

RECURRING HATE

MATT HALE AND THE WORLD CHURCH OF THE CREATOR

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INTRODUCTION

Rahowa, an acronym for Racial Holy War, is the battle cry for the Church of the Creator (COTC), an organization that in the early 1990s was one of the most violent hate groups on the radical right and which has recently experienced a resurgence.

Fueled by militant racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric, the organization has been responsible for, or connected to, at least one Florida murder, two conspiracies to commit hate crimes on the West Coast, and a planned secret police action against the African National Congress conducted in the waning years of South African apartheid. Police investigations into COTC leadership's connections to these criminal activities and the suicide of its charismatic leader, Ben Klassen, however, sent the organization into disarray for several years.

During 1996-97, however, the Church of the Creator (now known as the World Church of the Creator) has experienced a renaissance. Under the leadership of Matt Hale, an aspiring lawyer from Illinois, COTC has found a new center. The reappearance of Klassen's group is a disturbing development and illustrates the continuing and powerful influence of the Creator ideology on the far right, particularly among racist skinheads.

BEGINNINGS

COTC and creativity, the ostensible theology of the church, were the inventions of Ben Klassen, a one-time Florida state legislator born in the Ukraine and raised in Canada. After drifting among many far-right causes, Klassen announced the formation of his church in 1973. Klassen's announcement was coupled with the publication of a 511-page screed titled *Nature's Eternal Religion*. In the book, Klassen writes, "We completely reject the Judeo-democratic-Marxist values of today and supplant them with new and basic values, of which race is the foundation."

Under Klassen's leadership, COTC grew slowly, but steadily, over the next 10 years attracting several hundred neo-Nazi skinheads and other white supremacists from the U.S. and around the world. With active members in Sweden, Canada, and South Africa, COTC became one of the few American hate groups to gain an international audience.

South Africa's COTC chapter drew attention in February 1992 when two professed members of an undercover police unit reported that they had been instructed by superiors to join COTC in order to recruit South African racists in a dirty war against the African National Congress.

STEADY DECLINE

The event, however, that pushed the organization into the national spotlight and led to its temporary undoing was the murder of Harold Mansfield Jr., an African-American Persian Gulf War veteran, in a Neptune Beach, FL, parking lot. George Loeb, a COTC Reverend with a history of racist harassment, was arrested with his wife, Barbara, on June 6, 1991, in Poughkeepsie, NY, and charged with the crime.

Barbara Loeb was later sentenced to one year in jail on weapons possession charges; she served at least nine months of her term in a New York State prison. George Loeb was extradited to Florida where he was convicted of first-degree murder on July 29, 1992. The following month, he received a life sentence with no chance of parole for 25 years. In March 1994, the family of the murdered sailor, represented by the Southern Poverty Law Center, filed and subsequently won a lawsuit against COTC seeking \$1 million in damages and the dissolution of the organization for vicarious liability in the murder.

Klassen appeared to anticipate this lawsuit, and spent the last years of his life in a frantic attempt to unload COTC assets, like selling the North Carolina compound which housed COTC's headquarters, and divesting himself of responsibility for the organization. In his search for a successor, Klassen went through several candidates, none of whom worked out. Klassen finally settled on Richard McCarty, a telemarketer previously unknown in hate group circles. McCarty moved the group's headquarters to Niceville, FL. Soon after appointing McCarty in the summer of 1993, the 75-year-old Klassen committed suicide by swallowing four bottles of sleeping pills.

Continuing legal problems forced McCarty to dismantle the Niceville-based COTC organization. In two separate incidents in California, police averted potential bombing sprees that were to be directed at Jewish, African-American, and gay institutions. In both cases, the would-be terrorists were closely affiliated with branches of COTC. Leaderless and marked by its association with several violent incidents, COTC appeared defunct.

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Matt Hale was elected Pontifex Maximus, an ancient Roman title designated for the Church's supreme leader, by The Guardians of the Faith Committee at a ceremony at COTC Reverend Slim Deardorf's ranch near Superior, Montana. According to a Montana newspaper, the ceremony's attendance was meager; the paper estimated only 35 people in attendance. While the newly resurrected COTC might be small in numbers, the organization is compensating with an aggressive barrage of mailings and recruiting efforts.

