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# REPRESSION AND IDEOLOGY

The Legacy of Discredited  
Centrist/Extremist Theory

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1998

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## INTRODUCTION

### NEW INTRODUCTION:

Two social science models used by the U.S. government—“countersubversion theory” and “centrist/extremist theory”—wrongly assume there is criminal intent and activity behind all mass movements that are critical of the government.<sup>1</sup>

Centrist/extremist theory (sometimes called Classical Theory” or the “Pluralist School), lumps together dissidents, populists of the left and right, supremacists and terrorists as an irrational lunatic fringe.

The image of a democratic elite guarding the vital center against irrational populists has appealed strongly to many defenders of the status quo, but as a reading of US political traditions it is strikingly twisted and inconsistent.

Centrist/extremist theory denies the structural oppression at the core of US society; it obscures this country’s long history of brutality and genocide; it lumps popular movements that fight oppression and supremacy with those that reinforce it.

### ORIGINAL INTRODUCTION:

[This article originally appeared in Police Misconduct and Civil Rights Law Report Vol. 5, Nos. 13-14, Jan-Feb., and March-April 1998. Copyright 1998, the West Group.]

Litigators representing defendants accused of politically-motivated crimes need to be aware of a growing body of social science literature that challenges the two main analytical models used by the government to routinely argue that militant dissidents are marginal and maladjusted persons with a natural proclivity for criminal behavior.

This goes beyond mere intellectual curiosity since government attempts to introduce broad evidence regarding intent and motive can be challenged with greater authority when a defendant's litigator is aware of the flawed nature of these analytical models. Both of the models used by the government, which we are calling "countersubversion theory" and "centrist/extremist theory," wrongly assume there is criminal intent and activity behind all mass movements that are critical of the government. <sup>1</sup>

That government officials still rely on the flawed analytical models is evidenced by the attempt by federal prosecutors to claim that anti-government views expressed by Terry Nichols showed his intent to bomb the federal building in Oklahoma City.

In the first part of this article, we will look at the history and themes of Countersubversion theory and Centrist/extremist theory, and then review criticisms of these theories. In part two of this article, we review how the flawed analytical models used by the government help justify abuses of civil rights and civil liberties.

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## PART ONE: TWO FLAWED THEORIES

### Theory One: Countersubversion Theory

Countersubversion theory was influenced by nativism and took shape as a form of government repression during nineteenth century industrial struggles and early twentieth century scapegoating of immigrants.<sup>2</sup>Faced with a rising tide of militant labor activism, corporate elites and state agencies blamed the unrest on a few ringleaders conspiring to foment criminal subversive activity and eventually armed revolution. Following WW1 and the Bolshevik revolution there was a backlash against immigrants to the US from Italy, Russia, and other countries. These immigrants-seen as diluting the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant essence of the culture and nation-were scapegoated for purportedly bringing subversive "alien" ideas such as socialism and anarchism into the country and thus threatening law and order and even national security.<sup>3</sup>

Countersubversion theory emerged as the analytical model favored by corporate elites and private security firms to enlist state agencies in an effort to repress strikes and civil unrest aimed at industrial worksites and mines. Countersubversion theory later expanded beyond its early focus on alleged labor agitation and organizing by communists and anarchists to see all dissident social movements arising not from any real social or economic conditions, but as the creation of outside agitators who comprise a cadre at the epicenter of the movement. These leaders use the movement as a front to hide their plans for criminal subversive activity and eventual violent armed revolution.<sup>4</sup>

A key feature of countersubversion identified by author Frank Donner was the focus on individual ringleaders, outside agitators, foreign agents, hidden conspirators, and master manipulators. "The emphasis on individuals-*cherchez la personne!*-plays another quite separate role in the intelligence schema. It personalizes unrest and thus detaches it from social and economic causes. Under this view the people are a contented lot, not given to making trouble until an 'agitator' stirs them up. As soon as he or she is exposed or neutralized, all will be well again."<sup>5</sup> The solution is to use widespread surveillance and infiltration to penetrate to the core of the movement, expose the criminal cadre, and restore order as the larger movement collapses without the manipulators to urge them to press their grievances which were never significant to begin with.

Countersubversion has been used to guide government intelligence agency policy, provide a mission for organizations and groups, and as an ideology that mobilizes a mass movement. Countersubversion theory, for instance, has been a guiding ideology of the FBI in its campaigns against the left, and in its occasional efforts to investigate the far right.

## COUNTERSUBVERSION THEORY AND CONSPIRACIST STATE REPRESSION

Conspiracism is a worldview based on the premise that world history is shaped by a handful of secret conspirators. That conspiracism has flourished episodically throughout US history is well documented.<sup>6</sup>When conspiracism becomes a mass phenomenon, persons seeking to protect the nation from the alleged conspiracy of subversives gnawing away at the entrails of the society form counter movements-thus the term countersubversion. David Brion Davis noted that movements to counter the "threat of conspiratorial subversion acquired new meaning in a nation born in revolution and based on the sovereignty of the people," and that in the US, "crusades against subversion have never been the monopoly of a single social class or ideology, but have been readily appropriated by highly diverse groups."<sup>7</sup>

Donner perceived an institutionalized culture of countersubversion in the United States "marked by a distinct pathology: conspiracy theory, moralism, nativism, and suppressiveness."<sup>8</sup> This countersubversion hysteria is linked to government attempts to disrupt and crush dissident social movements in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

The most influential conspiracist theory in the US during the twentieth century was the fear of the Red Menace. Donner argued that the unstated yet actual primary goal of surveillance and political intelligence gathering by state agencies and their countersubversive allies is not amassing evidence of illegal activity for criminal prosecutions, but punishing critics of the status quo or the state in order to undermine movements for social change. A major tool used to justify the anti-democratic activities of the intelligence establishment is propaganda designed to create fear of a menace by an alien outsider. The timeless myth of the enemy "other" assuages ethnocentrist hungers with servings of fresh scapegoats. As Donner noted: "In a period of social and economic change during which traditional institutions are under the greatest strain, the need for the myth is especially strong as a means of transferring blame, an outlet for the despair [people] face when normal channels of protest and change are closed."<sup>10</sup>

Donner summarized the basic premise:

"The American obsession with subversive conspiracies of all kinds is deeply rooted in our history. Especially in times of stress, exaggerated febrile explanations of unwelcome reality come to the surface of American life and attract support. These recurrent countersubversive movements illuminate a striking

contrast between our claims to superiority, indeed our mission as a redeemer nation to bring a new world order, and the extraordinary fragility of our confidence in our institutions. This contrast has led some observers to conclude that we are, subconsciously, quite insecure about the value and permanence of our society. More specifically, that American mobility detaches individuals from traditional sources of strength and identity—family, class, private associations—and leaves only economic status as a measure of worth. A resultant isolation and insecurity force a quest for selfhood in the national state, anxiety about imperiled heritage, and an aggression against those who reject or question it.”<sup>11</sup>

