

Rifles and Rhetoric: Paramilitary Anti-Semitism in the New Deal Era

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Boston College

Department of History

Rifles & Rhetoric

Paramilitary Anti-Semitism in the New Deal Era



Left to right: Michael Vill, Macklin Boettger, Frank Malone, John Viebrock, John Graf. Image courtesy of *The Dansville Breeze*, Dansville, New York. Tuesday, January 16, 1940.

By Nick Centrella

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Introduction



Image courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Manuscript Collection at Duke University

On January 30, 1933, a forty-four year old Austrian veteran of World War I gained the Chancellorship of Germany. Bemoaning the “starving millions of unemployed proletarians”, Adolf Hitler promised the German people that his government would pull them from the rubble of the Weimar Republic and deliver them economic salvation. Buoyed by a violent paramilitary outfit and anti-Semitic tirades, he stood victorious outside the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and declared that the National Socialist party “will extend its strong, protecting hand over Christianity as the basis for our entire morality, and the family as the germ cell of the body of our people and State.”¹ He received a raucous ovation from the assembled crowd.

That same day, a forty-three year old screenwriter named William Dudley Pelley gathered his followers. In an unlikely move for anyone associated with the burgeoning Hollywood film industry, he incorporated them as the Silver Legion of America. Time in Siberia had exposed him to the “horrors of Bolshevism”, and a career as a writer had taken him to Hollywood. He bemoaned the “Jewish” control of the movie industry, leaving to focus on esoteric writings. Before long, Pelley declared war on the “communist-Jewish conspiracy to overthrow white Christianity.” Gazing across the Atlantic, he saw the boisterous Austrian as the savior of Western civilization. He told his followers that the stars and Great Pyramid of Giza foretold the election of Hitler to the Chancellorship, as well as his own destiny to lead a national spiritual movement.²

In Detroit, a young Canadian priest walked into WJR studios in Detroit and received his own weekly radio show. Father Charles Coughlin, not long out of the

¹ Text taken from the following: <http://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/hitlers-first-address-as-chancellor/>

² *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of William Dudley Pelley), 7215.

seminary, initially used these opportunities to educate the American public about the promise of Catholicism and the righteousness of Franklin Roosevelt's economic policy. After a falling out with the president, Coughlin reverted to anti-Semitic rhetoric that inspired a group called the Christian Front to fight back against the communist Jews who lurked in the shadows. Showing restraint, the Christian Front waited for its moment to strike.

Coughlin, Pelley, and their followers became some of the most violent anti-Semites of the Great Depression, enemies of the state who advocated the overthrow of the Roosevelt Administration in defense of the American way of life. Pelley's Silvershirts counted among their number violent Ku Klux Klan activists and an exiled Estonian aristocrat, in addition to the unnamed thousands of nonviolent sympathizers and fellow travelers. The Coughlin-affiliated Christian Front group included one of the most organized alleged terrorist cells of the decade. Hidden behind a façade of Catholic laborers who engaged in street violence across the country, they used religion to cloak their activities. Using Christianity as their shield, both Pelley and Coughlin employed anti-Semitic rhetoric that encouraged their followers to commit violent acts in the hope that they would overthrow the elected government of the United States of America. Not only did they prove to be among the New Deal's most dangerous opponents, the Christian Front and Silver Legion, along with their charismatic leaders, began a tradition of domestic right-wing extremism that continues through to the present day.

When the Democratic Party emerged triumphantly from the midterm elections of 1934, the United States was still a nation in crisis. President Roosevelt and the New Deal had stalled the economic nosedive of the previous four years, but renewed prosperity was

still a distant notion. The national income remained a full \$10 billion under pre-Depression levels. Unemployment, which had declined sharply and taken the working class out of the worst of the crash, remained at a staggering twenty percent. Consumers saw their average income lag behind pre-depression levels, and Congress developed a distaste for Roosevelt's increasingly costly New Deal programs.³

The political landscape was as volatile as it had ever been. The radical left offered poverty-stricken Americans the prospect of utopian economic recovery, an equal seat at the table in the future United Soviet States of America. Communists infiltrated organized labor and found a sympathetic outlet to the plight of the proletariat. They established newspapers, held European-style rallies, and incited labor unrest that often ended in bloodshed. Their opponents whispered—and not incorrectly so—that some action came in direct orders from Moscow. Communism and socialism alike found adherents across the disaffected classes of the country, including some members of Congress. While Roosevelt kept the radical left at arm's length, his pursuit of increasingly "socialistic" economic policy seemed a harbinger of things to come.

On the right, many found the extreme measures of the New Deal to be increasingly unpalatable. It had been a desperate few years since Hoover had chased away the Bonus Army from the lawn on Pennsylvania Avenue, and those lost veterans still gathered in American Legion posts to plot their revenge on the country that had abandoned them. The American Legion became a hotbed of anti-communist activity as its members battled would-be Bolsheviks in the streets. Major cities on the East Coast watched helplessly as their Italian immigrant populations looked adoringly on at

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Introduction." In *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 2-5.

Mussolini's march on Rome, and before long the Italian fascists had organized on both sides of the Atlantic. The tendrils of Italian espionage extended onto American soil, where it found willing volunteers in Philadelphia and New York.⁴ In Boston, the swastika flew proudly from the German consulate on Beacon Street as the German-American Bünd goose-stepped through ethnic German neighborhoods.⁵

Father Coughlin used his Roman collar to rally the deeply Catholic working-class Irish and Italian populations on the East Coast, making the Christian Front an organization that had "perhaps the greatest potential to become a genuine mass movement."⁶ At its height, Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, a broad-based political party distinct from the Christian Front, boasted four million members. These numbers too do not account for other sympathizers that tuned in to his weekly broadcasts. Coughlin's fiery Irish brogue appealed to his core constituents, as did his violently anti-British message. As Hitler's Panzer divisions rolled into Poland, Coughlin's followers crossed the Hudson in New York to practice their aim on stolen government rifles.

Fighting along with Coughlin's Catholic followers, some of America's most dangerous subversives came from the Anglo-Protestant culture that long had dominated its history. William Dudley Pelley, the son of a Methodist preacher from Massachusetts, recruited almost exclusively from among white Protestants in a bid to purify America of its "Jewish" influences. Many of the men he recruited as foot soldiers came from the ranks of Ku Klux Klan chapters, and did not leave their penchant for violence behind

⁴ For further information on Italian fascists, see Philip Jenkins, " 'It Can't Happen Here': Fascism and Right-wing Extremism in Pennsylvania 1933-1942," *Pennsylvania History*, 62, no.1 (1995): 31-58.

⁵ A photo of the German Consulate in Boston can be found, courtesy of the Bostonian Society, on their website: <http://rfi.bostonhistory.org/boston/full/002013.jpg>

⁶ Jenkins, 44.

with their hoods. The virulent anti-Semitism that became his trademark reached the willing ears of a white audience prone to conspiracies about world Jewish domination, usually connected to international banking. As the Nuremberg laws forced Germany's Jews into poverty and segregation, Pelley and his Silver Legion wondered aloud just how such a system could come to pass in the land where all men were created equal.

The Christian Front and the Silver Legion together represent the epitome of native paramilitary anti-Semitism in the New Deal Era. Other groups like the Bund and the Blackshirts gained notoriety for their pro-fascist sympathy, but had little to show for their tough talk beyond starched uniforms and newspaper clippings. The Christian Front and Silvershirts, on the other hand, left a more overtly violent history behind. Both gathered around a charismatic leader, in the vein of Hitler and Mussolini, who called for the overthrow of the American state. Each group had an organized command structure, although both were susceptible to the depredations of rogue actors. The two groups, in addition to other anti-Semitic outfits of the era, collaborated closely on a variety of projects ranging from mass rallies to arms stockpiling. Most consequently, the Christian Front and the Silver Legion prompted the first shock of right-wing political violence in the twentieth century that reverberated through the ensuing decades and continues to inspire hatred to this day.

What little history exists on how these groups utilized, or planned to utilize, force and violence is sharply divided. The predominant school of thought basks in the hangover of victory brought about after Hitler's defeat in 1945. Fascist groups across the United States folded after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Soviet flag flying over the ruins of the Reichstag in Berlin signaled to the world that the threat of fascism had been banished

from world politics forever. The United States and the forces of democracy reigned victorious, and the paramilitary leaders that once inspired fear instead morphed into caricatures at the fringe of American history. Harvard professor Arthur Schlesinger minimized any threat Pelley and Coughlin ever presented as he trumpeted Roosevelt's triumph over extreme elements on both sides of American society.⁷

With some minor variations, scholarship followed Schlesinger in a wholehearted dismissal of danger posed by American anti-Semites. In 2005, Scott Beekman wrote the only existing biography of William Dudley Pelley.⁸ For the most part, Beekman's biography rejects Pelley as nothing more than an occult writer and a fringe activist. The biography provides a firm factual basis for Pelley's life, but does not portray Pelley as any real threat to commit violence, or even acknowledge some of his violent and outlandish lieutenants. Biographies also exist for Father Coughlin, most of which focus on his perceived fascism at the expense of his call to militancy.⁹ Given his lack of direct participation in militant activity and his primary occupation as a cleric, the connection

⁷ In 1960, Schlesinger wrote *Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* as part of a series on the Roosevelt Administration and the New Deal. The book is used frequently in parts of this paper. For the full text, see the following: Schlesinger, Arthur M. *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston Houghton Mifflin: 1960).

⁸ This book is also used frequently in parts of this paper. For the full text, see the following: Beekman, Scott. *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

⁹ For extensive information on Father Coughlin, see: Charles J. Tull. *Father Coughlin and the New Deal* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1965). Shorter sections on Coughlin can be found in the following: James P. Shenton. "Fascism and Father Coughlin." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 44. no. 1 (1960): 6-11.; Raymond Gram Swing. *Forerunners of American Fascism* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969). ; Leland Bell. *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1973).

between Coughlin and the Christian Front terrorist cell has not been explored in recent historiography. As a result, the Christian Front has been pushed to the margins of history in favor of an analysis of Coughlin's rhetoric.¹⁰

A minority of historians has reversed this trend by recently reexamining the role rhetoric played in right-wing extremism. Leo Ribuffo began this process in 1983 when he argued for a serious evaluation of Pelley's impact on mainstream American society. He found that, contrary to popular belief, Pelley did not stray far from the mainstream in some of his beliefs. More recently, Arthur Goldwag has suggested that strains of Pelley's anti-Semitic argumentation survive in contemporary conservative dialogue.¹¹ Particularly in the wake of the Tea Party, a look at Pelley reveals that the substance of radical right-wing conversation has not changed even as the outward language has shifted with time. As such, men who once languished at the borders of serious history are worth reviving in an attempt to understand their impact on the radicals who followed.

The natural consequence of this rhetoric, regardless of its perceived importance by later historians, was militancy. Plots by communists and Jews needed to be combated immediately and with direct force, lest the foreigners on the left dismantle the American republic. The threat posed by Coughlin and Pelley's militant underlings has been

¹⁰ For full disclosure, it must be noted that the sources used in this work were not available until recently. Most primary information on the Christian Front comes from a previously classified FBI file that was not used by any of the above writings.

¹¹ Ribuffo's text is a detailed analysis of several right-wing figures and remains a standard in studies on extremism. For full text, see: Leo P. Ribuffo. *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right From the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1983). Goldwag is a relatively recent addition to this branch of historiography, but nevertheless presents compelling argument. See: Arthur Goldwag. *The New Hate: A History of Fear and Loathing on the Populist Right*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

minimized in the ensuing years, and has now been barely recorded. A post-9/11 analysis of terrorism recognizes the threat posed by large multinational groups and “lone wolves” alike. The Christian Front and Silver Legion fluctuated between those categories as different local units acted on their own to acquire weaponry and participate in military drills. In the aftermath of 9/11, the relationship between fundamentalist religion and terror acts has also come to the fore. The Christian Front and Silver Legion embody a rare combination of both domestic right-wing extremism and religious radicalism, placing them at a unique crossroads between contemporary anti-government militia groups and prominent religious fundamentalists. At different times one group had more success than the other, but each posed a unique challenge to the budding national security apparatus.

Pelley and Coughlin stood at the forefront of a short-lived wave of American paramilitary anti-Semitism that blew through American society and then faded into obscurity just as quickly. Born in a time of chaos, these men and their organizations deployed anti-Semitic rhetoric and militant action in a bid to change the course of American history. Although they failed, the echoes of their radical agenda are heard today—sometimes directly from the mouths of pundits and terrorists alike. A line stretches from the oratory of New Deal radicals through World War Two and continues through Posse Comitatus, all the way to the Christian Identity movement and beyond to right-wing opposition to the Obama Administration. The story of William Dudley Pelley and Charles Coughlin is the story of the modern American radical right, a story that gains renewed importance in times of ideological polarization and economic turmoil.

Chapter One: White Faith



William Dudley Pelley. Image taken from *Seven Minutes in Eternity*, courtesy of David M. Rubenstein Rare Manuscript Collection at Duke University.

*"I am not trying to make people good; I am only giving them extraordinary information."
-William Dudley Pelley*

In 1928, in his bed in a small bungalow in the Sierra Madre foothills, William Pelley died. He remembered it as a physical sensation, a tailspin into oblivion accompanied by an awareness of his own impending demise. As he lay there, he silently wondered how long it would be until someone found his body. Physically and mentally he thought that he had passed into the spirit realm, and he had met what he said were "two strong-bodied, kindly-faced young men in white duck uniforms not unlike those worn by internes [sic] at hospitals."¹²

That night in May was not the end of William Pelley's mortal existence. Instead, it began a lifetime peddling a concoction of occult astrology and anti-Semitic extremism. Pelley adapted this story into an autobiographical book that went on to sell thousands of copies and make him a prominent name in both mysticism and popular journalism. Riding on the wave of this notoriety, he found work as a screenwriter in Hollywood. The movie business gave Pelley his first personal contact with Jews, but he grew to resent Jewish studio heads for their power over his scripts. The ensuing years implanted in Pelley a deep-seated hatred for the Jewish people, and soon Pelley combined his newfound anti-Semitism with his previous work in mystic writings. The odd mixture of occult anti-Semitism found a ready audience in certain segments of the American population, and in 1934 he formed the paramilitary Silver Legion and began an active propaganda campaign against the Roosevelt Administration.

¹² William Dudley Pelley, *"Seven Minutes in Eternity", With Their Aftermath: Together with a Biographical Sketch of the Author* (New York: Robert Collier, 1929), 7-9.

While the American government considered Pelley threatening—it subjected him to multiple Congressional investigations by both the McCormick-Dickstein and Dies Committees—he was hardly the most violent member of his movement. Pelley’s personal subversive activities rarely saw him in the middle of the fight; they often found him socializing with German officials and writing anti-Semitic tracts. Pelley styled himself as the ideological leader of a broader paramilitary movement. Even if he later denied direct involvement, his rhetoric inspired later acts of violence that became associated with the group. Pelley’s promises of economic redemption, spiritual salvation, and anti-Semitic vengeance convinced thousands of ordinary Americans to forcibly resist the looming Communist Armageddon.

I. “A Bloody and Profitable War”

William Dudley Pelley was born as the only son of a Methodist family in Lynn, Massachusetts on March 12, 1890. His father worked as a foreman at a shoe factory and underwent nightly training as a minister at Boston Theological Seminary. Economic hardship often drove the Pelleys from town to town, and his father switched occupations at every stop. Working sometimes as a cobbler, other times as an advertising solicitor, the elder William Pelley eventually came on as a reporter for the *Gardner Journal* of West Gardner, Massachusetts in 1896. For the younger Pelley, nights with his father in the *Journal*’s print shop convinced him to try his hand at journalism.¹³

Working in Bennington, Vermont in the early 1910’s, Pelley wrote fictional short stories. He set them in the fictitious town of Paris, Vermont and sold them to local

¹³ Scott Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 1-5.

newspapers. Soon, larger news outlets began to pick up his stories. In August of 1917, *American Magazine* published a Pelley story entitled “Their Mother”. This first publication marked the beginning of collaboration between Pelley and *American Magazine* editor John Slidell. Money from *American Magazine* allowed Pelley to buy his own newspaper, a local outlet called *The Daily Caledonian*.¹⁴ His involvement with the newspaper lasted about a year. In the summer of 1918 he left it in the care of two local men after Bishop Fred Fisher of the Methodist Centenary movement approached Pelley and convinced him to act as an international correspondent for the movement’s missions.¹⁵

Pelley traveled first to Japan and then to Russia, where he covered the ongoing Russian Civil War. While waiting in the Japanese port of Tsuruga, Pelley met an American surgeon who introduced him to the world of anti-Semitism. The surgeon told Pelley that World War I had first broken out because “Jews had orchestrated the assassination of Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in order to bring about a bloody and profitable war.” The trip to Siberia exposed Pelley to anti-Semitism for the first time in his life, and he later remarked that the sentiments “prevailed among the American and Czech troops in Russia”.¹⁶ This first foray abroad left an indelible mark on Pelley, and he later traced his fervent anti-Communism to his experiences with the Bolsheviks.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 19-21.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁷ Pelley was neither the first nor the last to link Judaism with Communism. The view became widespread in certain circles after the publication of the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, once considered a legitimate document but now confirmed as a forgery. The *Protocols*, written in 1905, purported to be the secret instructions of a cabal of Jewish leaders to wage economic war against the Russian government. Pro-monarchy Russian forces used the *Protocols* to justify attacks against Jews, who they believed were

Following his stint in Russia, Pelley returned to the United States and continued writing. *Sunset Magazine* published five articles based on Pelley's experiences in Russia, and he reviewed Sinclair Lewis' novel *Main Street* on behalf of *People's Magazine*. Calling *Main Street* a "distorted, reprehensible libel on the American small town", Pelley sought to rectify the problems Lewis' novel and published a counterpart entitled *The Fog* in the summer of 1922.¹⁸ The book was a financial success, and this stroke of luck pushed Pelley to foray once again into short fiction. His short story "White Faith", written within weeks of *The Fog*, came to the attention of New York-based film producer Larry Giffin. Giffin bought the rights to the story and intended to adapt it into a movie along with wealthy businessman Jules Brulatour.

Giffin changed the title of the script from "White Faith" to *The Light in the Dark*, casting popular industry veteran Lon Chaney in the starring role. Pelley and Chaney met on the set and quickly became such good friends that when "they were not filming, their two families spent evenings and weekends together in New York."¹⁹ The friendship between Pelley and Chaney allowed the former to gain entry into the film industry, and by the end of 1922 Pelley had sold multiple scripts in New York City. Chaney connected

behind the Revolution. The text quickly spread across the world and became a foundation for the link between Communism and Judaism. For the text itself, as well as a foreword with an explanation by Dr. Daniel Keren of Brown University, see the following: http://ddickerson.igc.org/The_Protocols_of_the_Learned_Elders_of_Zion.pdf For further explanation, see the following: Jerry Z. Muller. "The Jew As Communist." In *Capitalism and the Jews* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Beekman, 34-35.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 38.

him with Universal Studios in 1923 for a movie entitled *The Shock*, and Pelley began working in what he called “the necromancy of movie making.”²⁰

Hollywood became both a financial boon and a moral turning point. Pelley maintained a residence in New York City but spent most of his time in California, leading to his divorce from his wife in late 1922. He sold *The Shock* to Universal for two thousand dollars, and the studio cast Lon Chaney as the star. The film opened to negative reviews, but had success at the box office and furthered both Chaney and Pelley in their careers.²¹ By 1924 Pelley had six movies to his credit. Life in Hollywood, however, brought its challenges. Pelley came into close contact with the predominantly Jewish heads of the major motion picture studios, who he found “ignorant and uncultured”. He resented their power to alter his scripts without his input and expressed concern over what he viewed as their decadence and influence over the American public.²²

II. “There Is No Such Thing As Death”

Pelley decided to withdraw from “Jewish” Hollywood and bought a bungalow in Altadena in 1928, receiving very few visitors and spending most of his time in contemplation on the question of race. One such night led to the experience about which Pelley later wrote. He called it *Seven Minutes in Eternity*. Published in 1929, the story told of an out-of-body experience in which Pelley ascended to heaven multiple times over the course of several weeks in order to communicate with its inhabitants. The two young men he called hospital interns relaxed him on this new plane of existence, and he

²⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

²¹ *Ibid*, 39-42.

²² *Ibid*, 46.

experienced an “inexpressible ecstasy [sic]” that was both mental and physical.²³

According to Pelley, he awoke nude on a bench in a marble portico across from a Roman-style pool colored by opal light. Suddenly people began to enter the portico, nodding at him when they passed and speaking to him with “a kindness, a courtesy, a friendliness, in their faces and addresses that quite overwhelmed me.”²⁴ He noted that none of these people exhibited any defects or handicaps as they might have in life, and they included no “misfits” or “sour leers.” Instead, they appeared as physically glorified versions of their previous selves. He talked with them, identified those he knew, and even “called others by their wrong names and was corrected.”²⁵ Before long a blue mist settled over the portico, and Pelley recalled being lifted and levitated before the crowd before suddenly awaking upright in his bed. He was very much physically alive.

