urban bias pervasive in the fabric of our lives.

We, as a nation of individuals, must begin to nurture real rural values in our daily lives. To do so, we must reawaken an ethos that esteems hard work, neighborliness and simple decency more than business profit. Moreover, we must honor and reward the hard-working producers of the basic materials of our lives. Only when we do so will we, as a nation, have an adequate response to the challenge of the Patriot Movement. Without such a fundamental shift, the nation may otherwise need a steady, and large, supply of feather dusters for many years to come.