Donner used the term “subversification” to describe the process by which dissidents are made outlaws. In order to justify the continued health of the intelligence empire, new movements would have to go through subversification to “fuel backlash charges that our national security is endangered by a sinister conspiracy of dissidents who have deliberately depleted our intelligence resources to prepare the way for a takeover. Since no evidence of such a conspiracy will emerge, the accusers will exploit, as in the past, its non-existence: Is it not obvious that a cover-up was part of the conspiracy and that the absence of proof demonstrates its effectiveness?”<sup>12</sup> There is also evidence that during these periods of repression, propaganda campaigns seeking to demonize dissident movements are adopted by the mainstream media and serve to insulate the repression from public discussion or criticism.<sup>13</sup>

According to Donner, “Intelligence in the United States serves as an instrument for resolving a major contradiction in the American political system: how to protect the status quo while maintaining the forms of liberal political democracy.”<sup>14</sup> Donner explained that “intelligence institutions have in the past acquired strength and invulnerability because of their links to two powerful constituencies: a nativist, anti-radical political culture and an ideological anti-communism, identified with Congress and the executive branch respectively.”<sup>15</sup>

Central to rationalizing surveillance and disruption was the fear of revolutionary violence. Donner observed that “appeals relating to collectivism and statism have little power to stir mass response. But the charge of violence, however mythic it has become, is the rock on which the intelligence church is built. It accommodates repression to democratic norms that exclude violent methods.”<sup>16</sup>

Implicit in the rationalizations and justifications for political repression is a package of right-wing countersubversion beliefs with roots deep in xenophobia and nativism. Two key countersubversive theories could be called the theories of the “Slippery Slope” and the “Onion Ring.”

#### THE SLIPPERY SLOPE THEORY OF SUBVERSION

According to this countersubversive theory:

- Global liberation movements are not prompted by a genuine response to social conditions but by outside intervention, most often by communists or their proxies.
- Domestic social change movements are not fueled by a genuine response to social conditions but by outside agitators, most often revolutionaries or those under the control of revolutionaries.
- Liberalism is the crest of a slippery slope which leads downhill to the Welfare State, then Socialism, and inevitably to Communism or Totalitarianism.
- Dissent is provoked by subversion. Subversion is a terrorist movement. Terrorism is criminal.

For the true believers who advocate this view, patriotism equals unquestioning obedience to authority and undying resistance to social change. Surveillance and infiltration are justified to stop the spread of subversion. It’s all a plot. Slippery Slope theorists generally also believe in the Onion-ring theory as well.

## THE ONION-RING THEORY OF SUBVERSION

According to this countersubversive theory:

- Subversive cadre bore into the core of all social change movements both at home and abroad.
- To uncover the cadre who are engaged in subversive criminal activity, an informant must work step-by-step from the outside onion ring of non-criminal free-speech activity through several rings of hierarchy toward the center core where the criminal activity lurks.
- Honest though naive activists are often unaware they are being manipulated, and therefore should welcome attempts to expose the core of crafty covert criminal cadre.

The Onion Ring theory is less extreme than the Slippery Slope theory in its concession that some members of radical and liberal political movements are sincere, and not sliding towards totalitarianism. Nonetheless, its advocates also justify surveillance and infiltration to stop the criminal activity at the core of groups exercising their free speech rights.

In fact, in order to insure that at least some agents or informants succeed in penetrating to the criminality at the core, an extraordinary level of invasion becomes not only legitimate, but essential. Onion-ringers advocate infiltrating every group, spying on every member, and keeping track of all persons even tangentially involved in all social change movements. Alas, for the domestic political activist, the end result of both the Slippery Slope and Onion Ring theories is the same: political surveillance and infiltration.

During the Cold War, activism by any left group was attributed generally to an alleged global communist conspiracy. Meanwhile rightwing groups were largely excluded from serious scrutiny because they were not perceived to be part of a subversive global revolutionary movement. Acts of right wing violence were consistently treated as isolated occurrences rather than part of a larger pattern. Far right groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were seldom targets of widespread surveillance for political repression—even when violent—but were monitored “primarily for crime prevention purposes,” according to Donner.<sup>17</sup> In some cases state tolerance of right wing violence spilled over to active support. This double standard objectively made “a special contribution to conservative politics,” said Donner, since social change movements of the left could be smeared as agents and fellow travelers of the violent revolutionary global red menace, while activists of the right could escape blame for the criminal excesses of a few reactionary and fascist zealots.

Since evidence of actual wrongdoing is scarce, Donner suggested the intelligence community anticipated threats by relying on “ideology, not behavior, theory not practice. During the Cold War, “The Bureau’s primary intelligence targets [were] various Marxist persuasions and their adherents.” Now, although the targets are more varied, “the basis for this priority” remains the same. “The selection of targets for surveillance, operations such as informer infiltration and wiretapping, and file storage practices reflect what may be called the politics of deferred reckoning, the need to know all about the enemy in preparation for a life or death showdown” with anti-government forces. “Domestic countersubversive intelligence is,” Donner continues, “in theory, future-oriented: ‘Subversive’ activities are, in the language of the FBI, those ‘aimed at’ a future overthrow, destruction, or undermining of the government, regardless of how legitimate these activities might currently be or how tenuous the link between present intentions and ultimate action.”<sup>18</sup> As targets shifted, the institutionalized procedures remained remarkably constant, merely made more efficient with the advent and advances of computer technology. Most far right activists during this period did not represent a challenge to entrenched systems of power, but in fact defended those systems. This dynamic shifted in the 1990s after the collapse of Soviet communism as large

sectors of the conspiracist right targeted alleged subversive traitors in the government and their allies in the UN as the new enemy, helping to justify a new wave of state repression in the form of “anti-terrorist” legislation.

In fact, a transition was taking place. The basic themes of countersubversion theory were developed to fight the red menace, but it was increasingly difficult to argue that a subversive leftist network was undermining the country. Far right groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the vigilante *Posse Comitatus* now openly targeted the government as the enemy. As the Cold War evolved, so did the language used to describe the threat. In the genesis of witch hunts, subversive begat extremist, which begat terrorist. Donner noted the addition of the term “extremist” to the countersubversive arsenal of demonizing language, and he discussed how the Reagan Administration and the New Right used the term terrorist to marginalize dissident groups and justify targeting them.<sup>19</sup> While some in the intelligence and law enforcement community clung to the countersubversive model, others adopted a more sophisticated justification, the centrist/extremist model.<sup>20</sup>

#### Theory Two: Centrist/Extremist Theory

Many discussions of right-wing and left-wing popular movements routinely portray such movements as bizarre fringe phenomena fundamentally at odds with the political “mainstream.” Generally the premise is that the US political system has an essence of democracy and freedom, but that this essence is threatened by “extremists” of one variety or another.