During that trip to the afterlife, he claimed to have unlocked the secret of his occult belief: “that there is no such thing as Death for the conscious entity that is you and me as we know one another.”²⁶ After publishing his experience, Pelley received thousands of letters from readers of *American Magazine* that more or less affirmed his belief. An epilogue to the article confidently stated that his letters indicated “that hundreds upon hundreds of quite normal persons from time to time throughout their lives had left their physical bodies.”²⁷ This allegedly large group of Americans convinced Pelley that there was a ready following for his occult beliefs, and he pushed ahead with

²³ Pelley, *Seven Minutes in Eternity*, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 30.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

his metaphysical studies. He claimed to study “two to three hours a night, three or four times a week, giving time to such hyper-dimensional instruction.”

One night, while partaking in this instruction, an unknown voice spoke to Pelley in a language he did not understand. He immediately asked a stenographer working alongside him to write the words as he repeated them phonetically, marking down vowel sounds to preserve proper pronunciation. This communication grew to twelve pages’ worth of writing. A few weeks later, Pelley showed the paper to “an erudite philologist” who found over a thousand words of pure Sanskrit within it, making up a message that commented on current affairs. Pelley claimed that it came from “an ancient Atlantean soul” who had been disembodied for the previous 65,000 years.²⁸ Pelley did not commit the majority of this occult metaphysics to paper until after he was paroled from prison in 1952, when he published his philosophy in its entirety under the title *Why I Believe the Dead are Alive*. The hefty tome explained in dense prose the exact nature of Pelley’s belief in the afterlife, and he personally attributed the ideas to the late Pythagoras. *Why I Believe the Dead are Alive* represented the totality of Pelley’s matured esoteric beliefs, having been crafted meticulously over almost twenty years while he was not otherwise occupied in organizing political groups.

In this book, Pelley expanded on his experience from *Seven Minutes in Eternity*. The arguments in *Why I Believe the Dead are Alive* expounded on Pelley’s supernatural racial theory, which he only hinted at in *Seven Minutes in Eternity*. Pelley’s spiritual hierarchy of races reinforced his perception that white Christians were the superior race. Combining both spiritualism and racism in one work allowed Pelley to impart a

²⁸ *Ibid*, 41.

metaphysical foundation for his followers to rest on, as divine inspiration for racism gave Pelley's arguments more legitimacy.

He said that during that night, he saw his deceased brother-in-law and people he had known "in other life cycles and previous states of physical consciousness."²⁹ One of these past lives included a run-in with Jesus of Nazareth, of whom he says, "I knew that He was not a mystical religious ideal. I knew that His ministry and career had been a literal actuality and that I had once seen Him when He was thus in His flesh!"³⁰ As for Christian angels, they were "the discarnate souls of relatives who have lost their bodies. And they know no more what they're talking about than they have known in mortality." These people, dead in the mortal world, existed on other planes of existence as sublime physical presences that were no more omniscient or supernatural than they were in mortal form.³¹

The hierarchy of Pelley's afterlife consisted of ten "spheres" of differing composition. The first sphere was Earth, the bodily existence that precedes death. The second sphere was composed of "those who are simply ignorant and weak, rather than downright depraved and vicious...there is more opportunity to gain knowledge of higher and better things." Such a sphere theoretically included groups like the Japanese—who Pelley claimed were "children and naught else"—but most certainly not Jews.³² The third sphere of the afterlife was "the great mass of everyday, ordinary people, not very wise, neither good nor bad, just full of blunders and stumbling along." Presumably, this sphere

²⁹ William Dudley Pelley, *Why I Believe the Dead are Alive* (Noblesville, Indiana: Soulcraft Chapels, 1954), 30.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

³¹ *Ibid*, 72-73.

³² Beekman, 25.

contained all white Christians who did not achieve anything extraordinary in their life. Pelley did not explicitly exclude racial minorities from this group, but in the context of his overarching racial philosophy their inclusion was impossible. Dating back to his experience with the “seven minutes in eternity”, Pelley believed that the different races “represented gradations of spiritual development. The Master Minds placed the least capable souls in black bodies, followed ‘upward, cycle after cycle by brown, yellow, red, and white men.’”³³

As for the next five spheres, they included “men and women whose lives have been developed to the service of mankind.” These spheres increased in rank as the inhabitant increased in wisdom, and each level had a smaller population than the one below it. People existing on these planes spent most of their time in the spheres below their own, teaching and helping “the less advanced and weaker members of the race.” His use of “the race” here suggested either the human race or the white race; his language is imprecise. Finally, the ninth and tenth spheres contained the “masters”, spiritual leaders that include most of the Christian canon.³⁴ Pelley’s metaphysical ideals attracted his first followers, and his mix of racist supremacy rhetoric with mainstream Christian iconography may explain why his adherents so readily abetted his rabid anti-Semitism.

Pelley’s *Seven Minutes in Eternity* served as a trigger mechanism that pushed him to combine his esoteric writing and his fervent anti-Semitism, the end result of which became *Why I Believe the Dead are Alive*. Before that metaphysical event and its subsequent racial formulations, Pelley had followed a mainstream brand of orthodox

³³ Leo P. Ribuffo. *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right From the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1983), 58.

³⁴ Pelley, *Why I Believe the Dead are Alive*, 88.

Protestantism that shied away from mystical or occult philosophy. Following the “seven minutes”, Pelley turned to theosophist and occult literature to give his experience meaning. This literature proved to be the joint at which he connected the disparate arms of occult and anti-Semitic thought. Theosophist practitioners of the time—mainly Germans and Russians—“inferred that the Aryan ‘Root Race’ was the best race.”³⁵ Pelley steeped himself in this tradition, joining “other German occultists [who] contributed to Nazi ideology, arguing (as Pelley did) that Atlantis had been corrupted by Jews.”³⁶

He advanced this line of thinking considerably with his own writing, drawing on examples from the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *The International Jew* to explain both spiritual and temporal events. Pelley “blamed Adam Weishaupt and the Bavarian Illuminati for the French Revolution...and added that the Rothschild family had financed the subversion.”³⁷ For domestic affairs, Pelley held the Jews responsible for the entirety of the American slave trade and placed the blame for Southern secession squarely on the shoulders of Judah P. Benjamin.³⁸

In addition to theosophist anti-Semitism, Pelley interspersed his occult ideology with references to British Israelism. The philosophy originated in England in the 19th century and held that Anglo-Saxons were actually the true Israelites depicted in the Bible. It succinctly combined northern European white supremacy with scriptural legitimacy in a way that appealed to Pelley’s Protestant tastes. Pelley never directly endorsed the ideology, but was heavily influenced by the writing of David Davidson. Davidson, a

³⁵ Ribuffo, 58.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Pelley adherent, was an author who wrote at length about “pyramidism,” the belief that ancient Anglo-Saxons related to Noah built the Great Pyramid of Giza. It functioned as a prophetic clock, which revealed the secrets of the future to those able to decipher it. Davidson’s pyramidism functioned in concert with British-Israelite racial theory to support Pelley’s anti-Semitic beliefs.³⁹

Pelley saw in the pyramids a prophecy that predicted the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. He never revealed exactly how he came about this prediction, instead retroactively claiming that he had seen auspices in the stars. A certain Mrs. Leslie had come to one of Pelley’s occult discussion meetings in 1933 and offered a prophecy that he would lead a “nation-wide spiritual movement.” Pelley himself had trouble interpreting this claim, but hoped that the “Great Pyramid date of January 31, 1933” would give him some indication. On that day he picked up a newspaper and read the headline “Adolf Hitler Becomes German Chancellor.” Pelley claimed that at that moment he realized the fulfillment of pyramid prophecy could only come through his rise at the head of the paramilitary Silver Legion.⁴⁰

Eric Sevareid described Pelley’s infatuation with pyramidism during a 1936 exposé on the Silver-shirts in Minnesota.⁴¹ His story, published in *The Minneapolis Journal*, explains that Pelley used the Pyramid of Giza to predict a global Jewish uprising on September 16th of that year. The uprising, planned “since Solomon’s time”, would be repelled by the members of the Silver-shirts. Sevareid quoted an unnamed Silver-shirt as

³⁹ David Lobb, "Fascist Apocalypse: William Dudley Pelley and Millennial Extremism," *New World Orders: Millennialism in the Western Hemisphere* (1999), 3-4.

⁴⁰ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of William Dudley Pelley), 7215.

⁴¹ The article was published under the alias Arnold Sevareid

saying that “we’ve known for a long time that the Jews are plotting to seize the United States government. They want to run the whole world and tell us what to do...September 16th is the day. You want to watch out. We’ve all got order to stay home and away from windows.”⁴² The world’s Jewish population celebrated September 16th, 1936 as Rosh Hashanah, the Hebrew New Year.

III. “Initiative, Ambition, Industry, and Thrift”

Pelley wrote several political tracts to accompany his esoteric literature. He titled the first *No More Hunger*, billing it as an economic manifesto for the liberation of the American people. First published in 1933, *No More Hunger* called for the creation of a “Christian Commonwealth” that in reality resembled fascist corporatism. Pelley developed this idea as a suitable “Christian” contrast to what he perceived as the contemporary Jewish-dominated secular American republic. Pelley organized the Silver Legion to implement the Christian Commonwealth across the United States if the group ever gained control of the government. According to Pelley, “a nation’s greatest danger lies in a political condition creating an economic condition where civic morale is gradually broken down.”⁴³ To prevent this, Pelley called for the immediate creation of the Christian Commonwealth with himself at its head. He presented the Commonwealth as an economic, rather than a political, system. At first, Pelley’s program did not “require installation by physical violence to be successful. Nor does it require that our political institutions need to be structurally changed.” Instead, he resolved to change “our ways of

⁴²Arnold Severeid, "Silvershirts Here Elevate Maurice Rose To Status Of International Banker" *The Minneapolis Journal*, September 14, 1936.

⁴³ William Dudley Pelley, *No More Hunger!* (Asheville, North Carolina: Pelley Publishers, 1936), 8.

doing business, earning money, handling trade and commerce, building and owning homes, [and] providing against unemployment and old-age dependency.”⁴⁴

As Pelley called for these reforms during the throes of the Great Depression, his sworn enemy in the White House attempted to create a similar system from a completely opposite perspective. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated in March of 1933 in the midst of a bank panic, prompting him to usher in the “first” New Deal. These reforms included establishing the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to underwrite deposits, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Civilian Conservation Corps. In addition, Roosevelt pushed Congress to pass the National Industrial Recovery Act that established rules of corporate behavior.⁴⁵

Not content to agree with the man he derisively termed “Rosenfeld”, Pelley had other ideas for the American economy. He issued seventeen stipulations for the Christian Commonwealth that comprised his economic policy. In essence, the stipulations called for the transformation of the American economy into “a gigantic corporation, its present morass of obligations properly funded by stocks instead of bonds...with our native-born and naturalized citizens as its only Common Stockholders [sic].” Again, the term “native-born and naturalized citizens” signifies white Christians. These stockholders would hold an amount of membership in a common stock that allotted them dividends once a month in an amount relative to the GDP, in order to “forever remove the Hunger Duress [sic]

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

⁴⁵ William L. Anderson. "Risk and the National Industrial Recovery Act: An Empirical Evaluation." *Public Choice* 103, no. 1 (2000): 139-61. Accessed April 22, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30026157>.

from their habits of economic thinking.”⁴⁶ This stock, however, was merely the base that an American citizen could earn. The state would award additional shares to citizens to recognize “initiative, ambition, industry, and thrift”, shares that could not be otherwise sold or given away to discourage predatory economic practices.

Paper currency, or really any currency at all, would not exist in the Christian Commonwealth. Instead, Pelley called for the citizenry to do business exclusively with the use of bank checks connected to each citizen’s checking account, the amount of money in which was again determined by the number of shares held in relation to the GDP. Without paper currency, Pelley’s system removed the specter of debt and allowed him to declare that “all rights to private property and homestead premises are made so inviolate and inalienable that it shall be as unlawful as it is unthinkable to foreclose on either.” Just as the citizens of the nation were freed from the bonds of debt, so too was the government. Pelley postulated that there would be no taxes in the Christian Commonwealth because “the need of taxes to finance the operation of government shall have been forever abolished, taxes becoming as archaic as currency.”

Pelley’s most direct attack on what he viewed as the predatory practices of “Jewish” bankers came in his ninth stipulation. He declared “there is no more commercial interest levied or paid in borrowings, because men shall no longer have occasion to supplement purchasing power.” Furthermore, it followed logically that “interest and usury are dispensed with, and with interest and usury will go three quarters of the evils attendant on the issuances of mortgages and bonds—all liens upon men’s futures.”⁴⁷ The elimination of interest would undermine the banking system directly, no longer allowing

⁴⁶ Pelley, *No More Hunger!*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

for banks to earn money on deposits.⁴⁸ Pelley believed that banks were controlled by an international Jewish conspiracy, at one point going so far as to claim that Jews invested between sixty-five and seventy percent of the country's wealth.⁴⁹ Destroying the banks meant destroying the "Jewish" grip on the American economic system, which would of course allow more freedom for patriotic—white Christian—Americans.

He did not sidestep the issue of governance, but rather presented a system that differed slightly from the traditional fascist state. He said that no major legislation in the Commonwealth could be passed into law without a fifty-one percent vote of the American citizenry. In addition, recall elections would allow citizens to remove "incompetent or dishonest" officials by a majority vote. These elections would end the secret ballot and instead publish all votes in order to abolish "dishonest tallying of returns". Pelley justified this by accusing the secret ballot of existing "because men are economically obligated to other men and any hostile votings might make them the objects of reprisals."⁵⁰ Once again, Pelley implied that the institution of a public ballot would harm the international Jewish conspiracy that controlled American voting.

On social issues, Pelley pushed an inclusive agenda. His Christian Commonwealth would provide educational opportunities "on all levels...available to each and every child—limited only by the individual's ability to qualify for higher

⁴⁸ This attack on interest rates is typical of anti-Semitic rhetoric. In the Middle Ages, the Papacy forbade Christians from charging interest on loans. Jewish banking houses filled that void, charging interest rates in a practice that became known as usury. Usury and Jewish identity became intertwined in Western anti-Semitic thought, and Pelley uses that history to argue against the continuance of interest in the Christian Commonwealth. For more information, see: Muller, Jerry Z. "The Long Shadow of Usury." In *Capitalism and the Jews* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Pelley, William Dudley. "Rabbis in Week's Huddle Agree to Rant for Patriotism." *Liberation!*, June 21, 1939, 3.

⁵⁰ Pelley, *No More Hunger!*, 29,30-31.

learning.” For those that didn’t qualify, the Commonwealth government would provide them with suitable vocational training. The Commonwealth would not only pay for its citizens’ education, but it would also pay for their healthcare. Pelley wrote “all medical and hospital needs are assumed by a Christian society recognizing its moral obligation to lift financial burdens from the unfortunate who suffer injury or are afflicted with costly and debilitating illness.”⁵¹ His opponents in the Roosevelt administration shared similar goals, but Pelley labeled them communists and accused them of being controlled by Jewish bankers.

IV. “The Tribe of Judah”

Pelley was so convinced that Jews controlled Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition that he published a book in 1936 called *What Every Congressman Should Know!* The introduction of the book accuses “the Tribe of Judah” of infiltrating the American government at all levels. Pelley believed that the Jews denied their existence in government and then used “stupendous weapons of publicity” to get “millions of hoodwinked or ignorant Gentiles to believe it.”⁵² As a dutiful patriot, he published the book to expose to his fellow white Christians the extent to which their government had been permeated by Jewish Bolshevism.

The rest of the book listed alleged Jews by branch of government and in ascending order of power. Pelley believed that Bernard Baruch, a successful businessman and confidante of President Roosevelt, was the most powerful Jew in government.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² William Dudley Pelley, *What Every Congressman Should Know*, (Asheville, North Carolina: Pelley Publishers, 1936), 1-3.

Labeling him the “Unofficial President”, Pelley asserted that Baruch enjoyed “almost autocratic control over 246 of the nation’s most vital war industries.”⁵³ Baruch also allegedly served as a “prince sponsor” to an international Jewish “uncrowned king” named Akha Dham.⁵⁴

Next in line was Henry Morgenthau, Jr. He served as Secretary of the Treasury, and Pelley accused him of being related to international Jewish bankers that had his ear.⁵⁵ In one of his more wild conspiracies, Pelley maintained that Morgenthau bought quarters made in Russia by Bolshevik mints for only five cents a piece, and then sold them back to the American treasury for full price while pocketing the difference. Not only that, but Pelley concluded that Morgenthau had hidden the Star of David on the back of dollar bills in a cluster of stars.⁵⁶

Pelley’s bizarre writings, while fantastical, do represent a legitimate attempt to present a political and economic alternative to the capitalist system. In the throes of the Great Depression, traditional forms of American political thought began to come under scrutiny by radicals on both the left and the right. Huey Long, the populist governor of Louisiana popularly known as the Kingfish, instituted a series of state reforms that included free textbooks and busing for elementary schools as well as the foundation of Louisiana State University.⁵⁷ These reforms came at a cost, however. Long also created a reign of terror known for “not only political and economics reprisals but threats, beatings,

⁵³ *Ibid* 5.

⁵⁴ Arnold Severeid, "Silvershirts Say Quarters Are Bought By Morgenthau In Russia At 5 Cents Each," *The Minneapolis Journal*, September 15, 1936.

⁵⁵ Pelley, *What Every Congressman Should Know*, 8.

⁵⁶ Severeid, 1.

⁵⁷ Schlesinger, 60.

and kidnappings.”⁵⁸ In a similar fashion to Pelley, Long advocated for the redistribution of wealth as a panacea for a variety of societal ills. A chorus of fascists both inside and outside of the American government echoed Pelley’s arguments, but none brought esoteric or paramilitary elements to the table.

Left-wing politics offered yet another option. Upton Sinclair, celebrated author of *The Jungle* and prominent critic of government, became known in this period for an adherence to “a romantic, old fashioned socialism in the tradition which had sprinkled America with utopian communities in the nineteenth century.”⁵⁹ Sinclair ran twice for governor and once for senator as a member of the Socialist Party, his most successful campaign garnering six thousand votes. Undeterred, Sinclair published a utopian work called *I, Governor of California* that laid out a socialist vision for rescuing America from Depression. It called for “the ultimate establishment of a network of land colonies, model factories, and workers’ villages.”⁶⁰

Not all socialist ideas met such lukewarm responses. In 1934 a magazine called *World Tomorrow* asked twenty-one thousand clergymen about reform in the economic system. Ninety-five percent favored a cooperative commonwealth system, and almost one third of the entire group declared for socialism.⁶¹ The New Deal did not convince some on the left that economic change was being pushed far enough. The liberal newspaper *Common Sense* decried it as “the intention of the Roosevelt Administration to make capitalism work. And since it is impossible today to make capitalism work for long, the

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 111.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 156.

New Deal is doomed to failure. With this in mind no intelligent or courageous radical can support Roosevelt.”⁶²

To say that Pelley was alone in searching for a way out of the struggle of the 1930’s does not do justice to the tumultuous nature of the time. Pelley and his cohort on the right wing used the dream of fascism to inspire a revolutionary movement, a plan to both resist the threat of communism and dismantle the oppressive capitalist system. Across the aisle, his sworn enemies inspired their foot soldiers to do the same. To combat the upheaval of the time, Pelley and the storm troopers of the Christian Commonwealth took the fight from the ballot box to the street in a struggle they believed would decide the future of the Christian world.

⁶² *Ibid*, 159.

Chapter Two: The Fighting Church



Father Charles Coughlin. Image courtesy of <http://www.ssa.gov/history/pics/coughlinmic.jpg>

“Social Justice has specific principles. First, it is Christian. Second, it is social. Thirdly, it is active. And fourthly, it is militant.”
-Father Charles Coughlin

The tower in the Shrine of the Little Flower had a spiral staircase, a series of ascending platforms in a dark hallway that reached high into the sky above Royal Oak, Michigan. At the top, a small room housed a jumble of wires running from outside the building, up through the outside of the tower, and into a small mahogany desk in the corner. There at the desk, a priest composed his radio sermons in the company of his trusted Great Dane. By 1939 he had become known as the Radio Priest, a man with a weekly listening audience of millions. On this particular Sunday, the fourth of June, Father Charles Coughlin delivered yet another broadcast; he titled it “Christians, Be Militant.”

