

From the Ground Up

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AS of Friday night, no one had been arrested in the killings last week in Chicago of the husband and mother of a federal judge, Joan Humphrey Lefkow. But the authorities were investigating the crimes' possible links to white supremacists, in particular supporters of Matthew Hale, who was convicted last year of plotting to kill Judge Lefkow and who is in federal prison awaiting sentencing. The judge became a target of Mr. Hale's wrath after she carried out an appeals court decision in a trademark case forbidding his group to call itself Worldwide Church of the Creator. The Week in Review asked Mark Potok, who monitors hate groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Ala., to assess the white supremacist movement.

Q. What is the state of the white supremacist movement today?

A. The most significant change of the last few years is that the main groups have been decapitated: they have lost their leaders.

William Pierce of the neo-Nazi National Alliance died in 2002. He was a former physics professor and wrote "The Turner Diaries," the novel that inspired Timothy McVeigh, and he was admired throughout the supremacist movement. But Pierce was replaced by an ex-boxer named Erich Glibe, who is widely despised within the movement. So, today, the National Alliance is in disarray.

Richard Butler of Aryan Nations lost his Idaho compound after we sued his group in 2000; he died last September. A faction has come to Alabama and another is headed for Florida, but for the most part the Aryan Nations is scattered to the winds.

Over all, many of the major groups have fallen apart, so the activity is increasingly welling up from below. There's also a resurgence of racist skinheads on the streets.

Q. What about Matthew Hale's group, now called Creativity?

A. This group was largely a personality cult built around Matthew Hale. So when he went to prison, his movement also fell into disarray. Some 16 chapters are out there struggling along, but they are without central leadership. Some chapters do not even recognize others as legitimate. So again, we're seeing activity from below, but very little directed from above.

Q. Are judges a target of white supremacists?

A. Judge Lefkow is an obsession because Hale had vilified her so vociferously as an agent of the Jews out to destroy the "Aryan" movement. But the peak of threats directed at judges probably was in the 1990's, from the militia movement, which despite its violence was by and large not racist or anti-Semitic. Its focus was on the supposed illegitimacy of the federal government and conspiracy theories like a U.N. plot to turn most of the United States into a biosphere.

Q. What is the main threat from white supremacists now?

A. With the disarray, it's even harder to control criminal, street-level activity. Paradoxically, some leaders tended to act as brakes on their followers. It was, "Yes, yes, we're going to kill the Jews, but not until next week." After all, the leaders were not interested in going to prison.

Hate group leaders were also vulnerable to civil lawsuits that the Southern Poverty Law Center pioneered in the 1980's. Over the years, nine major groups have been crippled by holding leaders responsible for the crimes of their followers. This has made the leaders more cautious.

On the street level, though, violence from white supremacists continues unabated.

Q. Where is the movement's real locus?

A. A lot of the action right now is in virtual communities like Stormfront, set up in 1995 by Don Black, a former Klan leader under David Duke in the 1980's. The cyber-forum has become so popular that it now claims an amazing 42,000 members; you have to be a member to post a message.

In many ways, Stormfront is becoming a real group, not just a Web site. One of the scary things is how it has been able to bring together and energize people from very different parts of the white supremacist movement.

Caption: Photo: Matthew Hale , saluting his followers in May 2002. (Photo by L. Todd Spencer/The Virginian-Pilot via Associated Press)

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