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system; the income tax amendment was never legally approved by Congress and, therefore, “sovereign citizens” need not pay taxes; the United States is a “republic,” not a “democracy”; and the only lawful authority is the county sheriff and his appointed “posse” of adult men who reside in his jurisdiction.  

Through the Posse Comitatus’ pre-existing network of Farm Belt groups, the Midwest became fertile ground for the spread of racist anti-Semitic propaganda during the 1980s. Wisconsin Posse leader James Wickstrom circulated a pamphlet, “The American Farmer: 20th Century Slave,” blaming Jews for the crisis in agriculture. Wickstrom and another Christian Identity minister, William Potter Gale, were frequent speakers on a daily Posse radio program broadcast from Kansas. Rick Elliott’s National Agricultural Press Association (NAPA) published The Primrose and Cattlemen’s Gazette, featuring bona fide agricultural news mixed with virulent anti-Semitic articles and advertisements for the Aryan Nations. Elliott recruited a claimed membership of 3,000 in thirty states before he was indicted for selling disreputable legal kits and absconding with supporters’ money. Both the Posse Comitatus and recruiters for Lyndon LaRouche’s right-wing cult made efforts to gain control over the American Agricultural Movement (AAM), a leading farmers’ lobby. Conflict within AAM over whether to ally with the racist and anti-Semitic Right led to a factional split in 1982, precisely at a time when farmers needed a coherent protest organization to make their voices heard in Washington. Had mainstream farmers not taken serious steps to educate AAM’s rank-and-file about infiltration by the far Right, the extent of the damage might have been much worse. One AAM faction sponsored guerrilla warfare training and classes on the making of pipe bombs; another faction advocating violence formed a Farmers’ Liberation Army.

North Dakota farmer Gordon Kahl was typical among the Posse Comitatus organizers of the rural Midwest. Kahl joined the Posse in 1974 and landed in prison after a 1976 television appearance in which he urged others to join him in not paying taxes. Once paroled, Kahl was ordered to stay away from Posse activities, but he continued to travel around the Midwest explaining to small audiences the Posse’s theory that Jews were to blame for the farm crisis. For violating the terms of his probation, the federal government issued a warrant for Kahl’s arrest. In February 1983, two federal marshals sent to capture him were killed in a gun fight with Nebraska state police when he refused to allow his farm to be repossessed. Kahl and Kirk became martyrs among the Posse and the broader racist Right. Their deaths exacerbated the conviction of fellow patriots that the existing federal government was wholly illegitimate and that a thorough break with “the system” was long overdue.

Toward the goal of unifying the racist Right into a coherent opposition, in 1980 Willis Carto published a series of articles on “populism” in the Liberty Lobby’s weekly Spotlight newspaper. The series featured laudatory biographies of historical “populist” heroes, and, as was mentioned in Chapter 6, Carto republished the series in book form as Profiles in Populism. Carto defined “populism” as an amalgam of political and economic nationalism, a conspiracist view of history, commitment to “free enterprise” and a strong middle class, and a justification for racial prejudice. In fact, in regular usage, the Liberty Lobby applied the term “populist” as a euphemism for individuals and movements more accurately termed “neo-Nazi” or “fascist” (e.g., Klansman David Duke and French National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen). The Farm Belt was receptive to some of the racist Right’s organizers. Carto and other career racists hoped to use the “populist” label to pass themselves off as true-blue democrats. The same Spotlight pages wherein the Liberty Lobby projected itself as heir to historical populist role models also promoted the latest activities of unreconstructed anti-Semites and white supremacists. These included leading preachers of Identity Christianity, as well as other Nazis and neo-Nazis. The Liberty Lobby-affiliated Institute for Historical Review, with its claims that no Jews died in Hitler’s gas chambers, and the group of Ku Klux Klansmen on trial for the murder of five U.S. Communists at a 1979 anti-Klan rally in Greensboro, North Carolina.

These were the kind of “populists” the Liberty Lobby sought to unite with the creation of the Populist Party in 1984. But by then, the Liberty Lobby faced competition over the use of the “populist” label from an old nemesis, Richard Viguerie. Along with fellow New Right leaders Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips, Viguerie had tried unsuccessfully to gain control of the American Independent Party at its 1976 convention.

Soon after Reagan took office, the New Right became so thoroughly disgruntled with the administration’s performance that Viguerie devoted the entire July 1982 issue of his Conservative Digest magazine to critiques from a spectrum of neoconservative, anticommunist, and Christian Right activists. From the Nixon years forward, Viguerie, Weyrich, and Phillips had toyed with the idea of launching a new third party. Toward reviving that idea, and in advance of Reagan’s reelection campaign, Viguerie published a widely circulated book, The Establishment
versus the People. In it, Viguerie took aim at “Big Business, Big Banks, Big Media, Big Unions, Big Government, and their allies.” He criticized Reagan for failing to take tougher stands against the Communist bloc, for creating exorbitant federal deficits by not eliminating welfare spending, and for acting on behalf of elites in both major parties by increasing outlays to the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Viguerie’s multi-million dollar direct mail business gave him an advantage in promoting his version of “populism.” But the Liberty Lobby portrayed Viguerie as a phony populist, “still echoing the same philosophy that he’s been peddling for the last twenty years, . . . support [for] big business, free trade and internationalism, including military intervention in useless foreign wars.”