Centrist/extremist theory was formulated in the 1950s by liberal and moderate intellectuals such as Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, Nathan Glazer, David Riesman, Seymour Martin Lipset, Earl Raab, Peter Viereck, and Alan Westin. They were members of the circle that would later evolve into the neoconservative intellectual movement. Many of them were former Marxists who had rejected the Popular Front and embraced a militant Cold War anticommunism, yet they defended the New Deal and criticized the “excesses” of Joseph McCarthy’s red-baiting. In books such as Bell’s anthology *The New American Right* (1955) and its expanded edition *The Radical Right* (1963) they glorified the political center against “extremists” at both ends of the spectrum.

Centrist/Extremist theory, especially as outlined by Lipset, Raab, Viereck, and Bell, sees dissident movements of the left and right as composed of outsiders-politically marginal people who have no connection to the mainstream electoral system or nodes of government or corporate power. Social and economic stress snaps these psychologically fragile people into a mode of political hysteria, and as they embrace an increasingly paranoid style they make militant and unreasonable demands. Because they are unstable they can become dangerous and violent. Their extremism places them far outside the legitimate political process, which is located in the center where pluralists conduct democratic debates. The solution prescribed by centrist/extremist theory is to marginalize the dissidents as radicals and dangerous extremists. Their demands need not be taken seriously. Law enforcement can then be relied upon to break up any criminal conspiracies by subversive radicals that threaten the social order.

Centrist/extremist theorists portrayed the political mainstream as an “open democratic market place”<sup>21</sup> where a rich array of interest groups competed freely and fairly, and where “the sources of power” were “difficult to locate.”<sup>22</sup> The center was a realm of political civility, pragmatism, rationality, and tolerance. The extremes were the opposite of all this: absolutist, moralistic, unrestrained, irrational, and paranoid. “[T]he extreme right,” wrote Hofstadter, “stands psychologically outside the frame of normal democratic politics, which is largely an affair of compromise.”<sup>23</sup> The difference could be expressed as one between “*interest politics*, the clash of material aims and needs among various groups and blocs;

and *status politics*, the clash of various projective rationalizations arising from status aspirations and other personal motives.”<sup>24</sup>

From this perspective, differences between the “radical right” and the “radical left” blurred or disappeared altogether. To Bell, far right conspiracy thinking was “cut from the same cloth as vulgar Bolshevik explanation...”<sup>25</sup> To Alan Westin, the politics of the John Birch Society were “remarkably similar” to those of the Popular Front in 1945-48.<sup>26</sup> To Peter Viereck, a centrist conservative, McCarthyism was “actually a leftist instinct behind a *self-deceptive* rightist veneer.”<sup>27</sup> A central tenet in the school’s conception of McCarthyism, in fact, was that its roots were not really (or not primarily) conservative, but lay rather in the agrarian radicalism of the 19th-century Populists.

Supposedly the Populists and McCarthy represented the same rural and small-town resentments, centered in the Midwest, against the urbane, intellectual and cosmopolitan East—a crude and dangerous egalitarianism steeped in old-time religion and isolationism. In *The Age of Reform* (1955), Hofstadter depicted Populism as a backward-looking movement obsessed with banker conspiracies—the fount of 20th-century antisemitism in the United States;<sup>28</sup> McCarthyism, centrist/extremist theorists argued, turned this same conspiracy thinking against “alien” ideas instead of “alien” people. In McCarthyism, they argued, “the status-insecure old-family American middle class” was joined by “status-striving minority ethnics” (especially Catholics) anxious to prove their loyalty to the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Popular movements in general were seen as a threat to freedom because the lower orders lacked the civility and “democratic restraint” of the elites.<sup>30</sup> Riesman and Glazer asserted that “civil liberties are protected, not by majority vote (which is overwhelmingly unsympathetic), but by traditional institutions, class prerogatives, and judicial life-tenure.”<sup>31</sup> Viereck saw liberty being defended by “tiny, heroic natural-aristocracies and by the majesty-beyond mob majorities-of moral law.”<sup>32</sup>

#### FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL ABERRATION

Over time centrist/extremist theory has created the impression that dissidents are psychologically maladjusted extremists. In the same way racism and antisemitism are seen as primarily a problem of militant supremacists who are psychologically maladjusted—mainly a lunatic fringe of ignorant bigots primarily composed of working-class Whites who are labeled “rednecks.” Similarly, the countersubversion rhetoric of right-wing populist movements is dismissed as reflecting irrational hysteria on the margins of society. These ideas reflected the centrality of individualism and psychological explanation prevalent in the postwar period.

In the 1950s the American Jewish Committee sponsored a five-volume *Studies in Prejudice* where the “Nazi Holocaust became a paradigm for all intergroup conflict,” and prejudice was explained as largely a matter of psychologically-determined personality types.<sup>33</sup> The keystone of this approach was codified by Theodor W. Adorno and his colleagues in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Two other influential studies commissioned by the AJC included *The Dynamics of Prejudice* by Bruno Bettelheim and Morris Janowitz, and *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder* by Nathan W. Ackerman and Marie Jahoda.<sup>34</sup> These studies pioneered descriptions of a variety of psychological disorders and categorized different forms of prejudice and discrimination, but wrongly implied that psychological disorders caused prejudice and discrimination, and that authoritarian personalities explained the political right.<sup>35</sup> These ideas popularized the notion of prejudice as primarily “an emotional disorder,” while “[i]ntergroup conflict became a simple matter of ignorance or malice.”<sup>36</sup>

Second, the contributors to Bell's anthologies (and other authors) bridged these psychological theories into history, sociology, and political science. Hofstadter's essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" contains useful descriptions of the content and patterns of conspiracist allegations popular on the US right, but in this and other essays he relied on the AJC studies and wrongly located the phenomenon as primarily a "persistent psychological complex" and "a mentality to see the world in the paranoid's way" resulting in a "pseudo-conservative revolt" reflecting a "largely unconscious hatred of our society" by extremist persons who manifested Adorno's "authoritarian personality."<sup>37</sup> After the centrist/extremist school established its dominance, many analysts went off looking for purely psychological explanations of right-wing behavior.<sup>38</sup>

Third, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith sponsored several studies of right-wing movements whose members displayed varying degrees of antisemitic and racist beliefs. These books, by Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, accomplished much groundbreaking investigative reporting, and took seriously the institutional networks of what they called the radical right and extreme conservatives.<sup>39</sup> As their books progressed through the years, however, they increasingly adopted core tenets of centrist/extremist theory, and began losing some of their earlier nuance and shading; reducing their originally complex analysis of conservative, reactionary, and fascist movements to monitoring "the hostility of the Radical left, the Radical Right, pro-Arab groups, black extremists, and a malingering anti-Jewish hatemongering apparatus," as one cover blurb proclaimed.<sup>40</sup> What most people remember about the Forster and Epstein series are the terms "extremist" and "radical right." One unrelated 1969 study sponsored by ADL concluded that antisemitism was a problem associated with "unenlightened culture."<sup>41</sup>

Centrist/extremist theory paved the way for the neoconservative movement, which allied with the Right on issues such as affirmative action, military spending, and gay rights.<sup>42</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan was among the early chief theoretical figures in the neoconservative movement, and his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, popularly called *The Moynihan Report*, set the stage for the backlash against the civil rights movement and women's movement by blaming problems of African Americans on Black family structure.<sup>43</sup> As Carl Ginsburg points out:

"Sometime toward the end of 1964, as the civil rights movement was losing steam, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an ambitious assistant secretary in the Department of Labor, came forward with a revelation. It appeared to him that black poverty was no longer the result of "external forces," such as general economic conditions, but rather that the black family had inflicted upon itself its own demise such as to render it "disturbed." The structure of the poor black family, rather than of corporate society-its ruling elite, economic organization, social isolation, and racial discrimination-became the focus of understanding black poverty. The problem became the black family structure."<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, a prevailing pattern of neoconservatism became the redefinition of social and economic issues in individualized terms.<sup>45</sup> Centrist/extremist theory and neoconservatism reinforced each other while rephrasing conservative and reactionary critiques of social problems in more palatable language. The early emphasis on prejudice as the result of personality disorders by analysts working with the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee flowed easily into the neoconservative point of view, and was circulated widely through AJC's *Commentary* magazine.<sup>46</sup> There were diverse sources of similar analyses, and a resultant was a growing mainstream consensus that social problems were largely the fault of individual character flaws. Racialized imagery was frequently a subtext of the debate, and throughout there was, according to Lucy A. Williams, a "continuing framing of subtle themes and twisting of information to appeal to white working class resentment of the gains of the civil rights movement and fears of inflation." Michael Lind notes this diverts "populist anger from Wall Street and the Rich."<sup>47</sup>

## CRITICISM OF CENTRIST/EXTREMIST THEORY

Centrist/extremist theory lumps together dissidents, populists of the left and right, supremacists and terrorists as an irrational lunatic fringe.

The image of a democratic elite guarding the vital center against irrational populists has appealed strongly to many defenders of the status quo, but as a reading of US political traditions it is strikingly twisted and inconsistent.

Centrist/extremist theory denies the structural oppression at the core of US society; it obscures this country's long history of brutality and genocide; it lumps popular movements that fight oppression and supremacy with those that reinforce it.

In many ways centrist/extremist theory was a sophisticated re-statement of countersubversion theory, with slightly less reliance on authoritarian measures and slightly more reliance on other forms of social control such as mass propaganda to build a centrist consensus.

This can be seen, for example, in Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab's 1970 book, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*, the most ambitious study of the far right written from a centrist/extremist viewpoint. Many specific discussions within this work are intelligent and perceptive, but the overall structure of the book gives a deeply distorted picture of US history.

Criticism of centrist/extremist theory gained significant attention in academia with the publication of Michael Rogin's 1967 book *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*. Since then, many other serious critics have emerged.

In a 1987 book by Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie: and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, he notes that by "emphasizing mobility, interest conflict, immigrant-native rivalries, and status anxiety," Lipset and Raab obscured the United States' major divisions of race, class, gender, and institutional power. Thus their book:

"...not only makes the anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish 1920s Ku Klux Klan into its emblem of countersubversion and ignores that Klan's anti-Negro predecessor; it also treats the abolitionists as extremists but avoids proslavery agitation; it attends to the late nineteenth-century anti-Catholic American Protective Association but is silent on antilabor and anti-Chinese violence in the same period; it expatiates on alleged Populist anti-Semitism while burying the Red scares that swept through the country between 1877 and World War I; it discusses McCarthyism but not the development of a countersubversive state security apparatus; and it has nothing at all to say about women and Indians. Claiming to cover right-wing extremism as a whole, the authors actually attack movements of which they disapprove that were neither right-wing nor extremist, and they cover up a countersubversive tradition that cannot be reduced to religious prejudice, ethnic conflict, and status anxiety."<sup>48</sup>

Rogin pointed out the status anxieties of the contributors to *The Radical Right* themselves, their sense of vulnerability in the face of McCarthyism and nativism, their tendency to turn "their own autobiographies into American history" while neglecting the structural forces that did not threaten them.<sup>49</sup> These men were Eastern intellectuals, mostly children of immigrants, many of them former Marxists-squarely in Joe McCarthy's line of fire. They had strong incentives to embrace and glorify the vital center. The Red Scare came on the heels of the Brown Scare of fascism, and "the great fear of the liberal intellectuals," as Kazin puts it, was that "social movements of the ill-educated could destroy what made America such a good place in which to live."<sup>50</sup> This fear was tied to the understanding that there had been mass support-or at least acquiescence- for the Nazi genocide of Jews. Many of those who developed centrist/extremist theory had Jewish backgrounds and had legitimate historic reasons to be suspicious of some mass

movements. "And a mere decade after the Holocaust," Kazin suggests, "there could be no greater fear for Jewish intellectuals than the spread of mass intolerance associated with demagogues on the Right."<sup>51</sup> The lesson to those who developed centrist/extremist theory, many of whom would later form the neoconservative movement, was that democracy was too fragile to be trusted in the hands of the people, and it was up to elites and their institutions to preserve a vital center against the waves of maladjusted extremists from both the left and right.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, while this view was convenient for centrist intellectuals and elites, it was overly self-congratulatory. As historian Leo Ribuffo put it:

"polemical convenience conflicted with historical accuracy. Grafting Brown Scare themes onto Cold War premises, authorities on extremism assumed that their political prescription, a center untainted by far right and far left, was also an accurate description of past politics."<sup>53</sup>

Ribuffo noted that the postwar "centrists suffered from inflated expectations regarding elites. While repeating the truism that persons threatened economically and psychologically were more likely than their comfortable neighbors to assail scapegoats, leading students of extremism missed the connection between far right activists and irresponsible, intolerant elites."<sup>54</sup> For instance, interwar far right leaders "borrowed their antiradical rhetoric from presidents, senators, attorneys general, corporate executives, and labor leaders," according to Ribuffo, who suggested that proponents of the "vital center" romanticized elites as much as those on the left who romanticized "The People."<sup>55</sup> It's striking, for instance, that Daniel Bell offered Theodore Roosevelt, of all people, as a prime example of the center's "pragmatic give-and-take" politics.<sup>56</sup> This was the same Roosevelt who called for labor organizer Eugene Debs to be "placed before a stone wall and shot," denounced White women refusing to have children as "criminal[s] against the race," and praised the "fighting instinct" of "the mighty civilized races," "which by their expansion are gradually bringing peace into the red wastes where the barbarian peoples of the world hold sway."<sup>57</sup> Theodore Roosevelt would doubtless have applauded Bell's assertion that, "The politics of civility...has been the achievement of only a small group of countries-those largely within an Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian political tradition."<sup>58</sup>

In praising Teddy Roosevelt as a model of tolerance and compromise, Bell was referring to Roosevelt's behavior toward other affluent White men. Roosevelt's treatment of workers, women, and "barbarian peoples" did not need to be considered in assessing his political demeanor because, in Bell's framework, these groups were of marginal importance. Not being full players in the centrist game of give-and-take, they were outside the realm of "real" political action.