Until his forced retirement from radio at the outbreak of World War Two, Father Coughlin regularly reached vast swathes of a receptive American audience with attacks on what he called “the mystical body of Satan.”⁶³ These sermons regularly lambasted international banking, American corporations, Jews, Communists, and the Roosevelt Administration. He often conflated all of these elements. Coughlin saw these disparate groups as tied to a single vast conspiracy to oppress Christian workers and subvert the traditional American way of life. Using his weekly broadcasts as a weapon, he condemned his enemies both real and imagined while simultaneously courting urban Catholic audiences.

Beginning in 1926, Coughlin’s programs initially concerned nothing beyond the Christian faith, particularly focusing on elements of Catholic teaching. As the Great

⁶³ Charles Coughlin. “Christians, Be Militant”. June 4, 1939.

Depression deepened, he turned increasingly to politics and economics. Soon his shows earned him a following that he called the National Union for Social Justice, a group of mostly working class Irish immigrants who he thought he could use as a force in electoral politics. The National Union for Social Justice initially served as a way for Coughlin to rally support behind President Roosevelt and the New Deal; it soon became an anti-Semitic party that followed only Coughlin's directives. Eventually the movement lost steam, and many of its adherents joined a more violent organization, inspired by Coughlin, called the Christian Front. Once a Roosevelt supporter, Coughlin turned against the President in 1934 and marshaled his supporters to present one of the most violent domestic challenges the New Deal coalition would ever face.

I. "At the Crossroads of Faith and Religious Persecution"

In the late 1890's, Thomas Coughlin worked as a sailor on Great Lakes steamships, shoveling coal and stoking wood with many of his Irish immigrant countrymen. Driven away by pervasive anti-Catholic bias in the American Midwest, Thomas moved to Ontario and joined St. Mary's Church in Hamilton as its sexton. There he met Amelia Mahoney, a young seamstress and devout Catholic. The two married, and soon after gave birth to a son. They baptized him at St. Mary's on October 25, 1891 as Charles Edward Coughlin.⁶⁴

Charles served as an altar boy at St. Mary's and attended the local parish school until his graduation in June of 1903. He entered St. Michael's College in Toronto, a high school that trained priests for the Archdiocese of Toronto. At St. Michael's Charles

⁶⁴ Sheldon Marcus. "Early Life." In *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 12-14.

received decent marks, but struggled in economics.⁶⁵ He graduated in 1907 and immediately entered the school's college portion. In 1911 he graduated again as president of his class and entered nearby St. Basil's Seminary, which was run by members of the Basilian Order. The Order ordained him into its ranks on June 29, 1916.

Now Father Coughlin, Charles taught classes at Assumption College and preached at St. Agnes' Church in Detroit. Only two years after he entered the order, the Basilians underwent a fundamental change. Historically the order answered to superiors in France, a vestige of Gallicanism brought to the New World by French fur traders. In 1918, Father Frank Forster, the superior general of the Basilians in Canada, broke with the order in France and established "a separate clerical entity stressing the concept of a Basilian community in conformity with canon law."⁶⁶ The change also required that all members of the order take an additional vow of poverty.

The Basilians gave their members three options. First, priests could comply with the new vow and remain in the order as a full member in good standing. Second, they could refuse to take the additional vow and remain in the order but without a say in community governance. Third, they could leave the order entirely and continue as secular clergy under their local bishops. Six priests, including Father Coughlin, took the third option and departed the community. Monetarily, this also meant that Coughlin was no longer bound by a vow of poverty, could create and keep his own wealth, and inherit property.

His break with the Basilians put Father Coughlin under the purview of the bishop of Detroit, John Foley. Foley died shortly after Coughlin's initial entry into the Diocese

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 14-15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 19-21.

of Detroit and was replaced by Michael Gallagher, the bishop of nearby Grand Rapids. Coughlin accompanied the Chancellor of the Detroit diocese to meet Bishop Gallagher, and the two became immediate friends. Gallagher incardinated Coughlin into the Diocese of Detroit on February 26, 1923, and assigned him as assistant pastor to St. Augustine's Church in Kalamazoo.⁶⁷

Three years later, Bishop Gallagher returned from a trip to Rome, on which he celebrated the impending canonization of St. Therese, The Little Flower of Jesus. Upon arriving in Detroit, Gallagher resolved to build a church in her honor. He chose Royal Oak, Michigan, as the place. Royal Oak, like many Detroit suburbs at the time, housed increasing numbers of Catholic immigrants drawn to the Midwest by the booming Detroit automotive industry. The local Protestants clashed with these groups, and Royal Oak in particular had a strong chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan in Royal Oak was aggressive and hostile to local Catholics, and Gallagher determined that the Catholic Church would enter the fray.⁶⁸

He knew he needed an aggressive young priest to combat Klan incursions in the area and looked to his friend Father Coughlin as the solution. Summoning Coughlin to the Chancery in downtown Detroit, Gallagher commanded him to go to Royal Oak and build a church "*at the crossroads of faith and religious persecution...*in the midst of the fiery hatred of Ku Klux Klanism. Build your church there in the wilderness. Name it the

⁶⁷ Incardination is the Catholic practice by which a priest is endowed with a ministry in a diocese by his superior. It enables a priest to conduct affairs with full legal status under canon law in a diocese. Priests who operate in a diocese in which they are not incardinated face significant legal hurdles to engaging in ministry.

⁶⁸ Marcus, 22.

Shrine of the Little Flower. Make it a missionary oasis in the desert of religious bigotry.”⁶⁹

II. “Neither Man Nor Beast”

The original structure for the Shrine of the Little Flower stood at the intersection of Woodward Avenue and Twelve Mile Road, two dirt paths that lacked even basic sewage systems. The church was a simple wooden building designed to fit roughly six hundred worshippers. Early in its existence the Church suffered from poor attendance and dismal finances. Coughlin lived in a small room in the back of the building, surviving off of food donated by his parishioners.

Two weeks after the Church opened, Coughlin awoke from his sleep in the middle of the night. Walking to the front lawn, he saw a large wooden cross burning in the night sky, next to a sign saying, “Move from Royal Oak.” The Ku Klux Klan had targeted the Church in order to stem what it viewed as a tide of Catholic intrusion into Protestant territory. Undeterred, Coughlin promised that he would avenge this attack, saying “Some day we will build a church and raise its cross so high to the sky that neither man nor beast can burn it down.”⁷⁰ To build such a church, Coughlin needed funds.

During his time in Detroit, Coughlin had become friendly with Wish Egan, a scout for the Detroit Tigers. He asked Egan if he could bring Tigers players to the Shrine of the Little Flower for publicity as a way of attracting parishioners and donations. On Sunday, August 8, 1926, the Tigers were in the midst of a series against the New York

⁶⁹ Ruth Mugglebee. *Father Coughlin, the Radio Priest of the Shrine of the Little Flower: An Account of the Life, Work and Message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Pub. 1933), 155.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Yankees. Egan brought some of them to the Shrine of the Little Flower, taking along several Yankees players that included Babe Ruth. Thousands flocked to the Church to see their favorite ballplayers, and the athletes themselves stood at the front doors with cardboard boxes soliciting donations. Ruth took Coughlin up to the altar before Mass and said “Listen, Father, you say mass and do the preaching and leave the collection to us.”⁷¹ The total collected that day amounted to approximately \$10,000.⁷²

While the collection had been a success, Coughlin needed a more consistent way to raise money. Considering ways to increase parish revenue, Coughlin explored the idea of weekly radio broadcasts; he hoped to rely on his refined preaching technique and expressive vocal range. In September of 1926 he spoke to Leo Fitzpatrick, the station manager for WJR, Detroit. Fitzpatrick and Coughlin were acquaintances, and Fitzpatrick supported Coughlin’s idea. Coughlin took his idea to Bishop Gallagher, who had similar enthusiasm for the plan. Fitzpatrick approached Dick Richards, the owner of both WJR and the Detroit Lions, for permission to air Coughlin’s broadcasts; Richards requested to hear one of Coughlin’s sermons before giving his approval. Coughlin later remarked that although “Dick was an Anglican, he told me that he would like to hear me preach a sermon. So he came over to the church two or three Sundays and he kept coming after that.”⁷³

Father Coughlin broadcast his first sermon on October 17, 1926, at 2:00 PM. It concerned the role of religion in Catholic life, and he delivered it standing at the altar in

⁷¹ Marcus, 24.

⁷² Later that day, the Tigers beat the Yankees 8-3. Ruth had two hits on three at-bats. The full box score can be found at the following: <http://www.baseball-almanac.com/box-scores/boxscore.php?boxid=192608080DET>.

⁷³ Interview with Father Coughlin, April 11, 1970. Taken from Marcus, 26.

the Shrine of the Little Flower. He personally received and replied to the five congratulatory letters he received after the broadcast. WJR had received considerably more than five letters and, convinced that the broadcast was a success, authorized Coughlin to begin a weekly radio show.

With the broadcast came financial contributions, mostly in the amounts of one and five dollars. By 1927, Coughlin had even won the local Ku Klux Klan over to his side. He related later that in May of that year a Klan funeral procession moved up Woodward Avenue, past the Shrine of the Little Flower. Seeing the funeral party in the rain, Coughlin walked out to the head of the pack and joined them in their march to Roseland Park Cemetery. He claimed to even have helped out with their memorial service afterward, and remarked, "After that we got along just fine."⁷⁴ Later that year Coughlin's broadcasts branched across all of Michigan and into neighboring states, and by the fall of 1927 he had name recognition across most of the continental United States.

Coughlin's weekly radio show had solved his financial problems, and he eventually operated the Shrine of the Little Flower at a surplus. The extra money enabled him to completely renovate his church, and in late 1928 he drew up plans for the new design. The austere wooden structure at the crossing of two dirt roads would disappear, and in its place would rise an octagonal stone church with an altar in the middle. Above

⁷⁴ Marcus, 27-29. The story about the Ku Klux Klan should be viewed somewhat skeptically. Marcus notes that Coughlin couldn't recall why they allowed him to lead their procession, as well as the fact that it is exceedingly unlikely they would allow a Catholic priest to conduct a Protestant service. In any case, the Klan generally left Coughlin alone by this period and eventually came around to his side when he began his campaign of anti-Semitic broadcasts.

the church Coughlin put a stone tower with a crucifix on each side, marking the new Shrine of the Little Flower as a church unique in its time.⁷⁵

III. “Christ or The Red Fog of Communism”

The events of 1929 irreversibly altered Coughlin’s life. With the national plunge into Depression, Coughlin left behind his innocuous religious sermons and focused his attention on politics and economics. His first overtly political sermon decried both Bolshevism and socialism, and his rallying cry in the Depression’s early days was “Christ or the Red Fog of Communism.”⁷⁶ Attacks against the far left became a staple of Coughlin’s rhetoric. Most of his economic arguments came from the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued by Pope Leo XIII.⁷⁷ In particular, Coughlin made use of Leo XIII’s social justice concepts to agitate for reform among the American capitalist elite. This class typically included Coughlin’s favorite target, the ambiguously defined “international bankers.”

His economic platform in this period concerned itself primarily with the revaluation of gold and silver. Gold needed to be revalued at an inflationary rate to decrease the power of individual dollars held primarily by large Wall Street banking firms, thus decreasing their overall sway on the ebb and flow of American economics. Silver, on the other hand, needed to be remonetized in order to diversify and broaden the overall base of currency held in the United States. In defense of his policy, Coughlin

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

⁷⁶ Schlesinger, 17.

⁷⁷ Released in 1891, the encyclical primarily addresses the rights and duties of labor and capital in the post-Industrial Revolution period. The English translation can be found here: http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html

argued that silver “has a value and always will, long after the slave standard of the Rothschilds will have been forgotten.”⁷⁸ Even then, the subtext of his sermons concealed the latent anti-Semitism that would characterize his later rhetoric.

In Coughlin’s eyes, the only person standing in the way of a total Communist takeover was Franklin Roosevelt. After three years on the radio, Coughlin had amassed a considerable following of national proportions; whether or not Roosevelt ever felt genuine admiration for the man, or merely used his endorsement for political gain, is difficult to determine. Coughlin used his connection with Frank Murphy, mayor of Detroit and member of his parish, to gain access to Roosevelt in the spring of 1932. The two met in New York City for a personal conference to discuss economic policy. Coughlin left the meeting “impressed by the governor’s advocacy of cheap currency and a ‘new deal’ for the common man.”⁷⁹ Coughlin endorsed Roosevelt for the Democratic nomination in the summer of 1932, and Roosevelt defeated the incumbent Herbert Hoover that fall.

Coughlin staunchly supported the New Deal during its first phases. He held fast in his belief that the government “had the duty to limit the amount of profits acquired by any industry.”⁸⁰ Coughlin and his supporters backed Roosevelt as late as spring of 1934, until it became clear to Coughlin and other observers that Roosevelt would not accede to the demands of a bloc pushing for the remonetization of silver. The priest vacillated for months throughout the summer of 1934 in his support for the New Deal, unsure of

⁷⁸ Schlesinger, 19.

⁷⁹ Marcus, 29.

⁸⁰ Schlesinger, 23.

whether or not his following would survive an open break with the president.⁸¹ Finally, just a week after the 1934 midterm elections, Coughlin struck out on his own.

On November 11th of that year he founded the National Union for Social Justice. His original platform called populist economic changes: the abolition of the hourly wage, its replacement by the annual wage, the nationalization of public utilities, the abolition of the Federal Reserve, and other minor monetary fixes centered around preferential treatment by government for the poor.⁸² Coughlin envisioned for the National Union for Social Justice as an interest group, not a political party in itself but a mass movement designed to push existing political parties toward Coughlin's program.⁸³ In practice, the group barely functioned the way Coughlin intended. It exerted little influence at the ballot box, as evidenced by the continued implementation of Roosevelt's New Deal even after 1934. Members drawn from urban Catholic populations spent most of the late 1930's listening to Coughlin's sermons and donating to the Shrine of the Little Flower, which increased Coughlin's influence among them but did little to change the course of American politics. Many members of the National Union for Social Justice likely joined the Christian Front at that group's inception in 1938.

IV. "The Power of the Mystical Body of Satan"

Coughlin attracted large Catholic support throughout the 1930's by blending his anti-Semitism and anticommunism with traditional Catholic theology. This rhetoric inflamed his supporters across the East Coast, and by 1939 unrest had erupted in areas

⁸¹ Schlesinger, 24.

⁸² "5,000,000 Recruits Asked By Coughlin." *The New York Times*, November 19, 1934..

⁸³ For a comprehensive summary of Coughlin's activity from 1935-1937, see Marcus, 45-179.

with large Catholic populations. This seeming subversion of Catholic teaching attracted strong reprimands from his superiors in the Catholic Church. Defiant in his speech, Coughlin's followers emerged onto the streets in 1939 in a wave of violence that gripped many East Coast urban areas where his radio show had its highest ratings. His targets, and by extension those of his adherents, were "only such Jews and Gentiles as are linked with international finance and Communism to the detriment of the world."⁸⁴ In practice, Coughlin's distinction between Communists and Jews amounted to nothing.

The intervening years of depression hardened Coughlin's rhetoric. On February 26, 1939, he delivered a weekly address titled "An American Christian Program." His argumentation built on traditional Catholic anticommunism and his own well-developed anti-Semitic ideology. In response to charges that he favored a fascist state, he ostensibly disavowed Nazism while remaining conspicuously ambiguous: "For many weeks I have been expressing the opinion that Nazism is only a defense mechanism against Communism. I believe the time is now opportune for Americans and Christians to erect a defense mechanism against both."⁸⁵ Even though Coughlin asserted that he opposed both systems, he made it clear which of the two evils he would prefer. Speaking of the Third Reich, he compared fascism to "a little brown pill" that "banished unemployment, limited profits for the industrialists, liquidated debts and capitalistic exploitation."

Coughlin's later broadcasts led directly to increasingly organized militant activity in his ranks. On June 4, 1939, he titled his sermon "Christians, Be Militant." His call for action rang true from the speech's opening moments, noting that the Church Militant—

⁸⁴ Coughlin, "Christians, Be Militant".

⁸⁵ Coughlin, "An American Christian Program". Delivered February 26, 1939.

the Catholic idea of a “fighting Church”—may only imply combat against “the inordinate movements of passion—pride, lust, and sloth.” Coughlin rejected this interpretation of Christian doctrine, instead implying that his followers needed to fight communism. He declared “it is equally important to fight the world and the devil; it is of paramount importance to consolidate their forces against the unchristian forces of the world; to oppose vigorously the very realistic powers and principalities of darkness who are the unseen rulers in high places.”⁸⁶ These “unchristian forces” and “unseen rulers” were veiled references to communists and Jewish bankers, respectively.

Much of Coughlin’s rhetoric during this period represented a perversion of mainstream Catholic theology. Since 1891, Catholic clergy and laity alike opposed communism on the basis of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The encyclical addressed the condition of the working classes in response to the changing forces of industrialization, but specifically refuted several key tenets of socialism. Pope Leo XIII wrote that at its core the purpose of labor was for the worker to earn money in order to improve the condition of his life. In order to improve the condition of his life, the worker needed the power to use of his wages as he saw fit, whether that be in land investment or other means: “...when a man engages in remunerative labor, the impelling reason...for his work is to obtain property...[if] one man hires out to another his strength or skill, he does so for the purpose of receiving in return what is necessary for the satisfaction of his

⁸⁶ Coughlin, “Christians, Be Militant”.

needs.”⁸⁷ Socialism denied the worker this right because it deprived the worker “the liberty of disposing his wages” by transferring private property to the community at large.

Rerum Novarum spoke in no uncertain terms about the “obsolete opinions” of socialism and, by extension, communism. Leo XIII charged that these ideologies “are defrauding man of what his own labor has produced...so it is just and right that the results of labor should belong to those who have bestowed their labor.”⁸⁸ Instead, this document held sacrosanct the idea that “private ownership is in accordance with the law of nature.” *Rerum Novarum* became the theological underpinning of Catholic anticommunism throughout the 20th century.

In addition to *Rerum Novarum*, Coughlin had surely read Pope Pius XI’s papal encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*. Issued in 1937, the encyclical denounced communism, which it decried as a “Bolshevistic and atheistic” ideology that aimed “at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization.”⁸⁹ Pope Pius XI encouraged Catholic clergy to foment Catholic opposition to communism within their own parishes, saying that the Papacy “has continued faithfully to protect the sanctuary of the Christian religion, and that it has called public attention to the perils of Communism more frequently and more effectively than any other public authority on earth.” The local clergy, in turn “accurately transmitted and explained to the Faithful these admonitions.”

⁸⁷ Pope Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum*. May 15, 1891. Full text can be found here courtesy of the Vatican: https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Pope Pius IX, *Divini Redemptoris*. March 19, 1937. Full text can be found here courtesy of the Vatican: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19031937_divini-redemptoris.html

Pope Pius XI used *Divini Redemptoris* to build on the arguments against socialism as advocated in *Rerum Novarum*. For example, in accordance with Pope Leo XIII's protection of private property, Pius IX attacked communist property division: "Nor is the individual granted any property rights over material goods or the means of production." In addition, Pius IX rejected communism on the grounds that its policies "makes of marriage and the family a purely artificial and civil institution" due to its rejection of hierarchy, "including the authority of parents."⁹⁰ With such a strong condemnation of communism coming from the Vatican in 1937, Coughlin drew theological support from Pius XI's argument.

Coughlin and his contemporaries held very dearly the tenets of both *Rerum Novarum* and *Divini Redemptoris*. American clergy had begun offering an organized Catholic alternative to left-wing social programs in the wake of World War I, when a group of priests aligned with Catholic University founded the National Catholic Welfare Council. The NCWC intended to improve "more parish-based forms of Catholic social service", overturning "a widespread reliance on personal, voluntary charity that obscured the systemic nature of poverty."⁹¹ In particular, the Welfare Council was "dedicated to the peaceful mediation of conflict between capital and labor", in direct contrast to the Marxist impetus for class warfare.⁹²

Out of the National Catholic Welfare Council came prominent Catholic anticommunist theologian Father Paul Hanly Furfey. Writing primarily in the late 1920's

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Eugene B. McCarragher. "The Church Irrelevant: Paul Hanly Furfey and the Fortunes of American Catholic Radicalism." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1997): 166. Accessed April 5, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1123977> .