A hallmark of Viguerie-style conservatism has been diligent avoidance of any controversy regarding racial issues, the money and banking question, the influence of internationalist outfits such as David Rockefeller’s Trilateral Commission and the ever-growing power of political Zionism.

Viguerie prefers to avoid noting that international Zionism has been perhaps the key force which led America into two bloody world wars and even now threatens to drag the world into a nuclear holocaust.

In contrast, Spotlight reiterated, Willis Carto’s “populism” stressed a nationalist, “America-first” foreign policy; “an awareness of the malign nature of international high finance” and the banking system; “a stand for producers, farmers and workers over money-lenders and speculators” and tariffs to protect U.S. jobs and industry; “a recognition of human differences” and the idea that “each race has the right to pursue its own destiny free from outside manipulation.”

These fundamental conceptual differences aside, Viguerie’s appropriation of the populist mantle threatened to confuse potential recruits to the Populist Party, fostered by the Liberty Lobby. The Populist Party represented the racist Right’s first concerted foray into electoral politics since the 1968 George Wallace presidential campaign and subsequent efforts by factions of the American Independent Party (AIP). Like the AIP, the Populist Party, too, proved incapable of sustaining unity among contentious racist Right stalwarts.

But in 1984, success seemed possible. With pressing deadlines to achieve ballot qualification status in as many states as possible, the party quickly assembled a team of state leaders. At the helm was the Populist Party’s first national chairperson Robert Weems, a former Mississippi Ku Klux Klan leader and head of Spotlight’s southern regional bureau. “We don’t think that it is communistic to belong to a union, or that it is reactionary to enact tariffs to protect American jobs and we intend to repeal the funny money Federal Reserve Act and abolish the income tax,” Weems said upon announcing the party’s formation in March 1984. In addition, the party’s platform called for a rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment and gay rights, an end to “forced racial busing” and illegal immigration, denial of voting rights to anyone on welfare more than one year; reduction of foreign aid, and a “national policy of nonintervention in foreign wars.”

Just as Klan and neo-Nazi activists had assumed leadership roles in the 1968 George Wallace campaign, the Populist Party likewise was organized by veterans of the racist Right. From the Posse Comitatus milieu came Keith Shive of the Farmers’ Liberation Army and Joseph Birkenstock, the party’s Wisconsin state chairperson. From the Klan came Ralph Forbes of Arkansas and A. J. Barker of North Carolina. Volunteering for the party’s speaking bureau was Colonel Jack Mohr, the notoriously anti-Semitic Identity preacher and leader of the Christian Patriots Defense League.

Small, pre-existing racist third parties enabled the Populist Party to achieve quick ballot status in fourteen states. In California, for example, the American Independent Party, headed by Wallace organizer William K. Shearer, offered itself as the new party’s official state representative, thus eliminating the Populists’ need to collect thousands of voter signatures. In other states, outposts of the old Constitution and the Conservative Parties followed suit.

The Populists held their nominating convention in Nashville, Tennessee—where they emphasized that the area was the landmark site of Andrew Jackson’s home, the Hermitage—and nominated Bob Richards and Maureen Salaman. Presidential candidate Bob Richards was the 1954 Olympic gold medal winner and “Wheaties” brand cereal spokesperson. Vice-presidential nominee Salaman was the president of the National Health Federation, author of popular health food books, and a Spotlight health writer. Though neither had national reputations as racist activists, both heartily endorsed the Populists’ platform and spoke at campaign stops organized by the racist Right.

The Populists captured a meager 63,864 votes in the fourteen states where the party was on the ballot as a challenger to incumbent President Reagan. Compared with other small but better publicized third-party candidates, however, the Populists fared well. The Libertarian Party, active since 1972, won only about 228,000 votes in 1984. Perennial candidate and cult leader Lyndon LaRouche won only about 79,000 votes, despite his expensive television campaign.

Before the Populist Party had much of an opportunity to plan its next moves, factionalism set in, and two more oft-times-fighting third parties, the American Independent Party and the Populist Party, vied for attention and resources.
his previous employment as Liberty Lobby counsel was reported in detail in the Washington Post. See dispatches for the following dates in 1981: April 17, April 22, April 24, April 25, and April 26.


11. For details on anti-racist organizing in the Farm Belt, see the Center for Democratic Renewal’s When Hate Groups Come to Town, op cit., pp. 118–127.


15. Willis A. Carto, ed., Profiles in Populism (Old Greenwich, CT: Flag Press, 1982). Throughout the 1980s, Profiles in Populism was promoted frequently and sold through the Liberty Lobby’s Spotlight.


The connection between populism and fascism recalls the analysis of populism produced by pluralist social scientists of the 1950s. See Michael Paul Rogin, The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967). Rogin notes (p. 212) that Victor Ferkiss, in particular, linked American populism to fascism “because both movements favored government intervention in the economy to preserve capitalism. By this token, the New Deal was also fascist.”


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.


Weems’ Klan background was never included in Spotlight’s coverage of the Populist Party but it was mentioned in an article about Weem’s own 1981 Congressional campaign. “‘White Elephant’ Is People’s Choice,” Spotlight, June 22, 1981, p. 30.


34. Among numerous sources on David Duke’s background and ideology, the most useful are Douglas Rose, ed., The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and “A Special Double Issue on David Duke,” The Texas Observer, January 17–31, 1992 (available from Texas Observer Reprints, 307 West 7th St., Austin, TX 78701).

The development and persistence of Duke’s explicitly neo-Nazi ideology