

A WEB OF WHITE POWER - Killing of judge's relatives points to Internet's potential to breed 'lone wolf' supremacists

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Without Matt Hale, the white supremacist who sits in a Chicago jail cell awaiting sentencing for plotting to kill a federal judge, his once- prominent hate group has splintered and dwindled in size.

But authorities say the white-power movement doesn't need Hale, who once held rock-star status among skinheads, to be dangerous. It has the Internet.

"Someone with a computer and a DSL line who starts following this stuff thinks he's going to be a hero if he kills someone," said Pat Webb, a former San Francisco FBI agent who investigated the Aryan Nation in 1984. "It would be a mistake to underestimate these people's potential for violence."

The Web was where white supremacist groups posted a barrage of hateful information about the judge Hale plotted to kill, Joan Humphrey Lefkow, before her husband and mother were slain last week in her home in Illinois.

Hale's now ragtag group, the World Church of the Creator, has been linked to some of the most vicious and brutal hate crimes in recent years, including a spate of synagogue fires in Sacramento and the murder of a gay couple in Shasta County six years ago.

The California crime spree started after two brothers, Benjamin and James Williams, read the group's Web site and became followers. They shot Winfield Mowder and Gary Matson in their Happy Valley home in 1999 because homosexuality is abhorrent to white supremacists. After Benjamin Williams committed suicide in jail, his brother pleaded guilty to the murders.

The Williams brothers also caused more than \$3 million in damage when they torched three Sacramento synagogues in 1999. When they were arrested, police found they had compiled a list of prominent Jewish leaders who authorities believed may have been future targets.

Some question whether other Internet followers of the World Church of the Creator read the online postings about Lefkow, which included her address in Chicago, and were inspired to kill her husband, Michael, a lawyer and leader in the local Episcopal Church, and her 89-year-old mother, Donna Humphrey.

Lefkow found them shot to death in her basement Monday evening. She and her four daughters remain under federal protection while police try to solve the crimes.

"It's quite likely that the killers in the Lefkow case were followers or sympathizers of Hale's who came by the judge's address and pictures of her family online," said Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which collects information on hate groups. "The Internet has given rise to the lone wolf. And with the lone wolf comes the potential for greater violence."

Judge labeled a traitor

Hale was convicted last year of soliciting Lefkow's murder and is awaiting sentencing. The man he approached to be the hit man was an FBI informant.

The white supremacist had gone before Judge Lefkowitz on a trademark case. A religious group from Oregon was suing the World Church of the Creator, saying it had the name first. Lefkowitz originally ruled in favor of Hale, but an appeals court overruled her and the judge was forced to order the white supremacist group not to use the title.

Almost immediately after her ruling, the World Church of the Creator branded Lefkowitz a "probable Jew" and a "kike- and nigger-loving" traitor who was trying to destroy the group and its Web site, according to Potok. Then other white supremacist Web sites printed the judge's address.

Although Hale has not been named as a suspect in the killings, police have reportedly interviewed him in jail and are looking at white supremacist groups.

Hale denies any involvement, calling the killings a "heinous crime" that "only an idiot" would think he had ordered, according to a statement he released through his mother to the Associated Press.

"I totally condemn it and I want the perpetrator caught and prosecuted," he said.

In the meantime, the World Church of the Creator, now called The Creativity Movement, is leaderless. During the group's heyday, the organization had 88 chapters across the country, according to Potok. Now, he said, it has 16.

Hale took over as leader in 1996, when he was just 25 years old. Bill Klassen, who had invented an early version of the electric can opener, founded the then-Church of the Creator in 1973. But by the '90s, the organization was floundering, according to the Anti-Defamation League, which also tracks hate groups. Several of its members had been convicted of violent crimes, including the murder of a black Gulf War veteran in Florida and the bombing of an NAACP office in Washington. The group had been successfully sued by the veteran's family, and Klassen had committed suicide in 1993.

Internet savvy

Hale, an avowed racist since reading Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich" when he was 12, was named the group's "pontifex maximus" by other members and took over the operation. He ran it from a bedroom in his father's house in East Peoria, Ill., surrounded by his stuffed animals, swastikas and an Israeli flag he used as a doormat.

Hale immediately made use of cyberspace, saying the Internet "has the potential to reach millions of white people with our message and we need to act on that," according to the ADL.

The World Church of the Creator's main site contained information ranging from how to join to tips on how to spread the word to commandments such as, "You shall keep your race pure. Pollution of the White Race is a heinous crime against Nature and against your own race."

The ADL says in addition to that site, the group had more than 30 subsidiary sites.

When not conducting chat rooms on the Internet, the young law student Hale preached the gospel of white superiority in libraries across the nation. Unlike his skinhead followers with their steel-tipped boots and T-shirts, Hale wore a suit and tie.

He had a penchant for attracting press and appeared on a number of network news shows.

"Hale was certainly a driving force and still has a number of sergeants around the country," said Jonathan Bernstein, the Northern California director of the ADL.

In 1999, even before the Williams brothers went on their rampage, the World Church of the Creator was making headlines. After the Illinois State Bar refused to give Hale a license to practice law, his friend and follower Benjamin Smith singled out Jews, African Americans and Asian Americans in the Midwest. He killed two people and wounded nine others.

"After the Ben Smith killings, some members of the group were forced underground," Bernstein said. "Others, like the Williamses, may have been emboldened by it."

Booted in Wyoming

After Hale's arrest two years ago, Thomas Kroenke, a fired Wyoming corrections officer, announced that he was taking over the World Church of the Creator and moving its headquarters to that state in Riverton.

But, according to Potok, the locals didn't take kindly to Kroenke and his Aryan movement.

"The banks wouldn't open checking accounts for him and delivery boys refused to bring him pizzas," Potok said. Kroenke left town and hasn't been heard from since.

During his incarceration, Hale has been unable to keep the group cohesive.

Some followers suggested in 2003 that the group change the way it does business by becoming a leaderless resistance, making itself less vulnerable to "disruption or destruction," according to the ADL.

ADL officials said Hardy Lloyd, a Pittsburgh member of the Creativity movement, announced that the days of "memberships and street rallies" were over and that "the time of the lone wolf is drawing ever nearer."

Caption: PHOTO (3)

(1) Matt Hale, shown in 1999 and now awaiting sentencing, once was revered by skinheads. Kari Shuda Associated Press 1999, (2) James Williams (left) and Benjamin Williams went on a crime spree after reading the Web site of the World Church of the Creator. Redding Record Searchlight 2000, (3) Matt Hale holds a letter that he says he received from Benjamin Smith, who went on a shooting spree, killing two people.

Fred Zwickey Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star 1999

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