Hale, in his upper 20s, has been a vocal but marginal figure in the right-wing extremist world for several years. He reportedly holds degrees in both political science and music from Bradley University and has attended a law school at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. From his headquarters in East Peoria, IL, Hale has frequently tried to invent himself as a major extremist leader. In 1992, he proclaimed himself National Leader of the National Socialist White Americans Party. Previously, Hale founded the American

White Supremacist Party (AWSP) while still a freshman at Bradley University. After dissolving the AWSP, he tried to attach himself to the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP), a group founded by longtime racist David Duke. It appears that this branch was never recognized by the NAAWP leadership and Hale abandoned this project as well. Soon after this, Hale discovered Klassen's Church of the Creator.

Hale has been arrested numerous times on relatively minor charges associated with his extremist activities but has served no significant jail time. According to Hale, his one conviction was overturned because police failed to read him his rights. He had been accused of felony obstruction of justice for refusing to provide the details of an episode in which his brother, who allegedly shares Hale's racist views, drew a pistol on a Black man. Hale's brother was convicted of a misdemeanor in the case.

Whether Hale will turn out to be as charismatic a leader as Klassen remains to be seen, but COTC has clearly experienced a jump-start since his arrival. Replacing the now-defunct Racial Loyalty newsletter, Hale has started The Struggle, a newsletter emanating from the COTC's headquarters in Peoria, IL. According to Hale, The Struggle is only a small part of a much larger campaign to spread COTC's message. He promises more media exposure and public demonstrations. One part of this campaign has been to encourage COTC to expand its already large and sophisticated presence on the Internet.

Another component of Hale's leadership has been an aggressive recruiting effort. During 1997, COTC material has been distributed in several large cities across the country, including Chicago and San Francisco and Reno, NV. There have also been reports of Creator material turning up in many smaller communities in Michigan, New York and California.

On July 13, 1997, two Detroit women, one of whom, Michelle Wilson, is closely affiliated with the local COTC branch, were arrested for littering when they were caught distributing hate material in Huntington Woods, MI. Police confiscated about 400 copies of a WCOTC booklet titled, FACTS That the Government and the Media Don't Want You to Know. In court, Wilson, invoking the First Amendment, pled not guilty and is awaiting trial. The other woman, claiming she did not know what was being distributed, pled guilty to the littering charge, a misdemeanor. Significantly, Wilson claims she has been in constant touch with Hale and Church headquarters and received advice on how to proceed. According to Wilson, "I've been getting support from headquarters, and we're making decisions as we go along. We'll fight this as far as we have to."

Hale's booklet runs the gamut of anti-Semitic accusations: the Kosher food tax, Jewish control of the media, Jewish control of the government, and, interestingly, Jewish control of the slave trade. The second half of FACTS is devoted to crude racism.

While estimates of the group's numbers are fuzzy, Hale claims that COTC now has almost 3,000 members. This figure, however, seems highly unlikely. However, there is some evidence that the group's recruitment effort over the past year is working. Miles Munter, a 21-year-old forklift operator, is the local COTC leader in Reno, NV. In a June 1997 Sacramento newspaper article, Munter claims to have signed on several dozen new members in the Reno area.

MORE THAN JUST TALK: COTC AND VIOLENCE

Along with the new recruitment efforts of the COTC has come a resurgence of the violent behavior that characterized the group under Klassen's leadership in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In August 1997, a father and son, while leaving a rock concert in Sunrise, FL, were accosted by a group of skinheads distributing COTC flyers. As the pair was walking away, the belligerent group of skinheads attacked both father and son. According to The Miami Herald, about 11 skinheads participated in the beating, kicking the pair in the back, chest, and face and smashing beer bottles over their heads. At the appearance of others, the perpetrators ran off. As of February 1998, no one had been arrested in connection with the beating. The Sunrise police department has classified the attack as a hate crime, and the investigation remains open.

In June 1997, 30 COTC members disrupted a gun-rights rally at California's state capitol building in Sacramento. Church members ran through the crowd, estimated at 800 people, distributing COTC fliers and yelling, "Freedom of Speech!" After rally organizers told the group to leave, California Highway Patrol officers and sheriff deputies forcefully escorted them from the rally. According to one officer, the COTC members were trying to start a riot. (The Contra Costa Times, June 29, 1997)

Also indicative of COTC's new lease on life, newly revived regional branches of the organization have appeared in several cities across the country. Regional branches exist in Auburn, CA, under the direction of Rev. Bart Powell, in Missoula, MT, led by Rev. Dan Hassett, and in Fort Lauderdale, FL, led by Rev. Guy Lombardi. These regional branches, which supposedly cover several states each, complement a long list of small COTC contact points elsewhere around the country.

The reappearance of the Church of the Creator is a disturbing indication of the sustained appeal for some people of Klassen's racist ideas, and is yet another example of the need for continued vigilance in the fight against violent extremism.