The very categories centrist/extremist scholarship used to distinguish the center from the extremes were arbitrary and inconsistent. If "irrationality" and failure to understand practical limits are the marks of the extremist, then anyone who preaches the Horatio Alger myth of upward mobility would surely qualify.<sup>59</sup> If "paranoid" conspiracy thinking is the test, then Franklin Roosevelt was an extremist, since he believed that bankers secretly controlled the US government.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, when the patrician conservative Henry Cabot Lodge described William Jennings Bryan's 1896 presidential campaign as "a well-drawn and carefully thought out scheme based on socialistic and anarchistic theories imported from Europe" he showed that conspiracist paranoia has been very much at home in the political center.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, the image of right-wing extremism as an irrational popular movement obscures the fact that rightist movements generally embody concrete, "rational" interests, and that elites often play a key role in them. For example, Bell and his colleagues saw McCarthyism as a pathological mass revolt against democratic institutions and leaders. But as Rogin pointed out, "the masses did not levy an attack on their political leaders; the attack was made by a section of the political elite against another and was nurtured by the very elites under attack."<sup>62</sup> Hofstadter, Lipset, and others, arguing that economic and

political factors could not account for McCarthyism, turned to “status anxiety” and other psychological explanations. In the process, they hid the perfectly normal power struggle involved-particularly a comeback effort by rightist business forces against the Eastern elite liberals who had unseated them in the 1930s.<sup>65</sup>Centrist/extremist theory insulated the state, corporate interest, and bipartisan elites from criticism.

Sara Diamond is critical of centrist/extremist theory for erroneously labeling the intra-elite power struggle during the McCarthy period as populist, and then labeling as “extremist” the electoral right-wing social movements that emerged after the McCarthy period:

“Popular right-wing groups like the John Birch Society emerged only in the late 1950s, well after political elites had turned the pursuit of “communist subversion” into a national religion. By then, polite society was keen to depict wild-eyed Birchers as “extremists,” even as they played by democratic rules and helped win the [1964] Republican [presidential] nomination for Barry Goldwater.”<sup>64</sup>

Demographic and attitudinal studies of Birch Society members and Goldwater supporters showed they were not marginal misfits but had above average education and income and were over-represented with professionals such as doctors and lawyers.<sup>65</sup> Himmelstein argued that right wing organizing drives “were not episodic eruptions of mindless anger and pain. They were part of the sustained growth of a continuous social movement with a clear, systematic ideology that led ultimately to the New Right and the New Religious Right.”<sup>66</sup>

Centrist/extremist theory ignores real power struggles in the society. It stifles a healthy public debate over how to unravel systems of oppression, allows individuals to ignore their own complicity in oppressive behavior, and obscures the supremacist forces woven into our society’s central institutions. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism-along with other forms of supremacist ideology-are not the exclusive domain of marginal and militant organized hate groups, but are domiciled in mainstream culture and politics.

James A. Aho points out how easy it is “to dismiss racism and religious bigotry as products of craziness or stupidity,” but that such a view is not accurate. According to Aho, “Evidence from field research on Pacific Northwest racists and bigots shows that in the main they are indistinguishable from their more conventional peers, intellectually and educationally.”<sup>67</sup> Aho also observes that with the exception of those who engaged in politically-motivated murders, the racists and bigots he studied “appear within the bounds of normal, psychologically.”

The centrist/extremist approach to the racist Right has not “abolished the movement, nor diminished racism in general, and may, in fact, unwittingly support racist beliefs,” suggests Abby L. Ferber. “While the focus is on the fringe, mainstream, everyday racism remains unexamined.” Ferber argues that a discussion is needed on the “points of similarity between white supremacist discourse and mainstream discourse,” especially since “White supremacist discourse gains power precisely because it rearticulates mainstream racial narratives.”<sup>68</sup> Raphael S. Ezekiel agrees, noting that organized White racism exploits feelings of “lonely resentment.”<sup>69</sup> It does this by weaving together ideologies already present in mainstream culture: “white specialness, the biological significance of ‘race,’ the primacy of power in human relations” along with “the feeling of being cheated.”<sup>70</sup>

The continued uncritical reliance on centrist/extremist theory has hampered the development of new and more effective ways of understanding and challenging prejudice, discrimination, and oppression; especially given the development of new and more sophisticated strategies and tactics by groups promoting ethnocentrism, xenophobia, supremacy and fascism.

At the same time, centrist/extremist theory has directed attention away from the long tradition of countersubversion in government agencies such as the FBI. Rogin, a key critic of centrist/extremist theory, considered the “development of a countersubversive state security apparatus” an important feature in US society. Richard O. Curry and Thomas M. Brown noted that “Sociological and psychological interpretations...used by scholars to explain the appeal of anticonspiracy crusades...are open to the objection that they make fears of conspiracy solely the work of an extremist, usually right-wing fringe of society,” when such “(f)ears of subversion are very much a part of mainstream politics.”<sup>71</sup>

If you were to ask the average law enforcement officer or prosecutor whether or not they subscribe to countersubversion theory or centrist/extremist theory you would most likely get a quizzical stare. Within government circles these analytical models are not known by name, they are described as representing “common knowledge.”

Political troublemakers are “extremists” out to subvert the legitimate government by “rabble-rousing.” That there is a history or ideological content to these notions is seldom, if ever, examined. Yet these analytical models play a powerful role in how prosecutors develop their theory of the case and their reconstruction of the events that led to the defendant being in court facing charges.

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## PART TWO: GOVERNMENT ABUSES BOLSTERED BY FLAWED ANALYTICAL MODELS

In part two of this article, we will examine how government abuses of power are bolstered by these flawed analytical models, and how liberals and neoconservatives can sometimes become collaborators with the political right in justifying state repression against political dissidents.

### CURRENT REPRESSIVE ASPECTS OF CENTRIST/EXTREMIST THEORY

There are many influential groups and individuals that use centrist/extremist theory as an analytical model, although many are unaware of the basis of their views given the way centrist/extremist theory has established itself as the dominant paradigm. When President Bill Clinton talks about the “vital center,” he is echoing centrist/extremist theory. When the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith justifies its private collection of surveillance files it is based on the concepts of centrist/extremist theory. When the Southern Poverty Law Center supports intrusive federal probes of the racist right, it is relying on criminalizing aspects of centrist/extremist theory. When women's rights and pro-choice groups support the use of the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) to prosecute militant anti-abortion protesters, they are endorsing the repressive aspects of centrist/extremist theory.

### LIBERAL & NEOCONSERVATIVE COOPERATION WITH STATE REPRESSION

The dynamic of state repression based on countersubversion and centrist/extremist analytical models involves not only conservative and reactionary forces but the periodic cooperation of their liberal and

neoconservative allies. (Neoconservatism is a political movement of former liberals who rejected the methods (and many of the demands) of the social liberation movements and the New Left in the 1960's and 1970's.)