⁹² *Ibid.*

and early 1930's, Furfey followed the precepts of *Rerum Novarum* and condemned Marxism, but simultaneously promoted systemic Catholic outreach to the poor. He held that "all Christians form a single social whole" and "charity is the bond of union which solidifies this group."⁹³ Furfey preferred to refer to this "single social whole" as the "Mystical Body of Christ", then "in vogue among North Atlantic Catholics."⁹⁴

In addition, Furfey created a "supernatural sociology" that combined Christian theology and social theory. Furfey leaned heavily on the concepts of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. This theory, based on Catholic theology, asserted the primacy of Christian charity in alleviating social ills: "Since only Christianity gave a true account of the human condition...and since only the Church Militant could most closely reflect the heavenly city, then only Christianity could provide a reliable reading of history and social life."⁹⁵ The Church Militant, unified with the Church Triumphant, represented "the only genuine revolutionary community."

Father Coughlin did not ignore these theological developments, nor did he use their terminology as a matter of coincidence. Instead, Coughlin took advantage of this developing social theory in order to pursue an anti-Semitic agenda. The Mystical Body of Christ theology, as representative of the Catholic community, allowed for the perfect villain in the Mystical Body of Satan, Coughlin's preferred term for Jewish internationalists: "My friends, learn this lesson thoroughly: Communism is only one manifestation of the power of the mystical body of Satan."⁹⁶ Furfey's formulation of the Church Militant as a genuine revolutionary community fit perfectly with Coughlin's hope

⁹³ *Ibid*, 169.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*.

⁹⁶ Coughlin, "Christians, Be Militant".

to use Catholics as the bulwark against communism; Coughlin's invocation of the Church Militant in his speeches implicitly referenced Furfey's theology.⁹⁷

Building on familiar Catholic theology influenced by *Rerum Novarum*, Coughlin continued his rallying cry by telling his listeners that to prevent the Communist takeover of America, "we must act now. Let us cast aside our indifference, our false tolerance, our criminal prudence, and organize thoroughly to reestablish the social order of Jesus Christ for the protection of our nation against the incursions of a diabolical philosophy of internationalism which is well organized amongst us."⁹⁸ Internationalism, Communism, and banking were inextricably intertwined with the "mystical body of Satan" in a conspiracy to overthrow the fabled Christian America that Coughlin sought to protect. Speaking a month later, Coughlin directly challenged the Communists by charging that they planned to "beat down by sheer force with bullet and bayonet and bomb the so-called Coughlinites."⁹⁹ His subtext implied that the Coughlinites were prepared to fight back.

V. "We'll Settle the Question Our Way"

In the streets, Coughlin's supporters organized a separate organization they called the Christian Front. Norman Thomas, noted Coughlin foe and staunch Socialist, asserted that the Christian Front had originated "under the aegis of the Paulist Fathers", but its

⁹⁷ Given Furfey's primary status as an intellectual, his influence among ordinary Catholics in the 1930's—relatively early in his career—is difficult to measure.

⁹⁸ Coughlin, "Christians, Be Militant".

⁹⁹ Charles Coughlin, "Let's Have An Armed Guard". Delivered July 9, 1939. Transcript courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University.

actual genesis was unclear.¹⁰⁰ By 1938, the Front had morphed into a Coughlin offshoot, a group he simultaneously courted and distanced in order to plausibly deny responsibility for their anti-Semitic rioting. Membership concentrated heavily in urban centers on the East Coast with high immigrant populations, including New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia. At any given time it was impossible to determine actual membership numbers for the Christian Front, but in some cities Front supporters numbered in the tens of thousands

Philadelphia at the time housed significant numbers of Irish, German, and Italian immigrants that comingled with a large local Jewish population. The ethnic mixing exploded into street violence with Coughlin's emergence. Local units of the Christian Front mingled openly with Italian Blackshirt groups and German Bund organizations.¹⁰¹ Theodore Erwin related "street fights were not uncommon. Synagogue windows were smashed, and members of Jewish men's clubs beaten. The West Philadelphia and Kensington sections particularly have been terrorized, swamped with anti-Semitic propaganda."¹⁰² He also alleged that for a brief period of time several Front-related groups engaged in rifle practice outside the city before being detained and dispersed by local law enforcement. Groups in Philadelphia vandalized a black church and disrupted

¹⁰⁰ Norman Thomas, "What's Behind the Christian Front?". Delivered August 17, 1939. Transcript courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University.

¹⁰¹ Jenkins, 46.

¹⁰² Theodore Irwin, "Inside the Christian Front". The American Council on Public Affairs. March 1940, 7. Transcript courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University.

“Protestant tolerance” meetings across the city, despite stern warnings from the local Catholic hierarchy.¹⁰³

Violence did not confine itself to Philadelphia. In Baltimore, several children of Front members branded a Jewish boy.¹⁰⁴ Cleveland saw approximately seventeen thousand Front members crowd a hall to watch Father Coughlin speak, with significant support from the local police. Reports from the city indicated that the police openly supported Front affiliated newspapers by harassing and arresting rival handbill salesmen.¹⁰⁵ In Boston, a former insurance agent named Francis Moran organized a Christian Front cover organization called the Committee for Defense of Constitutional Rights, with the purpose of defending the city against the “menace of communism.”¹⁰⁶

The worst anti-Semitic violence occurred in New York City. The large population of varying ethnic groups in close proximity lent itself naturally to incursions, and New York became the scene of the most destructive Christian Front activity. Every week for almost two consecutive years, from the beginning of 1938 until roughly 1940, New York units of the Christian Front held close to thirty open-air meetings in Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs, attracting as many as 2,000 at any given time. These rallies, and

¹⁰³ Jenkins, 44-45.

¹⁰⁴ Irwin, 8.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 5. The Christian Front group in Boston presented a more complicated picture. Under Moran, they switched their focus to propaganda efforts after crackdowns on the Christian Front in other cities. For more information, see the following: Norwood, Stephen H. "Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York During World War II." *American Jewish History* 91, no. 2, 233-67. Accessed April 23, 2015.

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ajh/summary/v091/91.2norwood.html>.

the ensuing brawls and beatings, created a situation in which “there [was] no longer any ambiguity about the link between anti-Semitic violence and Coughlin propaganda.”¹⁰⁷

Violence was often random. On May 21, 1939, a Front member named John Dugan beat an anti-Coughlin newspaper salesman. Dugan was charged with assault, but at his trial the judge praised him “for his frankness in admitting the attack. He was urged to count thirty before committing a similar offense. Sentence was suspended.” A month later, Samuel Applebaum walked by a Front rally and took offense to a Front member saying “We fought in the World War for you Jews. What for?” Applebaum began to argue with the man, and when a fight broke out another Front member walked up to Applebaum and stabbed him. The perpetrator was never found.¹⁰⁸

Those attacked by Front members had little recourse with the police force. Irish Catholics made up a large portion of the police force in New York City, and Coughlin opponents noted “the fraternal attitude manifested by the police toward the Coughlinites.” Police arrested David Grant, an anti-Coughlin activist, for carrying a sign quoting a condemnation of Coughlin by Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago. On the way to the police station, a patrolman told him that he had “gone too far, and we are going to stop you. We have 30,000 men, and when the time comes I’ll resign from the force and we’ll settle the question our way.” That same day, another man approached an officer next to a pro-Coughlin picket line and asked what he thought of the placards. The policeman asked if the man was Jewish, and upon confirming he wasn’t, said, “It’s lucky you’re not. The Jews are taking over everything.” Afterward he alleged that up to 6,000 police were Christian Front members. On July 6, 1939, Christian Front members beat an anti-

¹⁰⁷ James Wechsler. “The Coughlin Terror.” *The Nation* (July 22, 1939), 92-93.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Coughlin newspaper salesman on the corner of 116th Street and Rockaway Boulevard. When bystanders begged for police to intervene, an officer walked up to the man and hit him over the head with a club, fracturing his skull.¹⁰⁹

Coughlin's rhetoric, and the violence that came of it, caused major disruption in large population centers across the East Coast. Street violence characterized the movement, but in the shadows more sinister terrorist plots took shape. As Coughlin committed to his anti-Roosevelt rhetoric, his followers relentlessly assaulted those perceived as Jews and communists. In places like New York and Philadelphia, they associated openly with Bündsmen and Silvershirts in anti-Semitic agitation. The Christian Front, like their Protestant counterparts in the Silver Legion, resorted to brutish attacks on Jews—and those perceived as Jews—spurred on by unrelenting anti-Semitic rhetoric from charismatic figureheads like Charles Coughlin and William Pelley. Violence by both groups instilled a sense of domestic instability, and their more militarized elements engaged in terrorist and paramilitary activity with the ultimate goal of replacing the government of Franklin Roosevelt.

¹⁰⁹ Wechsler, 96.

Chapter Three: Army of the White King



Image courtesy of <http://johndenugent.us/images/silver-rangers-william-dudley-pelley-meeting-porch.jpg>

"It is his aim to replace the American democracy with a regime patterned after Hitler's Germany"-Representative Samuel Dickstein

Corporal Edward Gray stood at the corner of C Street and Broadway in the Chula Vista section of San Diego, California. It was late May of 1934, and the young Marine didn't see the group of Silvershirts approaching him. He knew these men; he had trained alongside them to defeat a supposed communist uprising earlier that same month. They knew him as well, although they had only recently discovered that Gray had informed government investigators about their clandestine activity. The ensuing altercation resembled less a fight than it did a beating, and when it was over Gray, skull cracked open from repeated blows, lay bleeding in the street.¹¹⁰

William Dudley Pelley and his Silver Legion, colloquially known as the Silvershirts, had established chapters in over half the territory of the United States. In the 1930's Pelley became one of the leaders of the growing domestic right-wing extremist movement, and his militant group hoped to replicate Hitler's success in Germany. All fervent opponents of the Roosevelt Administration, the Silvershirts gathered in major population centers to plot and prepare for the final battle against the Jews and the communists. With Pelley at the head of the organization local chapters spread out across the country and quickly paramilitarized, primarily through firearms training and street fighting.

Pelley alone did not represent a significant threat to the United States. Instead, his combination of foreign contacts and unpredictable followers made the Silver Legion a disruptive force in New Deal politics. Chapters across the country rallied and engaged in street violence against communist and pro-labor outfits, while Pelley himself mingled

¹¹⁰ Richard Crawford. ""The Silver Shirts"." *San Diego Union-Tribune*, April 2011.

with German officials in lavish parties on foreign cruise ships. Foreign funding and domestic guns, when placed in the hands of a demagogue like William Dudley Pelley, proved to be a combination dangerous to both President Roosevelt and the American democratic order.

I. East Coast: “A Growing Christian Militia”

William Dudley Pelley officially incorporated the Silver Legion of America on March 19, 1934 in the state of Delaware.¹¹¹ In composing its charter, Pelley declared that the organization aimed to “foster, promote, and develop political patriotic principles.” He composed a General Staff of directors, consisting of the treasurer, secretary, and national commander. From the beginning, Pelley took control by naming himself national commander and giving that position five total votes in all meetings of the General Staff.¹¹² His treasurer, Harry F. Seiber, and his secretary, Lee Collie, had only two and one votes respectively. In this fashion no one else on the General Staff, even if combined together, could overrule Pelley’s will.

Pelley tried to develop the Silver Legion into a cohesive organization patterned off of fascist paramilitary groups like the Brownshirts in Weimar Germany. He adopted a uniform consisting of navy riding breeches, black riding boots, and silver collared shirts with a large scarlet L on the chest. While at first Pelley suggested \$10 yearly dues for

¹¹¹ The Legion had already been active for almost two years before it was officially incorporated for tax purposes.

¹¹² Donnell Byerly Portzline, *William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Shirt Legion of America*, (PhD diss., Ball State University, 1965), 24-25.

membership in the organization, he eventually settled on only a \$1 enrollment fee to cover the cost of sending the membership material.¹¹³

Most of the money sent to the Silver Legion went directly into Pelley's personal bank account, and he reported it to the Internal Revenue Service on his tax forms as personal income.¹¹⁴

He also composed a detailed membership form. It included a line titled "My Racial Extraction," the name of the family physician, any physical disabilities, any military experience, and the name of a prospective member's bank. Pelley designed these questions to reveal any Jewish heritage or connection with Jewish doctors or bankers. When questioned by the House Committee for Un-American Activities, Pelley admitted as much: "My membership at that time, according to the stipulation of the constitution and the by-laws, was strictly a Christian organization. Thereby by elimination it would have the censorship of people of the Judaistic faith."¹¹⁵

Pelley recruited Robert C. Summerville, a young member of a New York chapter, to be his chief of staff in 1933. There are few available concrete facts about Summerville's personal life. Pelley said Summerville grew up in Chicago, and indicated before the Dies Committee in 1940 that he was only 25 years old. Summerville became Pelley's mouthpiece at the Silver Legion National Headquarters in Asheville, North Carolina, writing letters to various local chapters and organizers to communicate Pelley's

¹¹³ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of William Dudley Pelley), 7212. In 2015, the \$10 fee would cost \$177.88 annually. The single dollar membership fee would cost prospective members \$17.78

¹¹⁴ Portzline, 25.

¹¹⁵ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of William Dudley Pelley), 7225.

wishes. Shortly after he assumed his position at National Headquarters, Summerville began his letter-writing with a note to potential recruits, urging them to join the Silver Legion in imminent actions against communist elements in the United States: “We are now active in the promotion of a growing Christian militia which holds every prospect of taking the national situation by the horns and performing a serious setback to the activities of these predatory forces.”¹¹⁶

The promotion of Pelley’s growing Christian militia accelerated throughout the ensuing months. Local chapters sprung up in twenty-two states across the country, with strong concentrations in the Pacific Northwest and California. Pelley began to branch out, establishing contact with Royal Scott Gulden, the head of another right-wing outfit called the Order of ’76. He met with Royal Scott Gulden in April of 1934, where encountered Gulden’s secretary, Dorothy Waring. She became Pelley’s personal secretary as well, and later described that day for the Dies Committee: “He was in uniform, and when he came into my apartment with his bodyguards he sort of looked around the place to be sure that he would be secure, and safe, and he dismissed his bodyguards and removed from his person a shoulder holster with a gun, and kept on his person a hip holster with a gun on it.”¹¹⁷

Pelley was in the midst of a fundraising tour for his anti-Semitic magazine, *Liberation*, which he intended to publish out of the National Headquarters in Asheville. He thought that Waring could be a source of funding, and presented her with a sales pitch

¹¹⁶ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Letter by Robert Summerville), 7227.

¹¹⁷ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Dorothy Waring), 7539.

describing his plan for the ensuing years: “They would eventually march on Washington, that he would be dictator of the United States...that his idea was definitely to take possession of the United States...his troops were definitely being trained, that he had ammunition, and that he had guns.”¹¹⁸ The Silvershirts procured their guns through bulk purchases from the Winchester and Remington Arms companies, often made through Gulden.¹¹⁹

In the short term, Pelley’s plan meant partnering with the Order of ’76 in New York City to build a base of anti-communist support. Waring testified before the Dies Committee that the day after she met Pelley several anti-communist leaders gathered at Gulden’s office; these men included Pelley, Gulden, a representative from the Friends of New Germany, the head of the Westchester chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, and another Klan activist from an unspecified chapter in the area. When the time came, Pelley planned to work with these groups and take total control of New York City, placing key men at public utilities like the water supply and electricity stations to bring the city to its knees.¹²⁰

Not content to stop at New York, Pelley proclaimed that he would “lead this army as the White King into Washington”, much along the same lines as Mussolini’s March on Rome.¹²¹ To do so, Pelley needed reliable information. He and Summerville established an intelligence bureau in the Woodward Building in Washington D.C. The actual inner workings of the bureau always remained unclear. In New York City, Pelley outsourced

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 7540. Waring’s testimony before HUAC indicated that she either did not know or did not want to speculate why Pelley thought she would fund his venture.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 7551.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 7540.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 7543.

his espionage to the Order of '76. Throughout September and October of 1933, Royal Scott Gulden hired men to follow then-mayoral candidate Fiorello LaGuardia in hopes of uncovering communist activity.¹²² Communists in Washington also likely found themselves targets of covert Silvershirt surveillance, and Pelley's secretary alleged that the bureau intended to obtain military secrets and pass them on to German agents on American soil.¹²³

Pelley maintained extensive contacts both domestic and foreign, and counted among his expatriate associates both Germans and Russians. He used these links to both expand the Silvershirt movement and gain financial support from the German government. Paul von-Lillienfeld Toal operated as Pelley's link to the Third Reich. Toal worked in Philadelphia as an executive for the *Norddeutscher Lloyd* shipping company, which Hitler nationalized in the wake of his ascension to power.¹²⁴ Pelley recruited Toal in 1933 as the Legion's "foreign adjutant" due to his connections in Germany; Toal was an exiled Estonian aristocrat, though the circumstances of his departure from his homeland remained unclear.¹²⁵ The relationship between the two served as a conduit for both information and money. Pelley presumably supplied Toal

¹²² Spivak, John L. *America Faces the Barricades* (New York: Covici, Fiede, 1935), 174.

¹²³ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Dorothy Waring), 7546. It is unlikely that Pelley ever uncovered any secrets of legitimate military value, but the content of his reports to German contacts may never be known. For the allegation of Communist spying, see the following: "Christ's Men in Silver Raiment: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion of America." . <http://www.faem.com/books/pelley.htm> (accessed February 23, 2015). A Silvershirt organizer named Charles B. Swift founded a similar bureau in Pittsburgh in 1938 and apparently convinced members that they were working on behalf of the Office of Naval Intelligence. For more information see: Philip Jenkins, " "It Can't Happen Here": Fascism and Right-wing Extremism in Pennsylvania 1933-1942" 40.

¹²⁴ *William Dudley Pelley*. New York: American Jewish Committee Archive File.

¹²⁵ Heike Bungert. "Ethnic Germans and German Intelligence in the USA." *Secret Intelligence in the Twentieth Century* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 37.

with information on American domestic affairs, probably informed by intelligence bureau dossiers, which Toal then conveyed back to his German handlers.¹²⁶ In return, Toal supplied Pelley with funds. His status at *Norddeustcher Lloyd* enabled Toal to appropriate government funds to purchase advertising space in Pelley's *Liberation* magazine: "...they would send in money, for instance, \$500 for an advertisement the actual space for which cost \$50, and that the German steamship company here would charge up \$500 to advertising, and that only \$50 of that \$500 would be used for advertising."¹²⁷

By the end of 1933, Toal had gained enough of Pelley's trust to begin promoting ethnic Germans as organizers within the Silverhirts. On December 28th of that year, he wrote to Robert Summerville from the intelligence office in Washington to advise that he had named his "German Organizer for the Eastern District", a man named Seydel. Commenting on Seydel's devotion to the cause, Toal said that while was a United States citizen, he "was in Germany for a long time." The combination apparently made Seydel suitable to move freely in the German-American community. Three months later, Toal wrote again to Summerville to thank him for sending copies of *Liberation* to General E.S. Imnadze.¹²⁸ Imnadze was a former general in the Imperial Russian Army who had been exiled to the U.S. following the Russian Revolution; using his connections with

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Dorothy Waring), 7540.

¹²⁸ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Letter by Paul Toal), 7534.

anticommunist Russian émigrés, he facilitated the consolidation of the Order of '76 into the Silvershirts in early March of 1934.¹²⁹

In this period Pelley also associated with Colonel Edwin Emerson, founder of the Friends of New Germany. Born in Dresden, Emerson attended Harvard University and served alongside Theodore Roosevelt during the Spanish-American War. He came into the employment of the German government during the First World War, and continued as an official with the German consulate throughout the 1920's.¹³⁰ Once Pelley had brought the Silver Legion to New York City, Emerson contacted him with an offer to recruit 15,000 Germans to the Legion and pay \$10 for each man.¹³¹ While Pelley did not accept this offer, he leveraged his friendships with Emerson and Toal to attend frequent parties aboard *Norddeutscher Lloyd* cruise ships alongside German consular officials.¹³²

II. The Midwest: “An Altruistic Expression of Militant Americanism”

Roy Zachary hailed from Cashiers, a small rural area nestled in the western backwoods of North Carolina. Born in 1887, Zachary originally aimed for a career in education.¹³³ He decided against it, instead moving out West to work first as a lumberjack, then eventually as the head of his own lumber mill. Before long he found himself in Seattle, where he opened up a small restaurant and spent his spare time as an

¹²⁹ Spivak, 174.

¹³⁰ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940), Appendix VII, 56.

¹³¹ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of William Dudley Pelley), 7217.

¹³² *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Dorothy Waring), 7552.