Centrist/extremist theory gives an excuse for liberals and neoconservatives to tolerate state repression as a necessary last resort to protect democracy from the mob. So when mass movements form that challenge elite control of various social and political institutions, the reactionaries, conservatives, neoconservatives, and liberals find themselves as strange (and fickle) bedfellows. So not only does centrist/extremist theory insulate the political system from criticism, but its concept of irrational subversives undermining the idealized center helps provide a justification for state repression.

It is important to recognize that the US political right is complex and not monolithic. William B. Hixson, Jr. noted the fluid and complex nature of the US Right, pointing out that "[T]here are many conflicts in which 'elites' and 'masses' both divide, with segments of each interacting with those among the other with whom they agree."<sup>72</sup> Sara Diamond argues there are distinct sectors of the right that are sometimes system supportive and sometimes system oppositional and they form shifting alliances based on shared goals that vary across time and topic.<sup>73</sup> When "system supportive," right wing countersubversion movements are often embraced by the state, in part because they spread conspiracist scapegoating in defense of the status quo.

William W. Keller argues that in times of widespread social unrest, liberals retreat from their oversight function as protectors of civil liberties and allow authoritarian methods to restore order and defend the state.<sup>74</sup> While we question the overall track record of liberals on civil liberties, we agree that liberals show less commitment during certain periods of social crisis. The way this works depends on the historic moment and the nature of the social unrest.

When right-wing groups become system oppositional, they are no longer allies of the state but enemies of the state. Liberals then rally behind the state and tolerate (or openly support) repressive measures to limit the system-oppositional activity of the rightists.

During periods when liberals and radicals share a criticism of the state that is not shared by rightists, law enforcement agencies often forge ties with system-supportive right wing groups (even clandestine paramilitary units) in extralegal campaigns against progressive and radical movements that shift the momentum of the criticism toward liberal reforms or simply crush dissent to buttress the status quo.<sup>75</sup>

When progressive or radical left forces gain a mass following for demands that would radically transform the existing economic or political system, liberals often rally behind the state and tolerate (or openly support) repressive measures to limit the system-oppositional activity of the leftists. The same is true when left and right both raise criticisms of the state.

The embrace of centrist/extremist theory by mainstream groups such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL), Southern Poverty Law Center, and Simon Wiesenthal Center, helps to explain why these groups develop close ties to law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the US.

This overly close and often covert relationship with law enforcement limits criticism by some human relations groups of institutionalized forms of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. This is especially true with police misconduct that frequently involves racism.<sup>76</sup> Some human relations groups engage in questionable activities such as the collection of names and auto license plate numbers of dissidents attending meetings. This information is then made available to law enforcement and intelligence agencies that generally are prohibited from collecting such data without evidence of criminal intent.

## SOME EXAMPLES

A brief look at several examples illustrates some of the complexities involved in the relationship between human rights groups and law enforcement. Here we discuss three examples:

- The San Francisco Spying Scandal
- RICO and Anti-abortion Terrorism
- The Patriot and Armed Militia Movements

### THE SAN FRANCISCO SPYING SCANDAL

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith has maintained close relationships with law enforcement intelligence units nationwide for many years. This is consistent with the organization's reliance on centrist/extremist theory which assumes criminal intent on the part of militant dissidents. This analytical model, coupled with the increased influence within ADL of neoconservative political ideology, led ADL to engage in data collection practices that reflected a serious disregard for civil liberties and privacy rights.

In 1993 it was revealed that an ADL operative in San Francisco, Roy Bullock, collected and traded information in a covert spy network involving the San Francisco police, some 20 other California police departments, and police departments outside of California.<sup>77</sup> Bullock began working for ADL in 1954, and became a paid informer in 1960. Over 30 years Bullock compiled a huge computerized data bank including files on close to 1,000 groups and 10,000 individuals. Bullock provided information to the FBI, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and sold information on anti-apartheid activists to both South African agents and ADL. One Bullock source, former San Francisco Police Intelligence Unit detective Thomas Gerard, had also worked for the CIA in El Salvador, and provided information to South African agents.<sup>78</sup>

It was shown that Bullock had not just monitored bigots, but political adversaries such as leftists and critics of Israel:<sup>79</sup>

“There is evidence that Bullock had compiled “pinko” files on hundreds of liberal social action organizations with no relationship to bigotry, including Greenpeace, the NAACP, Act Up, New Jewish Agenda, and the Center for Investigative Reporting.”<sup>80</sup>

ADL's first response was to claim the charges were overblown and being exploited by antisemites to hamper its work. This stance intentionally conflated the complaints of bigots with issues raised by legitimate civil libertarians and principled political critics.<sup>81</sup> ADL later implied that the case was thoroughly investigated, and that ADL was not found to have engaged in any wrongdoing.<sup>82</sup> This is simply false. ADL agreed to a settlement in the case where it was not forced to admit guilt, but accepted an injunction against certain data collection practices, which is hardly the same as being found innocent.<sup>83</sup> That the charges were never seriously investigated was documented in a scathing report, *A Conspiracy of Silence: San Francisco's Failure to Address Police Intelligence Abuses*, by ACLU attorney John M. Crew.<sup>84</sup>

ADL's leadership defends centrist/extremist theory, its reliance on the countersubversion model, and its partnership with intelligence agencies.<sup>85</sup> This isolates many on its own staff who are deeply committed to both civil rights and civil liberties, and who produce excellent reports on topics such as skinhead violence and Holocaust revisionism.<sup>86</sup> In some instances, local ADL offices have ignored directives from the national ADL office, and joined broad-based community coalitions in fighting bigotry. Yet the national leadership defends data collection practices and covert information trading networks with government law

enforcement agents that appear to circumvent Congressional attempts to limit the intrusion of government surveillance into protected First Amendment activities of dissidents.

ADL's role in the San Francisco spy scandal was hardly unique. The organization has long bragged about its close working relationship with many government intelligence agencies. Many of these agencies have a history of back-door information-trading relationships with right wing countersubversion groups.<sup>87</sup> A good example of how networking takes place in this shadowy world is to show how ADL crossed paths with right-wing spymaster John Rees.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Rees, and his wife, Sheila Louise Rees, coordinated a network of informers who spied on peace and social justice groups (sometimes even pilfering files and internal documents from groups such as the National Lawyers Guild). The informers turned the information over to Rees who publishing it in his *Information Digest*, a secret newsletter sent to clients ranging from the New York State Police to the FBI to the John Birch Society.<sup>88</sup> In the 1980s Rees helped create the information-gathering apparatus for the Western Goals Foundation, later sued by the ACLU for one of Rees' projects: creating a computerized data base indexing files on leftists stolen from the LA police.<sup>89</sup> During Reagan's first term, ADL joined a network of conservative and Christian Right groups and government intelligence agencies to covertly plan and carry out a domestic propaganda campaign to bolster public support for Reagan administration Central America policies.<sup>90</sup> This effort was part of a larger campaign designed by CIA director William Casey, Oliver North, and others to use private groups, such as the Western Goals Foundation, to carry out domestic propaganda functions to support foreign covert intelligence operations.<sup>91</sup>

After Western Goals folded in 1983, Rees and his associates pursued a close working relationship with ADL staff through several countersubversive organizations including Mid-Atlantic Research Associates and The Maldon Institute, which in 1993 publicized the fact that it received financial support from "public-spirited foundations including the Allegheny Foundation, The Carthage Foundation, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith..."<sup>92</sup> The Maldon Institute's Advisory board included a number of key right-wing countersubversives, including:

- D. James Kennedy, a leading Christian right activist and co-founder of the Moral Majority. Kennedy endorsed a book that alleged the Illuminati Freemasons and Jewish bankers were behind US liberalism's attack on morality;<sup>93</sup>
- Raymond Wannall, past president of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers and a former assistant director of the FBI. Wannall led a campaign to justify the acts of government agents charged with illegally spying on the left;<sup>94</sup>
- Robert Moss, a journalist who gained fame suggesting that Soviet agents controlled a variety of left and liberal groups;<sup>95</sup>

ADL's participation in the right-wing countersubversion network has specific consequences. ADL does not maintain a single research library or repository of information open to the general public, and progressives are routinely denied access to the same private ADL archives usually opened to conservatives and government agents.<sup>96</sup> ADL's embrace of centrist/extremist theories has not only allied it politically with neoconservatism, but shifted its analysis of bigotry to the right.<sup>97</sup> At times ADL has soft-peddled allegations of bigotry against Republicans and anti-communists,<sup>98</sup> while red-baiting other social critics,<sup>99</sup> even attacking another human relations watchdog group, the progressive Center for Democratic Renewal.<sup>100</sup>

Because ADL is the largest and most-quoted human relations group in the US, it continuously legitimizes the flawed analytical model of centrist/extremist theory while covertly engaging in the intrusive surveillance activities justified by the analytical model of countersubversion.

#### RICO AND ANTI-ABORTION TERRORISM

The Supreme Court in 1994 expanded RICO by allowing its use by the National Organization of Women (NOW) in a lawsuit against anti-abortion zealot Joseph M. Scheidler. Jeff Builta is Director of Analytical Studies at the Office of International Criminal Justice, a law enforcement research and training facility based at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As Builta observes:

“The government has been hailed by many in and out of the pro-choice movement for taking a tough stance on the issue by using RICO and FACE legislation and opening conspiracy investigations. Others say such measures infringe on Constitutionally protected rights to freedom of assembly and free speech, and that the government actions are making martyrs out of those convicted, and militants of those with strong beliefs.”

A number of individuals and groups from the peace and social justice community joined with anti-abortion activists to condemn the ruling as repressive. An ad in *The New York Times* (which included endorsements by Erwin Knoll, editor of *The Progressive*, peace activist Liz McAlister of Plowshares, and Leonard Peltier of the American Indian Movement) condemned the “draconian” potential of the decision:

“An amicus brief filed by animal rights activists, homeless advocates and environmentalists, warned that an overbroad interpretation of RICO would surely precipitate an unwarranted interference in political and social advocacy, interference never intended by Congress when it enacted RICO.”

“Prosecutors and civil plaintiffs opposed to social change, or to a particular social conviction, now possess an ominous weapon for silencing unpopular causes...[w]e have no doubt they will use this weapon....The application of federal racketeering laws against protesters is a frightful assault against First Amendment guarantees of free speech.”

The irony here is that when the political tide shifts, RICO will inevitably be used against some of the same groups now championing its use against the political right.

#### THE PATRIOT AND ARMED MILITIA MOVEMENTS

Groups that have consciously and unconsciously adopted the countersubversion model promoted by centrist/extremist theory were quick to call for increased government power to fend off the perceived threat to law and order posed by the armed militia movement. Calls to unleash the FBI were especially strident following the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

A typical example was a *Wall Street Journal* column by Max Boot who reached back to the countersubversion scapegoating of earlier times. Boot suggested that a wave of serious anarchist terrorism began with opposition to US participation in World War One. According to Boot, “From 1914 to 1917, anarchists set off a number of blasts in New York and Boston. Most didn’t cause any major injuries, but a 1917 explosion in Milwaukee killed 10 policemen,”<sup>101</sup> Boot then implied that the widespread government repression of the post-WWI period was at least mitigated by what Boot sees as the successful crushing of the dangerous subversive anarchist terror movement. He then draws parallels to right-wing militias of today and suggests their potential for terror can best be handled by granting the government sweeping powers of surveillance and infiltration. But reliable accounts of the period after

WWI differ with Boot's description of events. He is using a popular countersubversion myth to justify new state repression.<sup>102</sup>

Even Louis F. Post, the Labor Department official who signed the deportation order for anarchist Emma Goldman after the Palmer Raids in 1919-1920, later wrote a book where he argued that no evidence of a widespread subversive conspiracy among anarchist immigrants ever emerged:

“It seemed to me at the time, and the impression has been deepened by subsequent developments, that if there were any alien conspirators in the United States who were at all dangerous to its institutions, its free institutions, the detectives of the Department of Justice did not ‘hit their trail’....Cases in which there was substantial proof of any unlawful act with sinister intent or guilty knowledge were exceptions-very rare exceptions.”

Of course, even if the government had found a criminal conspiracy among so-called “aliens” the broad draconian dragnet of the Palmer Raids would still have been a civil liberties nightmare.

Based on countersubversion myth, and the false portrayal of all members of the armed militia movement as extremists-even terrorist neofascists, the Clinton administration pushed through the “Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996,” called by civil liberties activists a “draconian” piece of legislation “which places the Bill of Rights and other constitutional protections at grave risk.”<sup>103</sup> This repressive legislation received support from several leading human relations groups that argued it would help curb the threat of violence from the militias. There was no evidence to support this claim, and the bulk of the legislation had been written and rejected prior to the Oklahoma City bombing. The legislation was supported by politicians pointing to militia involvement in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City and the terrorist bombing of the TWA flight that exploded near New York while en route to Paris. There is no current evidence to tie militias to the Oklahoma City bombing or terrorists to the crash of the airplane.

Embracing the conspiracist countersubversion myth woven into centrist/extremist theory justifies state repression. It encourages us to look the other way when militant rightists are gunned down without benefit of trial by law enforcement officers. This has happened repeatedly in recent years, not only with the Weaver family at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1993, but also in a series of killings of rightists starting with the farm crisis in the 1980s. These included Gordon Kahl, a rightist tax protester who became a *Posse Comitatus* organizer, killed in 1983; and Robert Mathews, a leader of the violent White Supremacist group The Order, killed in 1984.<sup>104</sup> Both these people were despicable racists and antisemites, but that did not justify the government's gross misjudgments and casual use of deadly force that resulted in their deaths.