¹³³ Birth information found here:

<http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/c/o/m/Charla-G-Compton/WEBSITE-0001/UHP-0157.html>

organizer for a small right-wing group called the Liberty Party. In 1935 he met William Dudley Pelley, who ventured to the Pacific Northwest in order to increase the Silvershirt presence there. Taken in by Pelley's claims of clairvoyance and supernatural communication, Zachary resolved to join the Silver Legion: "Pelley does nothing without divine orders. It only takes him a few minutes to get in touch with God. Pelley has been chosen by God for this special work."¹³⁴

Appointed as an organizer, Zachary tried to mold the Silvershirt organization into a political party. Shortly after he met Pelley he planned a slate of candidates to run for state and federal offices across the country. He took these men—they were exclusively men—from the ranks of the Silvershirts, and they in turn represented a convenient cross section of Pelley's followers. Zachary gathered a ticket that featured an "attorney, an osteopath, two engineers, a real estate salesman, an insurance salesman, a dry goods merchant, the owner of a photography shop, a former policeman, and two retired teachers."¹³⁵

Reading Zachary's modest success in Washington as a referendum on his national support, Pelley launched an independent bid for the White House in 1936. Zachary again spent most of that year gathering support in the Pacific Northwest. At the time, Pelley counted about 1,600 active Silvershirts in the state of Washington, with an undetermined number across the rest of the country. Dorothy Waring put the number as

¹³⁴ Donald S. Strong, *Organized Anti-Semitism in America: The Rise of Group Prejudice during the Decade 1930-1940* (Washington D.C., 1941), 48-49. Zachary quoted in the following: Eckard V Toy, Jr. "Silver Shirts in the Northwest: Politics, Prophecies, and Personalities in the 1930s." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*. 80. no. 4 (1989): 142.

¹³⁵ Toy Jr., 142.

high as 100,000 at certain points throughout the mid-1930's.¹³⁶ On June 9, 1936, Pelley officially launched his bid for President of the United States. He declared to an audience in Seattle, “this is not a political campaign” but “an altruistic expression of militant Americanism.”¹³⁷

For Pelley, the campaign was an unmitigated disaster. He only mustered enough signatures to place himself on the ballot in Washington as a third party candidate, and received a paltry 1,598 votes.¹³⁸ For Zachary, the campaign was an opportunity to prove himself in Pelley's eyes. He succeeded in this regard, and in early 1937 Pelley promoted him to second-in-command. Zachary spent most of the next year shuffling between headquarters in Asheville and various locations around the Midwest, hoping to revive what was left of Pelley's organization.

Roy Zachary proved to be a terrible militant. He clashed often with labor unions, which took issue with the overtly pro-fascist tone of Silvershirt rhetoric. Zachary launched an organizing drive in Minneapolis in the summer of 1938, specifically targeting the Local 544 Teamsters Union as a potential enemy. He had called for a “vigilante attack” on the union headquarters, prompting union officials to organize an armed guard for defense. The Teamsters gathered weapons, most of which were privately owned firearms. By September tensions had run so high that Local 544 put out a notice for its members to show up, fully armed, to a Silvershirt rally to be held on September 29. Zachary postponed the rally, then eventually moved it to Minneapolis. On October 28, the Silvershirts gathered at Minnehaha Hall to hear Zachary speak.

¹³⁶ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Dorothy Waring), 7547.

¹³⁷ Toy Jr., 143.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

Guards surrounded the hall, which Zachary purportedly claimed was to show that “the police know that some day they’ll need our support and that’s why they’re supporting us now.”¹³⁹ His opponents took the police protection as a sign of his unwillingness to fight.

Following the debacle in Minnesota, Zachary moved on to Chicago. Already home to a Silvershirt presence, Chicago suffered from further violence. Zachary had organized a rally at the Engineer’s Building on West Wacker Drive in Chicago on November 24, but local groups convinced the landlord to bar Zachary from hosting the meeting. Instead, the group moved to a tavern down the street. As the meeting of roughly one hundred and fifty men progressed, a group of hundreds gathered outside to oppose them. When the meeting concluded “the first Silvershirts to emerge were met at the door with blows and curses and the free-for-all ensued.”¹⁴⁰ The riot only subsided after a dozen police patrol cars arrived on the scene to make arrests, although only four men spent the night in prison; another went to the Henrotin Hospital with severe head injuries, and a patrolman’s foot was crushed in the chaos.

Undeterred, Zachary planned another rally in a Chicago hall just five days later. Scheduled for 8 o’clock, the meeting attracted over one hundred men and featured Zachary as the keynote speaker. While the meeting was in progress, “more than 100 automobiles in groups of threes and fives drew up and were parked near the hall.” Men involved in the earlier rioting had returned, and burst into the hall in the middle of Zachary’s speech. Another brawl ensued between hundreds of Silvershirts and

¹³⁹ "1938: How Teamsters Quelled Fascist Thugs." *The Militant*. no. 41 (1998). http://www.themilitant.com/1998/6241/6241_30.html (accessed February 24, 2015).

¹⁴⁰ "Two Injured, 4 Are Jailed in Anti-Nazi Riot." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 24, 1938.

predominantly Jewish “anti-fascists.”¹⁴¹ Men ran up to the speaker’s podium and beat Zachary over the head, while the clash spilled out onto the street. Police squads arrived and entered the fray, but as the fighting continued they called for help. Eventually the melee abated and all involved, including Zachary, were arrested and charged with inciting to riot. This incident virtually ended Zachary’s recruitment tour in Chicago.

Aside from Zachary, Pelley had corresponded with Captain S.J. Rubley, a cavalry officer of the One Hundred and Sixth Cavalry of the Michigan State Guard. In the early 1930’s Rubley had recruited for the Ku Klux Klan in Detroit, and by 1933 he was in the process of establishing a unit of trained Klan cavalrymen. He wrote to Robert Summerville at the Silver Legion National Headquarters, offering the support of himself and his men: “...hope to have fifty Klansmen mounted within two weeks. They are preparing seriously to defend their homes and their country...I may be exceptionally blood-thirsty, but I feel that the late winter snows will be tinged scarlet in the streets of Detroit.” Rubley pledged himself to the cause of the Silver Legion, and said that although he could not travel to the National Headquarters both Pelley and Summerville should “depend on [him] as a Silver Shirt in Detroit.”¹⁴²

Rubley conspired with Colonel Harold Webber, a superior officer in the Michigan National Guard, to train Silvershirts with horses owned by the federal government. Distributing Silvershirt literature, Rubley worked closely with the Detroit Klan to train for an eventual fight with local Communists. In October 1933 Rubley and the Klan distributed Pelley’s writing in a recruitment drive that aimed for over 10,000 members, a

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Letter from Captain Rubley), 7530.

number of which Rubley intended to train for military activity. Rubley offered this unit to Summerville in a letter; Summerville replied that the Klansmen needed to recognize that their propaganda materials came from Pelley. Furthermore, Summerville assured Rubley that “[we are] working intensely with espionage officers who are daily digging up information for use at possible sacrifice of their own lives. And when the people actually get aroused there will be only one leadership that may serve to keep the minds of the people into clear channels of constructive action.”¹⁴³ On Halloween of 1933, Rubley described the increasingly violent situation in Detroit. He counted “seven distinct riots” that broke out “under the guise of strikers...one readily senses a Communistic program.” He continued to train his cavalry, although he did not mention their participation in the street fighting. Describing earlier Klan fighting, he noted that they used “elm clubs and hard knuckles.”¹⁴⁴

Pelley designed a strategy to infiltrate military forces across the country, and Rubley’s main contribution to Pelley’s cause seemed to be his local contacts in the State Guard. He wrote to Summerville that “I am in close contact with a large number of Army officers here and am cultivating their friendship all I can.”¹⁴⁵ Samuel Dickstein, chair of a House committee to investigate Pelley, confirmed that in 1934 Silvershirt organizers met with “Army officers” in Cleveland, and established an armed Ranger Division in Oklahoma.¹⁴⁶ Due to the role of the “intelligence bureau” in these operations, the full extent of his military contacts across the country was never fully exposed.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 7533.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 7535.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁶ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Samuel Dickstein), 7524.

III. The West Coast: “An Elite, Clandestine Military Order”

The Santa Monica Mountains loom high over Los Angeles to the east, towering rock structures that have housed the cavernous mansions of Hollywood’s elite since the invention of the motion picture. On August 28, 1933, a wealthy young couple named Winona and Norman Stephens bought fifty acres in the Pacific Palisades for a structure that locals later called the Murphy Ranch. Norman worked as a mining engineer, and Winona had inherited a large sum of money from family in Chicago. Winona also had a deep passion for “metaphysical and supernatural phenomena”, a passion that eventually led her to a mysterious German man known only in official records as Herr Schmidt.¹⁴⁷

At the time, William Dudley Pelley had expanded the Silver Shirts to the West Coast, finding considerable support in his old Hollywood stomping grounds. His metaphysical teachings resonated with the occult fringe of Los Angeles society, and his virulent anti-Semitism, borne out of Hollywood many years before, found no shortage of adherents. Pelley’s contacts with the German government and his esoteric platform positioned him perfectly to tap into the fears of a certain segment of the Los Angeles population.¹⁴⁸ Locals suspected that Herr Schmidt had connections with Pelley and the Silvershirts.

¹⁴⁷ Hadley Hall Mears. "Cracking the mystery of L.A.'s "Nazi" Ranch." *Yahoo! Homes*, September 29, 2014. <https://homes.yahoo.com/news/cracking-the-mystery-of-l-a-s--nazi--ranch-021418277.html> (accessed February 25, 2015).

¹⁴⁸ While some association between Herr Schmidt and Pelley is very likely, Pelley was certainly not Herr Schmidt. At the time his face would have been well known both in Hollywood circles and across America, owing to frequent publications of both his name and likeness in national newspapers.

Herr Schmidt convinced Winona Stephens to buy the Pacific Palisades property in order to build a “self-sufficient farm based on National Socialist ideals.” Stephens signed the lease for the land under the alias of a widow named Jessie M. Murphy, and hired the architecture firm Plummer, Wurdeman, and Becket to build a compound. Springs in the nearby woods assured the ranch a self-sufficient supply of water, and architects built a double generator power station with a twenty thousand gallon fuel tank. The group constructed a large concrete structure with twenty-two bedrooms meant to serve as a temporary shelter until the main piece of the ranch was built.

Blueprints for the ranch depicted a four-story mansion with servants’ quarters and an indoor pool. The main floor, meant to serve as a public space, held a grand hall, multiple libraries, and various smaller rooms for social gatherings. In the center of the main foyer sat a large fountain with the twelve signs of the zodiac surrounding it in large detail. The basement floor held a dairy storage room, a laundry room, and a four-car garage designed to hold specific cars: “two Packards, a Cadillac, and a Ford.”¹⁴⁹

Construction on the site progressed slowly throughout the 1930’s. Roughly fifty people called the ranch home, and they constructed vegetable gardens in the surrounding woods. The compound remained completely cut off from its neighbors. Residents of nearby canyon homes reported seeing armed guards in the night patrolling outside the compound’s wrought iron gates, dressed in the silver shirts and blue riding breeches characteristic of Pelley’s men.¹⁵⁰ No writings or records from any residents of the compound have survived, but contemporary reports described the ranch’s true purpose:

¹⁴⁹ Mears.

¹⁵⁰ Cecilia Rasmussen. "Rustic Canyon Ruin May Be A Former Nazi Compound." *Los Angeles Times*, September 04, 2005. <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/04/local/me-then4> (accessed February 25, 2015).

“This was supposed to be the seat of American fascism from where Hitler would one day run the United States.”¹⁵¹

Unfortunately for the Silverhirts at the ranch, this fascist paradise never materialized; the mansion was never completed. A few days before Pearl Harbor, a neighbor tipped off U.S. Naval Intelligence to the existence of Herr Schmidt and the occult compound in the Hollywood Hills. On December 2, 1941, law enforcement officials raided the community and scattered its inhabitants to parts unknown.¹⁵²

The Silver Legion in California did not limit itself to Los Angeles, and perhaps its most dangerous local outfit set up shop just down the coast in San Diego. There the Silverhirts followed longtime right-wing extremist Willard Kemp. Kemp first came to the attention of federal investigators in 1933. In April of that year, Kemp took a train into San Diego from Oceanside, California; seated next to him was a U.S. Marine named Virgil Hayes. During the course of the trip Hayes mentioned to Kemp that he was a member of the Marine Corps, to which Kemp replied that he was the West Coast commander of the Silver Legion.

Kemp asked Hayes if he still had access to government arsenals, to which Hayes replied in the affirmative. Kemp then made his offer: ten dollars for every rifle, fifty dollars for every machine gun, and twenty dollars for every case of ammunition that Hayes could supply his unit. When the two arrived at San Diego, Hayes immediately

¹⁵¹ "Heil Hollywood: The Los Angeles Bunker From Which Hitler Planned to Run Nazi Empire After War. *The Daily Mail*, March 18, 2012. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2116684/Hitlers-Los-Angeles-bunker-planned-run-Nazi-empire-war.html> (accessed February 25, 2015).

¹⁵² Rasmussen. All accounts of the post-Pearl Harbor raid are attributed to “oral histories”, and documentary evidence is scant. While the claim should be taken with some skepticism, it is definite that the compound was vacant shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

reported the encounter to his superior officers. They instructed him to join the Silver Shirts, and a short time later Kemp promoted Hayes to be an instructor in his unit.¹⁵³

The San Diego Silver Shirt Rifle Club was “an elite, clandestine military order divided into squads of five men apiece, each of whom knew only his leader and the other three men in his group.”¹⁵⁴ Kemp claimed to Hayes that the San Diego Sheriff’s office had tacitly accepted the existence of the unit, with the exception of the deputy, who was Jewish and needed to be “liquidated.”¹⁵⁵ The outfit trained for the rest of the month at their command center in the hills outside of San Diego. The group had likely been together for over a year given the level of coordination between squad leaders. Each man in the troop had his own identity card, and a government raid in late 1934 recovered over two hundred.¹⁵⁶

Acquiring weapons came easy to Kemp. Hayes supplied “mainly Springfield rifles bearing a United States Government mark.”¹⁵⁷ Other men attained pistols and shotguns from the San Diego armory, most of the time bribing officers to look the other way.¹⁵⁸ The group engaged in target practice on a frequent basis to resist what they believed was an impending communist revolution in southern California. Kemp believed that when the time came, local Army units would support his group in containing the communist threat and securing downtown San Diego.

¹⁵³ Crawford, 1.

¹⁵⁴ Goldwag, 260.

¹⁵⁵ Crawford, 1.

¹⁵⁶ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Charles Kramer), 7527.

¹⁵⁷ Crawford, 1.

¹⁵⁸ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Charles Kramer), 7527.

Kemp did not know that he had a second informant in his midst. Corporal Edward Gray also served as a Marine in the San Diego area, and he had joined the Silvershirts under similar circumstances to Virgil Hayes. Kemp made Gray privy to the details of his plan, set for May 1 of 1934. Kemp expected local communist sympathizers to stage a May Day celebration as pretext for an uprising, presumably coordinated in cities across the country for a nationwide communist takeover. In San Diego, he ordered two hundred “armed, trained Silver Shirts...to converge on the city from the outskirts. They counted on the Communists going in before them and taking the city by storm. Then, in the confusion, the Silver Shirts were to overthrow the Communists.”¹⁵⁹

The expected uprising never happened. On May 1, 1934, Kemp’s unit sat armed and waiting for an enemy that never arrived. A few weeks later, Kemp discovered that Gray was an informant. He sent members of his unit to scour the city for him. A group caught up to Gray at the corner of C Street and Broadway, cornering him and beating him until they had fractured his skull. The incident sparked an investigation in the city, and before long federal investigators pursued Kemp for theft of government property. Both the Departments of Justice and War sent teams in to recover the munitions. Luckily for both Kemp and Pelley, the investigation stalled; the Committee for Un-American Activities never bothered to look for the weapons, and by the time Justice Department men arrived on the scene both the guns and the men in the unit had virtually disappeared.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Crawford, 1.

¹⁶⁰ *Hearings on H.R. 282, Before A Special Committee of Un-American Activities*, 76th Cong. (1940) (Statement of Charles Kramer), 7528.

IV. The End of the Silver Legion

By 1939 the Silver Legion had mostly disbanded. Repeated Congressional investigations had uncovered their militant activities and scattered their supporters. The McCormick-Dickstein Committee, convened in 1934, had hounded Pelley's lieutenants—including both Toal and Kemp—until it became almost impossible to carry out clandestine military activity. The Dies Committee further investigated Pelley's connections to the Nazi government in 1940, and recommended sedition charges against him shortly thereafter.

The United States government officially charged William Dudley Pelley with sedition in 1942, and FBI agents arrested him in Connecticut on April 4 of that year. He stood trial in July, and after a month of testimony a jury deliberated for only three hours before convicting him on eleven counts of sedition. Judge Robert Baltzell sentenced him to fifteen years in a federal penitentiary.¹⁶¹ Pelley served ten years.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 that gave the United States Army authority to detain Japanese Americans on the West Coast as suspected enemy combatants. The order also created a list of potential seditious persons known as the Custodial Detention Index. The CDI barred the vast majority of its members from travelling or living on the West Coast, and most of Pelley's close lieutenants were included. Zachary, Kemp, Toal, and others spent the war living in obscurity.

The opinion on the magnitude of the danger that the Silver Legion posed the government of the United States has changed with the times. During the era of their

¹⁶¹ Beekman, 138-139.

activity, the Roosevelt Administration and two separate Congressional committees, along with most of the general public, considered Pelley and his armed followers one of the largest dangers to domestic national security. After the defeat of the fascist threat in Europe, historians regarded Pelley as nothing more than a nuisance.

On his own, it is unlikely that William Dudley Pelley could have overthrown the United States of America. His organization remained relatively small in comparison to the United States population, and though no statistical studies exist it is unlikely that an overwhelming majority of the country supported a fascist dictatorship. Yet Pelley showed a knack for working with other right-wing groups to bolster his own popularity, and it may never be known how many sympathizers existed among the ranks of the Klan or other related groups.

By far the most dangerous aspect of Pelley's movement was his connection to the German government. Pelley's rabid anti-Semitism fit comfortably with Nazi racial theory even in the years before the start of the Holocaust. His verbal attacks on American Jews demonstrated an ideological affinity with the more dangerous elements of National Socialism, and he consciously cultivated rabid anti-Semites in his ranks. The contacts with Toal, Emerson, and other unnamed consular officials showed a high degree of coordination between Pelley's Silver Legion and a hostile fascist government. In some cases, the Germans openly bankrolled Pelley's operations. Given his connections in the armed forces throughout the country, as well as the number of his own armed cells in major cities, Pelley could have proven a valuable asset to the Nazi government if the American war effort in Europe had gone poorly. If defeats in Europe had turned popular sentiment against the war, Pelley certainly would have used the situation to his

advantage. Such a situation did not occur, of course, and so William Dudley Pelley died in poverty of heart failure on July 1, 1965.

Chapter Four: For God and Country



William Bishop, left, and John Prout. Image courtesy of *The Dansville Breeze*, Dansville, New York. Tuesday, January 16, 1940.

“I promise to work both by word and by action for the destruction of Communism in America” –Christian Front Induction Pledge

William Gerald Bishop spent the afternoon of January 13th, 1940, in New York City with a lady friend. Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation watched him take a subway at one o'clock to Nassau Street, where he met her before continuing to lunch at Schrafft's Restaurant on Broad Street. The two stayed for about half an hour. When they finished, Bishop walked the woman to the subway and spent two more hours shopping, first at the Weber & Heilbroner haberdashery and then at the Empire Jewelry Store. He returned home at five o'clock that night, only to leave forty-five minutes later. About one hundred yards from his house, Special Agents of the FBI exited their surveillance vehicle and took him into custody. His charge: plotting to overthrow the government of the United States of America.

Bishop and several other confederates were members of the Christian Front, the organization dubiously affiliated with Father Charles Coughlin. The main body of the organization dealt in street protests and anti-Semitic agitation, taking on the characteristics of a mass movement. The organization, however, produced a very dangerous offshoot—a group of men known as the Country Gentlemen. With Bishop as their head, the Country Gentlemen stockpiled arms and manufactured explosives to combat what they believed was an impending Communist revolution. In the process, they became one of the most organized and threatening anti-Semitic groups of the New Deal era.

I. “For the Purposes of Education, Country, and Christianity”

Claus Ernecke left Germany on March 8, 1927, departing from Hamburg at twenty-six years old with the intention of remaining permanently in the United States as a naturalized citizen. His generally average stature did not mark him as particularly noteworthy, nor did the thick wire framed glasses that he wore. He had a scar on the right side of his neck, another on his right arm, and spoke English with a distinctly German accent. Upon reaching the country he lived for several years in relative obscurity, only surfacing almost exactly four years later to enlist in the 101st Cavalry of the New York State National Guard. Again he disappeared from the official record, serving in the Guard uneventfully while continuing a day job at the International Correspondence School as a salesman.¹⁶² Ernecke, much like his neighbors and co-workers, lived an innocuous American life; but Claus Ernecke had little interest in remaining anonymous.

He approached Denis Healy on August 7, 1939 with a request: to train members of the Christian Front in the use of machine guns in preparation for the overthrow of the American government. Healy had developed a reputation within the National Guard for expertise as a gunner, and Ernecke needed a contact with the requisite technical knowledge. Some time between his admission into the National Guard and that fateful day in the waning summer of 1939, Ernecke had fallen in with the German-American Bünd and eventually made his way into Brooklyn Chapter of the Christian Front. Healy initially rebuffed his offer and approached the Federal Bureau of Investigation to report

¹⁶² FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front, file in possession of the author. Unless otherwise noted, all information in this chapter comes from this file.

Ernecke for his subversive activities. The FBI requested that Healy become a confidential paid informant on the group, an offer that Healy accepted readily.

Denis Healy had a colorful past of his own. He knew neither the place nor date of his birth, only that it occurred in either Canada or Ireland. His father was a sergeant in the Irish Royal Constabulary, often assigned by the British government to do “secret service.”¹⁶³ At age twelve he had served as a bugler in the Royal Canadian Army before traveling to Ireland. While there, he fought for the Irish Free State Army against British forces in the war for independence. He later served for the government against “rebels headed by de Valera.” After the war, he immigrated to America where he enrolled in the National Guard and secured employment at the New York Central Railroad.¹⁶⁴ He returned to Ernecke in early September and offered his services. Ernecke appeared enthusiastic. He confided in Healy that the Brooklyn chapter of the organization had recently made a purchase of rifles to supplement a cache of Browning machine guns they had stolen from a state armory. Meetings would begin soon, and Ernecke planned to serve as Healy’s introduction to the seedy underbelly of the Christian Front.

In the late afternoon of September 6, 1939, Special Agent Peter J. Wacks sat inconspicuously in his car parked on Hawthorne Street in Brooklyn. He observed a light blue two-door Ford Sedan approach house 29 at approximately 5:00 before parking. The driver exited the car and walked into the house, returning over an hour later with Claus Ernecke at his side. The two entered the car and drove toward Manhattan with Wacks in pursuit, stopping briefly at an apartment on Carlton Street before continuing to a four story building named Prospect Hall at 8:30. Ernecke and his companion entered the hall.

¹⁶³ “Entrapment Laid to Agent of FBI”. *The New York Times*. April 18, 1940.

¹⁶⁴ “Roosevelt Effigy ‘Front’ Gun Target”. *The New York Times*. April 9, 1940.

Wacks remained in the street, watching as another man entered the building with a rifle strapped to his back. The hall emptied at 11:00.

Wacks later ascertained that Ernecke's companion that night was Macklin Boettger. Boettger hailed originally from Pittsburgh, the blonde-haired and blue-eyed son of German immigrants. He was a large man with a ruddy complexion, an ex-member of the National Guard who made one hundred and twenty five dollars every month as a salesman for Acme. He was prone to anti-Semitic outbursts, having been fired from a previous job for openly supporting Adolf Hitler. The leadership of the Christian Front had tapped Boettger to be a squad leader in its Brooklyn unit.

At the insistence of the FBI, Healy invited Ernecke to dinner at his home on September 12. Earlier that night, Wacks installed a listening device in Healy's basement in order to eavesdrop on Ernecke in what the latter believed was a confidential environment. Ernecke arrived at the house at 6:10, eating dinner for a short time with Healy and his wife before retiring to the basement to discuss politics. In the basement, he revealed the purpose of the Christian Front: "to eradicate the Jews from the business, social, and political life of the United States." To accomplish that end, the Christian Front recruited men "who are familiar with firearms and can teach the use of firearms to members of the organization."¹⁶⁵ At that time, Ernecke knew of ten squads active in New York City, each consisting of fifteen to twenty men that actively engaged in military training under the guise of sporting clubs. Each squad, in addition to its firearms training, studied the locations of vital water works and power plants across the city. In the event of a Communist revolution, which Ernecke believed was imminent, the

¹⁶⁵ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. September 12, 1939. Section 1, 30.

Christian Front planned to activate squads across the country. These units would take possession of public utilities and infrastructure to cripple normal lines of communication, at which point the overarching Christian Front infrastructure would institute a military dictatorship.

Preparations for the revolution had already begun. Ernecke revealed that in May of 1939 a truck driver diverted fifteen thousand rounds of ammunition from Camp Smith to the New York units of the Christian Front.¹⁶⁶ A man named Osborne purchased rifles for the organization, and members had stored machine guns around Times Square to be distributed when the time came. The rifles were primarily Enfields and Springfields, semi-automatic antipersonnel weapons issued as standard to National Guard armories in the state. Every Tuesday, the squad leaders in the Brooklyn unit met with William Bishop, who had command of military operations. Ernecke insisted that Healy report to Bishop as soon as possible.

No one quite knew who William Bishop actually was. He was a tall and lanky blonde with scars on both of his ankles and rows of even teeth; his nationality was undetermined. The man known as William Bishop had been arrested on May 3, 1935, under the aliases William Arneck and Bishop Brown for illegal possession of a revolver and was sentenced to the Workhouse for a three-month stretch. At the time of his arrest, Bishop told the detectives of the NYPD's Alien Squad that he had been born on January

¹⁶⁶ Another confidential informant within the National Guard notified the FBI that he had no record of any shortages of ammunition at Camp Smith. He advised that the FBI should contact Colonel John Reynolds, who was in command. No records reflect that the FBI ever did so.

31, 1903, in Geneva and had arrived in the United States aboard the *S.S. Vestris* in March of 1928 as a member of the crew.¹⁶⁷

The Immigration Bureau granted Bishop a hearing in June of that year to discuss his immigration status. Bishop said at the hearing that he had lied to the NYPD. He claimed to actually have been born in on June 27, 1900, in Salem, Massachusetts, knowing only his mother and having no siblings. He last saw his mother in 1915, when he left a boarding house that she owned in southern Texas. Bishop alleged that he made his way into Mexico, where he was shot through the leg in 1919 and confined to a hospital in Monterey as a political prisoner. Eventually he escaped and made his way to New York City by 1923, and said he had not left the city for any extended period of time afterward.

Bishop sometimes claimed to serve the British. He told the owner of his boarding house that he had been born in Connecticut at the turn of the century and fought in the Princess Pat Regiment for Canada during World War I. During the later stages of the war, he said that he served with Lawrence of Arabia in Mesopotamia before moving on to Morocco, where he fought alongside Francisco Franco. To another close friend, Mary Murdock, Bishop confided that he descended from a long line of British soldiers, himself having been educated at Sandhurst Military Academy like his father and grandfather before him. He said that he and his brother had entered the service of the British Army at the outbreak of World War I, where he served in India and France. His father and brother were killed in action on the Western Front, and his mother died of

¹⁶⁷ The Immigration Bureau had no record of Bishop ever entering the country.

shock shortly thereafter. After the war, he served in the occupation of Germany; he gave Murdock three medals, which she kept in her home.

The men who prepared to follow Bishop into battle whispered another origin: that he was a German agent. In a meeting with Healy and others, Claus Ernecke confided that he believed Bishop was “definitely a Hitler agent.” Another ethnic German in the group recognized Bishop as a man named Major William Bischoff he had once been acquainted with in the German army. Later, a third member of the group reported he had spoken to Bishop privately about his origins. Bishop revealed that he had served as a major in the German army after World War I, where he engaged the Polish Army in Upper Silesia following a violent plebiscite in 1922.¹⁶⁸ Evidence also existed that Bishop was involved in some degree with William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Shirts.¹⁶⁹ FBI agents surreptitiously discovered several Pelley pamphlets in the glove compartment of Bishop’s car. Bishop had also allegedly told Healy he “was a military organizer for a group known as the Rangers and that he had connections with William Dudley Pelley, head of the so-called ‘Silver Shirts’.”¹⁷⁰

Whatever the origins of his mysterious captain, Healy met the man on September 20, 1939. Ernecke and Boettger had taken Healy to a meeting of the Christian Front at Prospect Hall, where the three of them met Bishop in the barroom. They advised Healy that Bishop was gathering a new force, a covert military outfit Bishop called the Country

¹⁶⁸ The FBI was left equally bewildered as to Bishop’s identity. Various witnesses described his accent as either English or German. His nationality was left officially unspecified, but the file reflects that the Bureau believed he was born in Salem in 1900. For reasons stated above, this is almost certainly false.

¹⁶⁹ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. October 22, 1939. Section 1, 127.

¹⁷⁰ “Bishop Is Called Paid Alien Agent”. *The New York Times*. April 17, 1940. Several local chapters of the Silver Legion went by the Silver Rangers moniker, and Bishop’s plot bears a striking resemblance to the plan formulated by Willard Kemp in San Diego.

Gentlemen. He intended the Country Gentlemen to be a cadre of trained operatives who in turn trained leaders of other squads in the use of firearms and the manufacturing of explosives. Bishop stated that he had personally obtained Lewis and Browning light machine guns, and that Healy had been brought in as the group's expert on the weapons. Thereafter the lines between the Sport Clubs, the Country Gentlemen, and the Christian Front blurred considerably, but Ernecke stated that the organizations were "definitely inter-related and affiliated with each other."

Healy met the other members of the Country Gentlemen in short succession. Twenty-three year old John Graff was a devout Catholic and Brooklyn native of German descent who worked as a clerk at the Edison Company in the borough. John Viebrock was the explosives expert, a large man with German roots; he was Bishop's brother-in-law and had a penchant for gossip. Michael Vill had arrived from Germany in 1927. He had been a farmer in Bremen, a blue-eyed Aryan straight out of Hitler's "purest" formulations. Vill told members of the group he had been one of the Führer's men during the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. Boettger had recruited his brother-in-law Edward Walsh, a young freckled Irishman whose sister was Boettger's wife. At eighteen years old, the youngest member of the outfit was William Bushnell, who had joined straight out of high school "with the full permission of his father and mother for the purposes of education, country and Christianity." Michael Beirne, George Kelly, and Edward Walsh provided Bishop with a sizeable Irish contingent to his outfit, although none gained his private confidence. The head of the Christian Front National organization, John Cassidy, also frequented meetings to keep tabs on his lieutenants. This group, later to be joined by several members of the state National Guard, formed the nucleus of Bishop's cell.

II. “To Terrify the Jews of New York City”

Planning for the plot began in earnest by late September. On the 27th of that month, Healy invited Bishop, Boettger, and Ernecke for dinner in his home in order to capture their conversation with an FBI detectaphone. Special Agent Gannon installed the bug at 5:15 that night in the corner of the basement window, with another hanging in a light fixture over the dinner table. The men arrived at 7:20, ate dinner with Healy’s wife—no “conversation of value was carried on while the individuals were engaged in dinner”—and then adjourned to the basement. Bishop told Healy that an organization called the Committee for American Action had sent him to take over the Christian Front in New York State and establish a military unit.¹⁷¹ A week before the dinner, Bishop had instructed forty men in the use of the machine gun just outside the city. He planned to continue these operations, and had enlisted several sympathizers in the National Guard for the same purpose. Bishop told Healy to go to Boettger’s home and pick up a rifle, along with two hundred rounds of ammunition, in preparation for practice exercises in several weeks.

Boettger hosted the next meeting of the Country Gentlemen at his home on October 10. After a brief lecture by Bishop on the “principals [sic] of the Talmud”, the conversation turned to an impending bombing campaign. Boettger initiated the plan. He suggested that “the *Daily Worker*, the New York Jewish newspaper, should be

¹⁷¹ The Committee for American Action appears throughout the file as a vague umbrella organization that may or may not have existed. Bishop seems to be the only member with connection to the hierarchy. It is likely that the group did not yet exist, and that Bishop intended for the Committee to spring out of his work with the Country Gentlemen with himself as leader.

dynamited.”¹⁷² Boettger told Healy to acquire dynamite from the warehouse of the New York Central Railroad, but Healy declined.¹⁷³ Undeterred, Boettger explained to the group that he could throw a stick of dynamite “through an open window in the plant of the *Daily Worker*...an automobile could be waiting in the near vicinity of the building housing the *Daily Worker*, and that the men perpetrating the bombing could make their getaway by means of this automobile.” The getaway involved “detailing planning...each and every traffic light would have to be timed in order that the plan would be a complete success...if necessary they would have an individual dressed in the uniform of a New York City policeman who would direct traffic at the nearest intersection in order that their escape would be facilitated.”¹⁷⁴ All present at the meeting expressed enthusiasm for the plan, particularly Bishop. The captain also suggested that these actions should be pursued “in order to terrify the Jews of New York City.” At the conclusion of the meeting, Bishop handed Healy a 30.06 caliber Springfield rifle. The group agreed to meet again in the near future.

Seven days later Boettger visited Healy’s house for dinner. FBI agents hidden in Healy’s attic eavesdropped on the discussion. Boettger confessed to Healy that he felt that there was an informant within the Christian Front, owing to the fact that articles about Cassidy had appeared in several New York City magazines.¹⁷⁵ Commenting on the

¹⁷² Special Agent Foxworth, author of this portion of the report, appears to have been confused by this nomenclature. The *Daily Worker* was actually the official newspaper of the Communist party in New York City. Boettger most likely referred to the paper as a Jewish newspaper because of the tendency among Christian Front members, and indeed anti-Semites as a whole at the time, to automatically correlate Communism and Judaism. Foxworth likely transcribed the name incorrectly.

¹⁷³ Healy’s actual reason for declining this task is redacted in the final report.

¹⁷⁴ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. October 14, 1939. Section 1, 71.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* October 18, 1939. Section 1, 124.

group's impending firearms training, Boettger said that although he did not plan on bringing much ammunition he thought that the group "should be given as much instructions [sic] in military tactics as possible." He also told Healy that Bishop had been in contact with several local businessmen who could be potential sources of funding for the plot. As the night drew to a close, Boettger asked Healy if he had been able to acquire any dynamite. Healy told him that the dynamite "was strictly accounted for, and that it would be impossible for him to secure any of that material." Boettger replied that if he could get a sufficient amount of explosives, he would blow up the Daily Worker. Before leaving, he offered Healy one last remark: "He stated that he would 'do the goddam job alone if he could get the powder'." ¹⁷⁶

Over the weekend of October 21st, Healy and Ernecke loaded their weapons into Ernecke's car and drove to Narrowsburg, a rural community outside of New York City. They traveled to the Hillside Inn, where unbeknownst to the group two FBI agents were having breakfast and observing their movements. Bishop, Graff, and Cassidy came down from an upstairs room to meet the new arrivals; soon after Vill, Viebrock, Bushnell, and Lieutenant Frank Malone of the 165th New York Infantry appeared in the lobby. The men filed into a private dining room, where they each gave Cassidy "the Nazi salute" and had a communal breakfast. ¹⁷⁷ The agents observed them leaving the inn, loading their rifles and ammunition into a pickup truck, and driving away. Their destination was a firing range in an open field several miles down the road, a forest clearing in the view of a small mountain. Several paper targets stood at the far end attached to posts. The Country Gentlemen lined up about seventy-five yards away from the targets and engaged

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.* October 17, 1939. Section 1, 115.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.* October 21, 1939. Section 1, 126.

in military rushes, running ten to fifteen yards at a time before dropping into prone position and firing their weapons. Bishop oversaw this drill and another that had the group shoot standing targets at one hundred yards.

Upon Cassidy's return to New York on October 23rd, unit leaders of each borough of the Christian Front held a meeting at the home of Georgia Long, a local sympathizer.¹⁷⁸ John Cassidy had called his New York groups together in an attempt to formulate a strategy for action. His cousin Albert Gunnison, leader of the Bronx group, was present along with Daniel Kurtz, head of the Queens cell. Other members of the Christian Front board of directors sat in as well. Cassidy told those present that he had recently traveled to Detroit to speak with Father Charles Coughlin, who recognized him as the National Director of the Christian Front. Using Father Coughlin's endorsement as leverage, Cassidy forced the resignation of the rest of the board of directors and took sole control of the organization. The change in leadership had been urged by the rank and file, who "were demanding action."

Cassidy, in his new capacity as sole leader of the Christian Front, attended another meeting at Boettger's house on October 25th. This time Sergeant Andrew Buckley of the 165th New York Infantry joined the Country Gentlemen, and he came bearing gifts: cartridges of .30-30 rifle ammunition and flares—both stolen from the state armory—given by his commanding officer, Captain John Prout. Emboldened by his new allies in the National Guard, Bishop laid out his overarching plan: "When we overthrow

¹⁷⁸ Details of this meeting come from an FBI interview with Walter Ogden, former Secretary and Treasurer of the Christian Front. He agreed to supply information to the FBI after Cassidy removed him from his positions, citing Ogden's unwillingness to engage in "action". See: FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. October 23, 1939. Section 2, 31.

the Government, we will take the gold that is in the Federal Reserve Banks of the United States, which banks are controlled and operated by twelve Jew banks, and redistribute it among the people. We will also cancel all internal Government debts.”¹⁷⁹ As the meeting adjourned, Bishop told the group to prepare for firearms training in several days.

Two days later, Healy and several other members of the group attended a Christian Front rally at Prospect Hall in Brooklyn. Men he identified as members of the Committee for American Action examined his Christian Front membership card at the door, and the group entered shortly after. Healy estimated that between three hundred fifty and four hundred people attended the meeting, wherein Cassidy delivered a lecture on “dealing with Christian merchants.” After the speakers were done, Boettger, Ernecke, Bishop, Graf, and Cassidy called Healy over to where they were seated. They introduced him to a group of men belonging to the Irish Republican Army in New York who wished to coordinate efforts and membership with the Christian Front.¹⁸⁰ Healy later could not recall their names. Once the meeting ended, Boettger and Bishop took Healy to a nearby tavern to continue discussion. Bishop confided in his companions that Captain John Prout and Lieutenant Malone of the 165th Infantry had agreed to supply ammunition and weapons to the Country Gentlemen. Their shipments had already begun; Bishop acquired two Browning light machine guns stolen from armories in Boston.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.* October 25, 1939. Section 3, 66.

¹⁸⁰*Ibid.* October 27, 1939. Section 2, 24.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.* October 27, 1939. Section 2, 25.

III. “One Common Enemy”

Specific details of the plot came into focus in November and December of 1939. At a meeting on November 4th, Cassidy railed against the repealing of the Embargo Act and recommended “the shooting of the men responsible for the repeal.” Furthermore, Cassidy wanted to “knock off about a dozen of the Congressmen just to show them that the Christian Front meant business.” Bishop agreed, and told the group that in the event of American entry into a European war “the program of the Committee for American Action would be one of sabotage.” In his opinion the Country Gentlemen, and the larger Christian Front and Committee for American Action organizations, “might as well be killed over here carrying on a program of sabotage rather than going to some foreign country and fighting a war which has been arranged and promoted by the Jewish bankers in the United States.”¹⁸² A few days later, Viebrock delivered six hundred rounds of .30-30 ammunition to Boettger’s house. On the 10th, Bishop received fully loaded machine gun belts from Captain Prout.

At the behest of his FBI handlers, Healy called for a meeting at his home on November 13th. There Bishop criticized Cassidy in the latter’s absence, stating that he had “no real object to fight for”. He confirmed that Cassidy was not a member of the Committee for American Action, but was “allowed to attend its meetings merely as a courtesy because of Cassidy’s position in the Christian Front.” Squad assignments began to take shape. Ernecke “advised that he had several members of the German-American Bünd in mind whom he desired to get into the group...they were men who were trained in military tactics and who knew how to fight and shoot.” Bishop agreed to accept the

¹⁸²*Ibid.* November 4, 1939. Section 3, 73.

men and gave Ernecke permission to begin training a squad of eight to ten. Macklin Boettger broached the recruitment of Irish Republican Army members, stating that “they could obtain some who would obey orders and stand for discipline; that they could make a bomb out of practically nothing and could easily go out with nothing and blow up the Woolworth Building.” Bishop again agreed, saying that members of the squad should only be bound by a few precepts: “He must profess hatred against no Christian; that [he only has] one common enemy, and that is the International Jew and the International Jewish capitalist.”¹⁸³

A meeting on November 24th introduced National Guardsmen to the group. Andrew Buckley, an Irishman who had immigrated to New York City three years earlier, brought two individuals named Tucker and Ryan to a meeting at Macklin Boettger’s house. Buckley, Tucker, and Ryan were all members of the 165th Infantry of the New York National Guard under the command of Captain John Prout, Bishop’s as-of-yet unseen compatriot and arms supplier. Prout had recently delivered another seven hundred-fifty rounds of .30-30 rifle ammunition to Bishop, and another shipment was due on the 25th. At the meeting Bishop and Vill briefly discussed making bombs, and as the meeting adjourned Healy invited Bishop to bring Prout to dinner. Bishop accepted.