There has also been the use of questionable legal tactics, such as the prosecution on charges of seditious conspiracy of White supremacist leaders in Ft. Smith, Arkansas. The witnesses who testified about the alleged conspiracy were so dubious that the case was rejected by jurors who found the defendants not guilty.<sup>105</sup> During the McCarthy period charges of criminal seditious conspiracy were used in the political witch hunt against communism. When the government announced the sedition trial of White supremacists in Fort Smith, Arkansas, one person to object was Arthur Kinoy, a well-known leftist civil rights attorney and respected constitutional scholar who has argued cases before the US Supreme Court. Kinoy, who had defended persons charged with communist sedition in the 1950's, agreed the White supremacists in the Ft. Smith case were “disgusting,” but he said “I'm worried about the charge of sedition against anyone.” Kinoy expressed concern with the legal charge of sedition, noting its historical use by the government to attack all dissent, especially on the left.<sup>106</sup>

Silverglate agreed:

“I know it is a tricky and emotional issue, but sedition is a very serious charge, and to bring it in the Aryan Nations case at Fort Smith was patently absurd. You can’t be cheering when the government brings a charge of sedition against the Aryan Nations crowd and then be complaining when they bring it against your friends.

We must recognize that fear of government repression is not just paranoia. Government officials to this day refuse to admit that negligent bureaucratic brutality at Ruby Ridge, Idaho against the Weaver family and at Waco, Texas against the Branch Davidians could cause any citizen to be distrustful or cynical about government. These were clear examples of government misconduct and abuse of power. The answer to the resurgent right should never be allowing the government to curtail civil liberties. It is wrong philosophically, and it gives the government a huge new club to beat up on leftwing dissidents-the more typical victims of government repression.

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## CONCLUSIONS

Centrist/extremist theory remains the dominant paradigm for discussion of dissidents even though numerous historians, political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists, psychologists, and activists have thoroughly undermined its underlying assumptions.<sup>107</sup>

The theory creates a Potemkin village where there is a marginalized lunatic fringe of extremists attacking idealized democracy upheld by a vital center of elites. This view logically then relies on government crackdowns to protect us from the zealots. Centrist/extremist theory hides the oppression and inequality institutionalized throughout US society; the frequent links between right-wing movements and economic and political elites; the complex mix of legitimate and illegitimate grievances underlying the paranoid-sounding conspiracism of right-wing populism; and the danger of increasing state repression.

Why should we fear the government? Ask a Japanese American held at an internment camp during World War II. Ask a target of McCarthy era witch hunts who lost a job. Ask a civil rights activist or a Vietnam war protester spied upon or arrested unfairly. Ask a member of the American Indian Movement, the Black Panther Party, or a Puerto Rican independence group who has friends that were shot by government agents during a raid. Ask an anti-interventionist monitored and harassed by the FBI during its probe of CISPES in the 1980s. Ask a young African-American male driving through a wealthy White suburb.

There is a tragic irony in allowing the use of authoritarian or repressive methods to fight supremacy and violence. We should not have to choose between fighting intolerance and bigotry, and protecting constitutional liberties.

Emerging as a criticism of centrist/extremist theory is a collection of newer theories which include the “political process model,” “resource mobilization theory” and “new social movement theory.”<sup>108</sup>

As analysts who are exploring new ways to study dissent, we see mass movements as composed of people motivated by a sense of grievance-legitimate or illegitimate-who mobilize to seek redress of their grievances through a variety of methods including, but seldom limited to, the electoral process. This view

sees most participants in social and political movements as being able to organize others using rational and effective strategies and tactics—even if their mobilization is based on grievances that are primarily irrational and conspiracist, illegitimate and prejudiced, or in defense of disproportionate access to power, wealth, and privilege. A basic point of departure for our study is our view that right-wing movements are a normal part of US political traditions, that they are subject to the same basic dynamics as other movements, and that their members are for the most part regular people motivated by a combination of material and ideological grievances and aspirations.<sup>109</sup> We see dissidents on the left following the same pattern.

One synthesis of various social movement theories developed by John C. Green of the Ray Bliss Center at the University of Akron, Ohio, argues that all mass movements of dissent arise through a combination of four factors:

- A discontented group of politicized persons who have grievances they wish addressed.
- A core group of strategic leaders and local activists that effectively mobilize the politicized persons using available resources.
- The recruitment of politicized persons into the movement through pre-existing social networks.
- The availability of opportunities in the social and political environment exploitable by movement leaders and activists.<sup>110</sup>

These new ideas about social movements contradict both countersubversion theory and centrist/extremist theory, and call into question longstanding government assumptions about the essentialist criminal nature of dissident movements. When litigating against government prosecution of dissidents, attorneys should resist prosecution attempts to offer briefs, evidence, or witnesses that would bring these flawed notions into the courtroom; and be prepared to counter these ideas and arguments.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chip Berlet is senior analyst at Political Research Associates in Somerville, MA. A founding editor of this newsletter, his work has also appeared in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Mother Jones* magazine. He is the editor of the collection, *Eyes Right!: Challenging the Right Wing Backlash*, (Boston, South End Press, 1995); and wrote “Who’s Mediating the Storm? Right-wing Alternative Information Networks,” in *Culture, Media, and the Religious Right*, eds. Linda Kintz & Julia Lesage (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 1998).

Matthew N. Lyons is an independent historian and activist in Albuquerque, NM. He is the author of *The Grassroots Network: Radical Nonviolence in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1972-1985* (Cornell University Center for International Studies, 1989), and “Business Conflict and Right-Wing Movements in the United States,” in *Unraveling the Right: The New Conservatism in American Thought and Politics*, Amy Elizabeth Ansell, ed. (Westview, 1998).

They are co-authors of *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2000); and co-authored the article, “Militia Nation” in *The Progressive*, June 1995.

## FOOTNOTES

1 This study is adapted from sections of the book by Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford, 2000). Portions of this study have appeared previously in Chip Berlet, "Three Models for Analyzing Conspiracist Mass Movements of the Right," in Eric Ward, ed., *Conspiracies: Real Grievances, Paranoia, and Mass Movements*, (Seattle: Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment [Peanut Butter Publishing], 1996); —, "Frank Donner: An Appreciation," *CovertAction Quarterly*, Summer 1995; —, "Re-framing Dissent as Criminal Subversion," *Covert Action Quarterly*, Summer 1992, Number 41; —, "Hunt for Red Menace: How Government Intelligence Agencies and Private Right-wing Countersubversion Groups Forge Ad Hoc Covert Spy Networks that Target Dissidents as Outlaws," Monograph, (Somerville, MA: PRA, 1993 (1987)).

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108 Social movement theory is a broad popular term for a collection of analytical models rooted in dialectical analysis and power structure research which examines the mobilization of groups of people seeking to change the social or political system. The term "social movement theory" is used in the generic sense to encompass the basic elements of several academic schools including, "New Social Movements Theory," "Resource Mobilization Theory," and the "Political Process Model," among others.

109 We reject narrow definitions of what constitutes a social movement applied by some academics. Social change organizers helped build social movements in many varieties before the term was used in academia to describe only the most volatile phenomenon.

110 The four elements of social movement theory described here are based on language developed by John C. Green of the Ray Bliss Center at the University of Akron, Ohio, and presented as a paper in New York City in 1995 at a symposium hosted by Lumiere Productions.

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