Captain John Prout made his first appearance on December 6th when he joined Bishop, Boettger, and Viebrock for dinner at Healy’s request. Viebrock had brought four tin cans with him, and after dinner the men discussed the manufacture of explosives. Taking the cans, Bishop began to demonstrate. Using two cans, he placed the smaller inside of the larger can, explaining that “cement should then be poured in between the

¹⁸³*Ibid.* November 13, 1939. Section 2, 39-40.

two cans...the smaller can should have a small hole through which black powder could be poured and a fuse attached.” This type of bomb, Bishop explained, did not possess killing power but “could do a great damage to property.” He had tried one on a billboard a few days earlier and reported that the bomb “blew the billboard to pieces.” Boettger suggested replacing the cans with brass pipes to concentrate the force of the blast and thereby cause more damage. Disagreeing, Bishop stated “we do not want killing power in this...just enough to smash the window out and, if possible, set the thing on fire.”¹⁸⁴ He intended for his explosive devices to be breaching implements used to seize buildings across the city.

When the group sat down to dinner, Captain Prout’s discussed his origins. Prout was of Irish descent, and his father had served first in the 69th Infantry during World War I and then for the Irish Free State army in that country’s civil war. Prout himself had followed in his father’s footsteps and joined the National Guard, rising to the rank of captain in a howitzer company before gaining expertise as a machine gunner. During the conversation, Healy remarked that the ammunition at his post with the 101st Cavalry was under close guard and that his superiors would object to his taking it. Prout replied that his superiors at the 165th Infantry would also object, “if they knew we were taking it.”¹⁸⁵

As the month progressed, the threat to New York City became increasingly realistic. A week after their dinner, on December 13th, Healy and Viebrock attended a meeting of the Committee for American Action at Boettger’s home in Brooklyn. Viebrock showed Healy two Campbell’s soup cans with reinforced steel plates on each end, heavy with black powder and a fuse poking out of the top. Viebrock gave them to

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.* December 6, 1939. Section 2, 56.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.* December 6, 1939. Section 2, 57.

Boettger and left the home. The next night, Viebrock and Healy visited Bishop at his home on East 36th Street in Midtown. Bishop revealed to them a stockpile of seven thousand loose rounds of 30.06 rifle ammunition and several fully loaded machine gun belts. On the wall hung an Enfield rifle, and Bishop spoke of other rifles hidden in various closets alongside pistols and further ammunition for the same. He brought out ten tins, each about three inches across and four inches high and packed with cordite powder.¹⁸⁶ Carefully wrapping each tin in brown paper, Bishop handed them to Viebrock with the implicit instruction to manufacture more bombs. The date of the putsch became set; after the first of the year, the Country Gentlemen intended “to bomb the American League for Peace and Democracy, the *Daily Worker*, the Consolidated Edison Plant, and to take over the Customs House.”¹⁸⁷

On December 20th, Viebrock went to Healy’s home with several empty tin cans and a circular can of cordite powder he had gotten from Boettger. Viebrock indicated that Boettger had several more cans stashed away, and that each can had roughly one hundred rings of propellant to be used in a bomb. He told Healy that he had seen Bishop leaving the armory of the 165th Infantry openly carrying bags of ammunition, and that he had another thirty thousand rounds hidden at the home of a Captain Jones on Lexington Street. Over the course of the discussion, Viebrock revealed a plan to steal three one-pound mortars from the Marine Armory in Brooklyn. The guns were World War I models that the government considered obsolete, and they were lightly guarded.

¹⁸⁶ Cordite was a smokeless propellant used in Army mortar shells during the First World War. The powder was commonly packaged in a circular container and divided into rings. Three rings could fire a twelve-pound Stokes trench mortar up to four hundred fifty yards. Information taken from the following: “Finding of Bombs Told At Plot Trial”. *The New York Times*. April 24, 1940.

¹⁸⁷ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. December 18, 1939. Section 2, 53.

Viebrock and an unnamed companion planned to take the wheels off of the mortars and sneak them out through a window, although Viebrock “indicated that possibly some representatives of another group in the Christian Front were also considering the stealing of these three one-pounders and Viebrock suggested that they should now allow them to get the jump on them.”¹⁸⁸

Bishop brought in the New Year in West Virginia, returning to New York on January 3rd with dynamite caps and fuses. He and several others met at Macklin Boettger’s home that same day. Although his unit clamored for action, Bishop stalled for time. Healy told his FBI handlers that at that time Bishop “indicated a desire to delay action; that Bishop stated the members of the group are like moles underground, and if they came out and struck a blow it would be necessary, upon investigation, to go back underground.” Bishop had apparently received orders “to expel anyone from the organization who started anything or performed any act of violence without direct orders from him; that there would be no acts of violence or any bombings until after January 20, 1940.”¹⁸⁹ On that weekend, Bishop planned to take Viebrock, Healy, Ernecke, and Boettger to Hazelton, Pennsylvania and test his bombs.

By January 11th, Viebrock had produced nine bombs. He told Healy that he could have twenty assembled by the time they intended to go to Pennsylvania, and that Bishop had transferred half of his ammunition to a Captain Saul, the owner of a boarding house in Hazelton. Bishop had assigned William Bushnell to case the *Daily Worker* building while the group was away, and disclosed the specifics of the plan. Bishop intended for the attack to be a pre-emptive strike against the communists, to upset what he believed

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.* December 20, 1939. Section 3, 93.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.* January 3, 1940. Section 3, 97.

were plans to assert communist control over the American government. He stated “the railroads would have to be destroyed, docks blown up and highways together with bridges destroyed to keep supplies from reaching the cities.” Groups of twelve to eighteen would seize “various arsenals, Post Office Buildings, Customs Houses and other public buildings, confiscating stores of food and clothing as well as other necessities from nearby shops.” Whatever they could not take, they would destroy in order to deny access to government troops. On the streets surrounding the seized buildings, each unit was to erect barricades to delay the advance of the enemy, falling back slowly to further defensive lines close to the arsenals. Bishop took care to note that the water supply “should only be cut off and not destroyed because when their troops (the revolutionists) take over a city it will be necessary to have a supply of water, otherwise they would lose considerable men from resulting disease, besides killing or injuring their own five battalions which might have been working from the inside.”¹⁹⁰ If the FBI arrested any member of the group before their plan could be carried out, Bishop instructed them to remain silent. He told the group that the “third degree” was often nothing more painful to rub a lit cigarette on a suspect’s hand. To illustrate his point, he calmly removed the cigarette from his mouth and put it out on the back of his own hand.¹⁹¹

IV. “To Overthrow, Put Down and Destroy By Force”

Unfortunately for Bishop, the FBI acted before he did. On January 13th, 1940, Judge Grover Moscowitz of the U.S. District Court issued warrants for the arrest of Bishop, Cassidy, Boettger, Viebrock, Ernecke, Vill, Graf, Prout, Buckley, Bushnell,

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* December 6, 1939. Section 3, 87-89.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Quinlan, and several others. That same day the NYPD arrested each of them and confined them to the Federal House of Detention in New York City. All of them were charged with conspiring alongside Bishop “and others to overthrow, put down and destroy by force the Government of the United States, and they did conspire to oppose by force the authority thereof, and they did further conspire...by force to seize, take and possess property of the United States.”

Raids on houses commenced across the city. In Bishop’s home, the FBI found the following, among other things: two Remington rifles, a full Army-issue ammunition belt, a box of squib fuses, a powder fuse, a member certificate with his name on it from the Police Athletic League, a German-language newspaper, several books by William Dudley Pelley, a framed picture of Francisco Franco, over a hundred pictures of Spain taken during the Civil War, various articles (written by Bishop) about Franco and the Spanish Civil War, a loaded shell with a firing cap already attached, and a yellow sheet on which was scribbled “squad leaders, contact Mac about how to instruct your squads.”¹⁹²

John Cassidy’s home contained virtually all the Christian Front membership cards, along with several volumes of instructions pertaining to the distribution of squads across the city and new member induction ceremonies. In addition, he had a bandolier of fifty-four cartridges sitting under a map of Brooklyn in his bedroom. A map of the Bronx on Cassidy’s desk had been divided into discrete sections, each one bearing a number. FBI Agents found several letters from Father Coughlin in Cassidy’s personal correspondence, as well as a telegram from Bishop. Bishop’s telegram stated, “It is

¹⁹² Bishop’s interviews with the FBI are virtually useless because he denies knowing any of his co-conspirators in any capacity. The items in his apartment lend credence to his claim that he fought alongside Franco during the Spanish Civil War.

raining today, but the Browning Light Machine guns are rattling on the side of the mountain range. Rain can't stop us...a few of the boys, group commanders, asked me to send you and your men greetings from them for Christ and country. They all say that the New York companies must come down and learn some real shooting." Bishop had sent it in August of 1939 from West Virginia.

Agents raiding Ernecke and Boettger's shared home found the majority of the weapons cache. In Ernecke's room, a Springfield rifle was hidden in the closet. Seven hundred rounds of .30-06 rifle ammunition had been placed under a work bench in the basement alongside a work box that contained more weaponry: four hundred and thirty further rounds of .30-06 ammunition, several chemical bottles including potassium nitrate and silver nitrate, five blank shells, a box of gunpowder, two knives, and a saw. The home's library had a large filing cabinet; the only things the men had filed were seven cans of cordite powder. There were three further bombs in the kitchen, and the bedrooms contained rifle cases and ammunition belts.¹⁹³

After the arrests, the men became overnight sensations. National newspapers picked up the story of the Christian Front plot and gave the trial extensive coverage. Eight hundred Christian Front members rallied in the Bronx. Protests gripped the city in the final days of January as Front groups seized street corners and blocked traffic in solidarity with their detained brethren. Father Coughlin said "While I do not belong to any unit of the Christian Front, nevertheless, I do not disassociate myself from that movement." Letters poured into FBI field offices across the country as citizens rushed to

¹⁹³ Agents remarked in their report that they also found "obscene pictures of [a] person believed to be Mrs. Maureen Boettger" in the upper left hand drawer of the Boettgers' dresser.

condemn and defend the Christian Front. The police chief of New York City ordered an immediate investigation into Front infiltration of the NYPD; he found that over one thousand uniformed policemen openly admitted membership, while hundreds of others refused to answer.¹⁹⁴ Colonel Bill Donovan, founder of the Office for Strategic Services during World War II, wrote personally to J. Edgar Hoover in a bid to have Captain Prout removed from the case, as Donovan had fought with Prout's father during World War I.¹⁹⁵ Hoover denied the request.

Across the Atlantic, Ireland took notice. *The Kerryman*, a newspaper local to Kerry in the Irish Free State, published a piece on the arrests titled "Is America's Justice Agency Tool of Scotland Yard?" The author asserted that the real reason for the arrests was a British attempt to clamp down on Irish Republican Army support flowing from New York City into the Irish Free State: "It has been learned that one of the first questions asked of the prisoners was whether they knew anything about the I.R.A."¹⁹⁶ A week before the arrests, British newspapers had reported on massive movements of funds from the United States to the Irish Republican Army. The Irish view this timing with suspicion, and said that "knowledge of the identity of the fund raisers would be of very great interest to the Empire of Great Britain."

The trial began in April of 1940. Jury selection opened on the 5th, with prospective jurors asked "whether they were members of the Communist, Socialist or American Labor parties, and whether they or their relatives or friends were affiliated with a list of organizations which included...the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Friends of

¹⁹⁴ "1,000 Police In N.Y. Admit Joining Front". *The New York Times*. February 13, 1940.

¹⁹⁵ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. January 22, 1940. Section 6, 123.

¹⁹⁶ "Is America's Justice Agency Tool of Scotland Yard?". *The Kerryman*. February 24, 1940.

Loyalist Spain.”¹⁹⁷ The judge personally inquired whether prospective jurors had heard “of an organization called the Irish Republican Army, also known as the I.R.A.” After receiving negative answers on both counts, the court seated a jury of ten men and two women.

On April 7th, the prosecution called Denis Healy to the stand as its primary witness. His direct examination testimony took up several days of proceedings as he laid out the details of the plot. Healy told the jury about how “members of the group practiced making crude bombs out of empty beer cans” and alleged that they had used effigies of Franklin D. Roosevelt for target practice in Narrowsburg.¹⁹⁸ During the course of his examination, Healy divulged that Bishop had “boasted to him of knowing who was responsible for an explosion he said had occurred on an oil tanker in the lower bay a few days earlier.”

Defense counsel mounted a withering cross-examination of the FBI’s star informant. Testimony disclosed that the FBI had arranged for Healy to receive his full salary from the New York Central Railroad during his time as an informant, even though he had not stepped foot in the office. Healy also had a previous conviction for street fighting, for which he received a suspended sentence. Attacking Healy’s credibility, the defense succeeded several times in forcing him to “admit that he had lied many times to the men on trial.”¹⁹⁹ On the 11th, after four straight days of testimony, Healy collapsed during a court recess and had to be sedated by a doctor on hand.

¹⁹⁷ “Front Trial Jury Carefully Chosen”. *The New York Times*. April 5, 1940.

¹⁹⁸ “Roosevelt Effigy ‘Front’ Gun Target”. *The New York Times*. April 9, 1940.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Two days later, Claus Ernecke failed to appear in court. Presiding judge Marcus B. Campbell immediately forfeited Ernecke's bail and issued a bench warrant for his arrest. Ernecke's lawyer, Leo Healy (no relation to Denis Healy), claimed "he did not believe Ernecke had disappeared voluntarily and thought it possible that Ernecke had been kidnapped or murdered." Leo Healy told media outlets that Ernecke had received several death threats since the beginning of the trial.²⁰⁰ Testimony continued, and over that weekend family members finally found Claus Ernecke; he had hung himself in the basement of his home.

Undeterred by the macabre turn of events, the prosecution pressed its case. FBI Special Agent Charles Gannon testified in late April that there was a belief among the plotters that both Bishop and Ernecke were in the pay of the German government. Gannon told the jury that over a listening device he heard John Viebrock pledge to use his cordite to "blow up the Police Department." In that same conversation, Viebrock argued that the time was right for a bombing because "there were two factions that could readily be blamed for the bombing, and because there was a great deal of animosity against Soviet Russia at the time because of the Finnish war."²⁰¹ The shadowy influence of the Irish Republican Army continued to skirt along the edge of the trial during Gannon's testimony, specifically in conversations between Healy and Viebrock: "He quoted Healy as having said that there were many Irish who would engage in German activities but who would not 'go hand in hand with a German agent.'"²⁰²

²⁰⁰ "Defendant in 'Front' Trial Gone; Kidnapped or Slain, Lawyer Fears". *The New York Times*. April 13, 1940.

²⁰¹ "Tale of Nazi Spies Unfolded At Trial". *The New York Times*. April 23, 1940.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

Testimony dragged into May, when the defense began to allow members of the Country Gentlemen to take the stand. “Chubby-faced” William Bushnell made a sympathetic witness, informing the jury that he had been a Boy Scout prior to his involvement with Bishop. While he admitted to taking detailed sketches of the floor plan for the Daily Worker, Bushnell said that he did so because he believed “William Gerald Bishop was a reserve officer of the United States Army who had been detailed to recruit civilians to cooperate with the army against an expected Communist revolution.” On the day of the arrests in January 1940, Bushnell was at home with his mother. When the FBI raided the home, he “invited them to join him in eating a chocolate cake his mother had just baked, and...when they got lost on their way back to New York he gave them directions which enabled them to find their way to the Brooklyn Bridge.”²⁰³

John Viebrock told the jury that some time in late November Bishop and Cassidy split over a difference in philosophy regarding pre-emptive violence against Communist targets. Whereas Bushnell and others sided with Bishop, Viebrock remained loyal to Cassidy. He said that “Cassidy instructed him to remain with Bishop...he kept Cassidy informed of the activities of Bishop’s group.”²⁰⁴ Cassidy later put the date of the split as November 22nd and confirmed that he had planted Viebrock in Bishop’s camp as a mole.²⁰⁵

Further testimony by the defendants shed light onto Bishop’s activities. They portrayed Bishop as “a strict disciplinarian whose word was law to his followers and also as a good sport who was well supplied with money and often ‘bought drinks for the

²⁰³ “Youth Joined Plot to Check Revolt”. *The New York Times*. May 16, 1940.

²⁰⁴ “Joined Plot To Spy, Viebrock Asserts”. *The New York Times*. May 15, 1940.

²⁰⁵ “Cassidy Ignored ‘Nazi Spy’ Report”. *The New York Times*. May 25, 1940.

crowd’.” Michael Beirne, a member of the cell who had remained on the outside of Bishop’s circle, alleged that Bishop said he would “explode a synagogue in Brooklyn.” Beirne’s statement to the FBI also raised the I.R.A. issue: “Bishop said there would be several bombings and this would cause unrest. He said the tactics would resemble those of the I.R.A.”²⁰⁶

The trial wrapped up in the middle of June. Closing arguments for the defense leaned heavily on the idea that the government had targeted the Country Gentlemen for their opposition to communism. Michael Beirne’s lawyer told the jury that the Communist party was “avowedly committed to a program of overthrowing the government, and charged that those opposed to communism were being indicted for their efforts.” He went on to say that the only fifth columnists in the United States “were the Communists, who alone, he contended, had an interest in the overthrow of the United States Government. He said the Christian Front, to which Beirne and some of the other defendants belonged, was the only organization actively opposing communism.”²⁰⁷ Leo Healy relied on histrionics for his portion of the defense, claiming that if his clients were actually guilty of treason they “ought to be ‘taken down and shot dead in the street’.” Referring to Macklin Boettger’s desire to obtain a rifle to shoot “a few Communists”, Leo Healy told the jury he shared the sentiment: “So would I, and so would a lot of other Americans. I’d like to see them all strung up by the neck.”²⁰⁸ The jury apparently found

²⁰⁶ “Bishop Is Pictured At Trial As Lavish”. *The New York Times*. May 3, 1940.

²⁰⁷ “Reds Peril to U.S. ‘Front’ Jury Hears”. *The New York Times*. June 15, 1940.

²⁰⁸ “Sedition Case Held A Plot By The U.S.”. *The New York Times*. June 14, 1940.

this argument persuasive; on June 16th, they acquitted nine defendants outright and deadlocked on charges against five more.²⁰⁹

V. “Blown Bodily Away”

If the acquittals brought a measure of peace to the City That Never Sleeps, they did not allow a long respite. At 4:10 P.M. on June 20th, a bomb blew apart the eighteenth floor of the German Consulate at 17 Battery Place in downtown New York. The blast destroyed doors and windows, injuring nine people. Forty-three minutes later, a bomb blew out the interior of the *Daily Worker*. Police said the bombs were “apparently designed to create more sensation than damage.” In addition, they concluded the bombings were the work “of a single agency” because of the proximity of the timing.

John P. Kaufman, an American who worked at a German industrial service in the building, told police that he had been milling about the corridor shortly before the explosion. He saw someone walk down the hallway, a young man with blonde hair who stood about five feet and eight inches in height. The man dropped a brown paper bag next to a door and kept walking down the hall. Within seconds, the package exploded. By the time Kaufman had recovered his senses the bomber was gone. When federal agents swept the office, they found remnants of the timing device: four electrical connections found on dry cell batteries, a spring in white metal housing, and several brass washers. Investigators concluded that the device had been electrically timed.

Outside the *Daily Worker*, evidence was harder to find. Witnesses gave no description of the bomber. Instead, police discovered that a man had approached the

²⁰⁹ “U.S. Drops Last 5 of ‘Front’ Cases”. *The New York Times*. January 3, 1941. The United States eventually dismissed the last five cases in early 1941.

front of the building, which also housed the New York Communist Party headquarters, with a brown paper bag similar to the one used in the consulate bombing. The man left the bag on a front step of the building and continued on his way. Shortly thereafter, the bag exploded and blew apart the façade. Again, investigators concluded the device was an electrically timed device.²¹⁰ Members of the local community immediately suspected a connection between the bombings and the Christian Front, but produced no hard evidence.²¹¹

The city spent a little over a week in peace. That summer the World's Fair had come to New York City, and substantial celebrations marked the Fourth of July and American independence. At the beginning of July, the British Pavilion at the World's Fair received a chilling phone call. An unidentified man called the building and told the telephone operator that she had "better get out because the place was going to be blown up." The day passed without event, but the New York Police Department assigned two detectives to "keep an eye on crowds."

Sometime during the early afternoon on July 4th, a member of the crowd entered the fan room of the British Pavilion. The room was situated at the center of the building, a "control room" with air-conditioning equipment and controls for the building's electricity. At about three thirty in the afternoon, William Strachan, an American electrician working in the building, discovered a small canvas bag in the room while checking the controls. The bag was ticking. Thinking it had been left overnight by another employee, Strachan picked up the bag and brought it to the service staff office.

²¹⁰ "Ten Hurt by Bombs Here Near Red, Nazi Agencies". *The New York Times*. June 21, 1940.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

The head of service staff became concerned and called in the head of uniformed staff, who in turn contacted the two NYPD detectives assigned to the pavilion. Detectives William Federer and Frederick Morlach notified the New York bomb squad and then determined to move the package themselves.

They took it through a back door of the pavilion, back through an alleyway past the Italian and Polish exhibits before placing the satchel against a fence on the very border of the World's Fair grounds. Commissioner John Sullivan of the World's Fair police arrived along with the bomb squad a few minutes later, and the police spread out in a loose semicircle around the package. Detective Morlach accompanied several other officers as they cut a small hole in the corner of the package, peering inside to discover whether or not the threat was real. They found dynamite.

Within seconds the package exploded, throwing Morlach through the air. When he recovered his senses, he surveyed the full damage of the bomb: "The detective turned to see that two of the men he had been watching only a minute before had been blown bodily away from a hole in the ground where the case had stood."²¹² One detective had both his feet blown off, and another "distorted body" laid motionless nearby. Two other detectives tried desperately to crawl toward their colleagues, "their clothing in tatters." Most of the crowd did not even realize there had been an explosion—the device was timed to coincide with fireworks spectacles in honor of the American Revolution.

The only initial clue the police could find was a small cog, usually found in clocks and presumably included in the bomb's timing mechanism. Other small fragments of bomb littered the fairground. The NYPD deployed detectives from both the homicide

²¹² "Police Die In Blast". *The New York Times*. July 5, 1940.

and alien units to collect evidence, and the police worked through the night to collect small pieces of metal in hopes of identifying the device. At the time, police “did not know whether the attack on the British Pavilion could possibly have any connection with those on the German agency or The Daily Worker.” There was only one lead: “It was thought for a time that American sympathizers of the Irish Republican Army might have placed the bomb this afternoon, and while this line remained open, there was little that was made known on which to base it.”²¹³

The NYPD’s Alien Squad moved into action immediately. As several of their colleagues combed the blast site, the rest of the unit rounded up known radicals across the city: “Protesting agitators were hauled down from soap boxes in Columbus circle the ‘red rendezvous’, and rushed unceremoniously to police headquarters. Others were seized from downtown haunts; still others were routed from bed.”²¹⁴ The final count extended to over one hundred people. While most were released, police held a middle aged German immigrant named Caesar Kroger. Kroger was in the country illegally, and when police raided his apartment they found several unregistered weapons and copies of *Mein Kampf*. Kroger claimed that he found the guns but “had not dared turn them in to police because he was a bundsman and feared what would happen to him.”²¹⁵

While Kroger languished in a county prison, threats continued to pour in. Late in the night of July 7th, the manager of an automobile service station received two phone calls warning him that gas tanks on West End Avenue were targets for bombings. The

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ “World’s Fair Bombing Results in Roundup of Metropolitan Radicals”. *The Jamestown Evening Journal*. July 5, 1940.

²¹⁵ “Hairs Yield Bombing Clue”. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. July 5, 1940. As a matter of clarification, “bundsman” refers to the German-American Bünd from which Claus Ernecke recruited squad members in late 1939.

next day, police fanned out across the city to guard “all electric power stations and gas storage tanks of the Consolidated-Edison Company, following new bomb threats.”²¹⁶ On July 15th, someone placed a package outside the front door of the Jewish Community Center in Union City, New Jersey.²¹⁷ Police arrived before the bomb exploded and later declared it a “dud.” They did, however, find a timing device that resembled the one used in the World’s Fair bombing.²¹⁸

The FBI received advance notice of possible Christian Front activity well before the bombs had gone off. Their own surveillance of the group identified at least four other Front-affiliated units active in New York City besides the Country Gentlemen: the aforementioned Bronx and Queens units, the group of Bünd members Claus Ernecke recruited in November of 1939 and subsequently organized on his own, and the Irish Republican Army sympathizers Macklin Boettger recruited around the same date. In addition, the FBI processed multiple letters with incriminating information that they included in the Christian Front file but never pursued.

Shortly after the arrests in January 1940, the warden of the Essex County Penitentiary wrote to the FBI and informed them that some time between the 5th and 11th of January forty sticks of dynamite went missing from the prison armory. He thought that “perhaps the Christian Front members were responsible.”²¹⁹ Not only did the FBI fail to investigate other active units for participation in the theft, they also failed to follow-up the matter with the Essex County Penitentiary. Another letter from a manufacturer of bulletproof vests was marked for possible Christian Front connection.

²¹⁶ “Special Police Guard Consolidated-Edison”. *The Cortland Standard*. July 8, 1940.

²¹⁷ Union City is at the other end of the Lincoln Tunnel from New York City.

²¹⁸ “‘Bomb’ Outside Jewish Centre”. *The Irish Examiner*. July 15, 1940.

²¹⁹ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. January 17, 1940. Section 5, 201.

That letter related that two men named G.T. Laughlin and Thomas Kane, both of New York City, contacted the business in September of 1939 and requested vests that could protect a wearer from 30.06 caliber bullets.²²⁰ When the proprietor told the men that such protection would be virtually impossible to assure, Laughlin and Kane contented themselves with other samples in both police and military models for a “foreign buying commission.” The men traveled between New York and Boston several times in the ensuing months; by late December, Kane told the manufacturer that he had “large orders pending.” On January 13th, the same day of the Christian Front arrests, Kane stopped answering telegrams from the bulletproof vest company and promptly disappeared. The FBI file classified his partner Laughlin’s occupation as “notorious gun-runner.”²²¹ Neither man was ever investigated, and none of the bombings were ever solved.

VI. “Unsettled World Conditions”

What remained of the Christian Front dispersed slowly following the bombings. Most of the men involved in the Country Gentlemen spent the next several years in obscurity; by the end of 1941 the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and wartime legislation suffocated homegrown militant activity. The government held William Bishop in custody at the conclusion of the trial and sent him to Ellis Island for deportation hearings in the middle of July of 1940.²²² The unforeseen circumstances brought about by the United States’ entry into World War II allowed Bishop to escape

²²⁰ The names of the owner as well as the business remain redacted in the official report.

²²¹ FBI case # 65 - HQ - 4279, Christian Front. January 19, 1940. Section 6, 34-37.

²²² “Bishop Hearing At Ellis Island”. *The New York Times*. July 13, 1940.

“deportation because of unsettled world conditions.”²²³ In 1942 the government detained Bishop and classified him as an enemy alien, with newspapers reporting that he “may now be kept in custody for the duration of the war.”²²⁴ The newspapers eventually lost interest in Bishop, and the lack of reporting meant he joined his erstwhile comrades in anonymity shortly thereafter.

Of all the anti-Semitic groups active in the New Deal Era, the Country Gentlemen and their affiliated Christian Front offshoots proved to be among the most dangerous. The outfit actively stockpiled firearms, created bombs, and scouted potential targets in hopes of furthering a plan that called for the overthrow of the United States government. They associated themselves with former Nazis, recruited men from the German-American Bünd and the Irish Republican Army, and infiltrated the New York State National Guard. Although their plans to shoot Jews and Congressmen never came to fruition, the bombings that followed their acquittal reeked of something more than coincidence. Whether or not the Country Gentlemen had a direct hand in any violence, their goal to “terrorize the Jews of New York City” with guns and bombs far surpassed any other group in its path to realization, and ultimately secured the unit a place among the most dangerous anti-government organizations of their era.

²²³ “W.G. Bishop Seized As An Enemy Alien”. *The New York Times*. February 28, 1942.

²²⁴ *Ibid*.

Conclusion



Image courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Manuscript Collection at Duke University

When Soviet troops flew the hammer and sickle from the ruins of the Reichstag in 1945, the world breathed a sigh of relief, secure in the knowledge that the forces of fascism had failed. In the United States, anti-Semitic groups like the Silver Legion and the Christian Front had already faded from view. William Dudley Pelley languished in a federal prison. Father Charles Coughlin lived in quiet exile from public life as his controversial views lost support. Their followers laid down their arms, and the government muzzled their most implacable lieutenants. Citizens across the world witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust, and the once-rabid anti-Semites of America tempered their rhetoric in response. Historians looked back on the tumult of the 1930's and saw the Pelleys and Coughlins of the day as a defeated foe; they wrote their histories accordingly.

The fact that the New Deal coalition survived the attack of the anti-Semites does not mean that the groups were never dangerous. Throughout the 1930's the federal government initiated multiple sweeping investigations into anti-government paramilitary groups, some of which ended in sensational sedition trials and lengthy prison terms. Silvershirt chapters and Christian Front units regularly engaged in violent rioting, vicious beatings, and arms stockpiling; groups associated with the Country Gentlemen remain connected to the deaths of multiple NYPD detectives in unsolved bombing incidents. The Silver Legion actively supplied Nazi Germany with intelligence on domestic targets, and the Christian Front included ex-Nazis (and possibly at least one Nazi agent) in its ranks. Although the organizations did not ultimately achieve their goal and bring about the overthrow of the American government, the precedent they set continues to haunt American right-wing extremism.

William Pelley never ruled the United States as its White King, but his brand of anti-Semitic paramilitarism did not die. The same holds true for Coughlin's populist attacks on the government. Instead, the rhetoric and ideology these men created to take down Franklin Roosevelt survived in various forms, manifesting across the intervening decades in strange and sometimes deadly ways. While the Christian Front and the Silvershirts disbanded, the ideals they held dear never truly went away. Paramilitary groups that followed retained both the racial theory and anti-government spirit of their New Deal precursors, if not their outward trappings. Building on conspiracies surrounding Jewish domination of the American government, right-wing extremists have incorporated elements of Pelley's British-Israelism and Coughlin's hate rhetoric to fashion a surviving assortment of anti-Semitic thinking.

I. The Posse Comitatus

The most direct line from Pelley's era to the present day runs through Henry Lamont Beach. Beach lived in Oregon during the Roosevelt Administration and joined a local chapter of the Silver Legion, rising eventually to become its organizer. Once World War II began and the Silvershirts disbanded, Beach landed a job as the executive of a dry cleaning company, holding that position until his retirement in the late 1960's. While the Silver Legion had long since disappeared, their anti-government and anti-Semitic ideology remained deeply imprinted on Beach until late in his life. In 1969 he formed a group called the Sheriff's Posse Comitatus, or the Citizens' Law Enforcement Research Committee. The group's ideology stemmed from the belief that "there was no higher political authority in the United States than the county sheriff." He based this belief on

an interpretation of the Posse Comitatus Act, passed in 1878 during the Hayes Administration that prevented the federal government from deploying the military to intervene in “police matters.”²²⁵ Taking this interpretation to its logical extreme, Beach contended that American citizens had no obligation to pay income taxes to the federal government or even acquire driver’s licenses.

The Posse Comitatus, as the group called itself after a merger with a similar organization in late 1969, grew quickly throughout the 1970’s. By 1975, an FBI investigation found “seventy-eight chapters in twenty-three states”, although compiling actual membership numbers was practically impossible owing to the Posse’s unwillingness to carry even basic state identification.²²⁶ As the movement grew, it became intertwined with anti-Semitic strains of thought derived from the same type of British-Israelism that William Pelley espoused in the early 1930’s. Members claimed that the federal government should not hold power because Jews had infiltrated it, leading to their use of the term Zionist Occupied Government.²²⁷ It did not take long for this newest incarnation of anti-Semitic paramilitarism to grow violent, and members acquired firearms in the same manner as their Silvershirt ancestors. The most famous incident of Posse Comitatus violence came in 1983 at the hands of a “balding, bespectacled” North Dakota farmer named Gordon Kahl.

²²⁵ Stephen E. Atkins. *Encyclopedia of Modern American Extremists and Extremist Groups*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press (2002), 30.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ Information courtesy of the Anti-Defamation League. For more information, see: http://archive.adl.org/poisoning_web/posse.html

Kahl had served in the army during World War II, winning several medals for valor as the turret gunner on a B-52 bomber.²²⁸ When he returned home he took up farming and intermittently worked on an oilfield in Texas. In the late 1960's he joined the Posse Comitatus and stopped paying his federal income taxes, leaving to a tax-related conviction in June of 1977 and a sentence of five years' probation.²²⁹ Kahl violated that probation in February of 1983, just short of the completion of his sentence. The government dispatched marshals to North Dakota to arrest Kahl, who got caught in a federal roadblock. When officers approached his car, Kahl and his son Yori opened fire with assault rifles. Two marshals died, "a third was critically wounded and two other officers were injured." The men "shot their way out of the police net and disappeared into the sparsely populated countryside as darkness fell, later stealing a deputy's car, which allowed them to monitor police radio conversations."²³⁰ Kahl made it as far south as Arkansas before federal agents tracked him down and shot him dead in another gunfight that required "more than 3,000 rounds of machine-gun fire."²³¹

The Federal investigation into the Gordon Kahl case revealed a high level of cooperation among "small groups of heavily armed right-wing extremists." In a disturbing parallel to their New Deal-era counterparts, these groups were "said by these authorities to be bound by anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, religious tenets and beliefs that taxation is illegal and that currency is debased by an amorphous conspiracy of Jews,

²²⁸ Wayne King. "Books of the Times; A Farmer's Fatal Obsession With Jews and Taxes." *The New York Times*. August 21 1990.

²²⁹ "Dakota 'Fanatic' Hunted In Slaying of 2 Marshals". *The New York Times*. February 15, 1983.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ King.

bankers, Communists, their dupes and corrupt government officials.”²³² Fifty years had passed since Pelley and Coughlin articulated their arguments that Judeo-Communist conspiracies had influenced international banking, yet the idea lived on amongst the fringe of the American right almost completely unchanged. The Posse Comitatus, founded by a former Silvershirt, used the substance of Pelley’s rhetoric and combined it with an opposition to taxation in order to revive anti-Semitic extremism in the post-Nazi era. As of 2015, the group continues to operate.

II. Christian Identity

William Dudley Pelley incorporated British-Israelism into his occult anti-Semitic beliefs, and the theory did not die along with him. He was neither the first nor the last to argue that Anglo-Saxons represented a lost sect of “pure blood” Israelites, and that the Jews of modern times had “not kept their bloodlines pure while in captivity” and thus lived as a substandard class of people.²³³ *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, the anti-Jewish tract published during Pelley’s stint in Siberia and used frequently by American anti-Semites throughout the Roosevelt Administration, inspired a body of theology based around the theory of Jewish debasement that came to be known as the Christian Identity movement.

Christian Identity had no single primogenitor, although work by the Silvershirt David Davidson and *Dearborn Independent* editor William Cameron played a large role

²³² Wayne King. “Link Seen Among Heavily Armed Rightist Groups: Investigators See Links Among Heavily Armed Right-Wing Groups”. *The New York Times*. June 11, 1983.

²³³ Richard Abanes. “Christian Identity”. In *American Militias: Rebellion, Racism & Religion*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press (1996), 160.

in shaping the American version of British-Israelism. Originally, American adherents of British-Israelism “viewed the Jews as fellow kinsmen, descendants of the southern kingdom of Judah.” Over the thirty years between World War II and the beginnings of the Posse Comitatus movement, Christian Identity “gradually metamorphosed from a European belief system into a distinctively American hybrid of myth and hate.”²³⁴ Identity believers “assert that America is the Promised Land...where all Israelites/whites, in fulfillment of biblical prophecy, will be gathered together just prior to Armageddon...the earth will subsequently be cleansed of all antichrist, Jewish, multi-racial forces.”²³⁵

The main theological underpinning of Christian Identity derives from the British-Israelite idea that the Anglo-Saxon race descends from ten “lost” tribes of northern Israel. While the Anglo-Saxon tribes remained racially pure thanks to their avoidance of the captivities in Egypt and Babylon, the remaining Jewish communities polluted their blood and “are actually descendants of Edomites, Hittites and Idumeans”²³⁶ In the mid-1940’s, Christian Identity theorists also propagated the theory known as the Serpent Seed. The belief held that Jews “are the physical descendants of a sexual union between ‘Mother Eve’ and ‘the serpent’”, who is identified as either Satan himself or his demonic representative.²³⁷

Vestiges of Pelley’s anti-Semitic millennialist rhetoric survive in the Christian Identity movement. During his publishing career Pelley published an article called “What You Should Do to Prepare for the Christ Commonwealth” that urged his followers

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Abanes, 166.

²³⁶ Abanes, 161.

²³⁷ Abanes, 162.

“to store food and ammunition and drill in a military fashion, foreshadowing the emergence of survivalism and apocalyptic ideology which has become central to the culture of the post war right.”²³⁸ Pelley’s experience with Protestant fundamentalism allowed him to draw on apocalyptic rhetoric and pair it alongside anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. He said that Jesus was not a Galilean, but the descendant of immigrant Gauls; he taught Jews descended from the devil and created Communism.²³⁹

This precedent, and indeed some of the words themselves, influenced the development of Christian Identity to a large degree. Pelley used Davidson’s pyramidism concept to predict Armageddon multiple times, failing in each. Regardless of his prophetic accuracy, Pelley’s insistence that his white Christian followers prepare for an End Times-like struggle against world Judaism bears remarkable similarity to the Christian Identity movement.²⁴⁰ Pelley’s association between the Jews and Satan, not to mention Coughlin’s “Mystical Body of Satan” formula, predate the Serpent Seed Theory. These similarities are not a result of coincidence.

III. The President As Foreigner

The most visible lingering remnant of Pelley and Coughlin’s inflammatory rhetoric came under scrutiny during the presidency of Barack Obama. The nation’s first African-American president first entered the White House in 2008 to a chorus of

²³⁸ Lobb, 3.

²³⁹ Goldwag, 259.

²⁴⁰ For examples previously cited in this paper, see Severeid. For further discussion about the extent of Pelley’s millennialist rhetoric and its relation to Christian Identity, see Lobb. For further discussion concerning Christian Identity theology see Abanes.

conservative conspiracy theorists. Some claimed that Obama was secretly a Muslim, while others maintained he was born in Kenya.²⁴¹ Eventually visible conservative radio hosts including Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh joined the fray, claiming that Obama could not produce an authentic American birth certificate and that he lied about practicing Christianity.²⁴² Liberals shot back and claimed that Glenn Beck followed in the footsteps of Charles Coughlin, with the fight becoming so acrimonious that Beck dedicated a segment of his radio show refuting the characterization.²⁴³

A close look at the rhetoric of Coughlin and Pelley reveals, however, that Beck clearly took pages from the New Deal anti-Semitic playbook and repurposed them for a 21st century context. Extreme conservative opposition to Barack Obama coalesced around a charismatic radio host who attacked the President's ethnicity and implicitly questioned his commitment to the welfare of the American people. Father Coughlin used radio on a weekly basis to attack "Jewish" interference in the Roosevelt Administration, with the insinuation that the President was not entirely American himself. Pelley dispensed with formality entirely and referred to Roosevelt as "Rosenvelt" and "Rosenfeld."²⁴⁴

Conservative attacks on Barack Obama have shamelessly reoriented these anti-Semitic tropes and updated them in the wake of 9/11. The perceived enemy was no longer Jews and Communists, but instead Muslims and Islamic fundamentalists. By

²⁴¹ Nicholas D. Kristof. "Obama And The Bigots". *The New York Times*. March 9, 2008.

²⁴² Joe Kovacs. "Rush Limbaugh Pummels Obama On Birth Certificate". June 10, 2009. For original text see link: <http://www.wnd.com/2009/06/100717/>

²⁴³ A video of that segment can be found posted on YouTube by a user named "CommieSkullSmasher" at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vBdUbXkMdg>

²⁴⁴ Pelley. "Rabbis in Week's Huddle Agree to Rant for Patriotism". *Liberation!*, 3. June 21, 1939.

associating Obama with a “foreign” religion and foreign terrorist groups, Beck and his colleagues tapped into the same fear of the Other that Pelley and Coughlin exploited over seventy years before. The result has been almost an exact replica of the extreme right-wing paranoia that gripped conspiratorially minded segments of the American population in the years leading to World War II.

The study of William Pelley, Charles Coughlin, the Silver Legion, and the Christian Front is the study of a continuing tradition of radicalism on the extreme American right. Whether the rhetoric is anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, or anti-Muslim, it has encouraged violent outbursts from the fringe of American politics that sometimes end in deadly clashes. The Posse Comitatus and Christian Identity movements can trace direct lineage to New Deal opposition organizations, and attacks on the ethnicity of the President continue into 2015. In a time when the Department of Homeland Security still classifies domestic right-wing terrorism as the greatest threat to the stability of the American government, the paramilitaries of the New Deal remain more relevant than ever.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ A declassified version of the Department of Homeland Security Intelligence report, released in 2015 and covered extensively by conservative media, can be found here: http://cloudfront-assets.reason.com/media/pdf/Sovereign_Citizen_Extremist_Ideology_2-5-15.pdf

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