

Fascist Apocalypse: William Pelley and Millennial Extremism

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Scholars of the American radical right have generally viewed the decade of the 1930s as a “transitional” period in the development of the extreme right. It was a decade when the old right, characterized by nativism, or fear of foreign peoples on the grounds that they were un-American, was transformed into a modern, revolutionary movement. Anti-Catholicism, which was the corner stone of earlier nativist movements such as the Know Nothings of the nineteenth century, was replaced by anti-Semitism and anti-government rhetoric. In addition, the threat of violence by groups on the right became a real possibility. During the Depression Decade threats to social order did not come from the radical left but from the right as several “shirt” organizations emerged modeling themselves after Hitler’s Brown Shirts and Mussolini’s Black Shirts. Art Smith’s Khaki Shirts and William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Shirt Legion were among the most notable. While both Smith and Pelley failed as organizational leaders, Pelley in particular, left behind a legacy of ideas and organizational style that would influence many of the more extreme right-wing groups emerging after World War II.

Pelley was perhaps the first extremist in America to combine anti-Semitism, paramilitarism, survivalism and millennialism into one movement. While Pelley is often thought of as an obscure figure of the right with bizarre beliefs and hopeless dreams of fascist dominance in the United States, the millennial aspects of his movement’s ideology would inspire future extremists. It can be argued further that Pelley’s political and economic aspirations were secondary issues to his obsession with the millennial idea of the Apocalypse and the important role his organization would play in ushering in the Second Coming.

Although several scholars of American radicalism have discussed Pelley and his organization, he remains an obscure figure. Despite this, Pelley is an interesting figure to examine as we attempt to trace the development of the radical right in America. In addition, he is equally significant in that he successfully made millennialism a key component of extremist organization. Often remembered for his bizarre economic plans to bring the country out of depression, and his failed political quest for power, Pelley’s movement may have been more focused on preparing for the Last Days than many scholars have noted. Pelley’s fusion of right-wing political organization with anti-Semitism, paramilitarism and millennialism may have laid the groundwork for extremists who emerged in the post-war era.

Historians of American culture and politics such as Richard Hofstadter have noted that millennialism is by no means unique to the twentieth century. In fact, strains of millennial thought have been a constant in American society. Hofstadter and others have pointed out that millennialism has taken two forms. There have been millenarian movements, which look forward with optimism to the day when the Second Coming will establish a desired paradise.

Abolitionists, for example, often used millennial rhetoric to these ends. In addition, there have been those who look with pessimism to the future and see the final days as the only time when the tyranny and oppression they perceive will be lifted from them.¹ Pelley certainly fits into this category. As older nativist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan died with the Depression, William Pelley and others on the right kept much of their rhetoric alive; that they would be the saviors of the white race in the Last Days.

Pelley was the only son of a Methodist minister and was born in Lynn, Massachusetts. Pelley often commented that he was raised in a world of Protestant orthodoxy, forced to travel around Massachusetts with his family, recalling that most household conversations during his youth dealt with free will, salvation, and infant damnation.² It is clear that Pelley would have the necessary ideological tools to make religion, but more importantly, millennial Christianity part of the movement he would later start. Pelley traveled so often in his youth that he never made many friends and found it difficult to maintain relationships. When his father left his occupation as a minister, Pelley went out on his own. Resenting that he had never received his full formal education, he set out to prove himself a displaced intellectual, and took up writing. He worked as a correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post* in Russia during WW I. After the war, Pelley began to write novels and moved to Hollywood to write screenplays. He contributed several articles to various magazines, and also wrote short stories. But Pelley's life to that point was filled with significant failures amidst his few successes. In 1921 his wife left him and several business ventures he had been working on folded.³

In 1925 however, Pelley would have a reversal of fortune of sorts. It was in this year that Pelley claimed to have an out of body experience while in his small cabin in the hills above Los Angeles. He claimed that he left his physical body and transcended to a heaven like place where he was shown his life flaws and was inspired to change his life and lead a national movement to change society as well. The account of his experience was published in the *American Magazine* in 1928. His article, "Seven Minutes in Eternity" came at a time when ideas of metaphysics were popular, and the story endowed Pelley with cult like fame. After its publication, Pelley became outspoken about his anger and frustrations with American society and government, and sought to change them. Like much of the conservative opposition to Hoover and FDR at the outset of the Depression, Pelley sought to exploit the prejudices of the increasing numbers of people affected by the crisis.

From his experience in Russia during the Great War, Pelley claimed to have witnessed first hand the threat of what many on the right referred and still refer to as the Jewish-Communist conspiracy. Pelley claimed that a powerful cabal of Jews planned to subvert and take over Christian nations of the world, particularly the United States. With American society sliding fast in the wake of the 1929 crash, Pelley blamed the same conspirators for America's problems. He wrote that he was "revengeful that he had been denied social and academic advantages". Pelley also explained that he had not properly embraced religion. Pelley explained that he had blamed God in what he saw as the Last Days when he should have been "blaming his environment,"⁴ or those responsible for it.

¹ Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 30,38,17-18,20-21.

² William Dudley Pelley, "Seven Minutes in Eternity: The Amazing Experience that Made Me Over," *The American Magazine* (March 1928), 139.

³ Geoffrey Smith, *To Save A Nation: American Countersubversives, the New Deal, and the Coming of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 54.

⁴ Pelley, "Seven Minutes," 140.

By 1930, Pelley was attracting followers to his ideas of conspiracy, metaphysicism, and odd brand of millennial Christianity. That same year he moved to Ashville, North Carolina. In North Carolina Pelley established his own printing press and began publishing newspapers and countless tracts and pamphlets conveying increasingly anti-Semitic theories of conspiracy and religion. He also started his own bible college. The Galahad Bible College was never accredited but it did offer correspondence classes to people all over the world.⁵ It was also in North Carolina that Pelley began to organize. In 1931, he founded his first organization, the League of the Liberators. Three years later he would form the more militant wing called the Silver Shirt Legion, whose members dressed in Khaki pants and Silver shirts with a scarlet "L" on the breast.

It is no coincidence that the Silver Shirts were founded the same year that Hitler came to power in Germany. Pelley was obsessed with Hitler's rapid rise to power, and besides being attracted to the anti-Semitism of Nazism, Pelley saw the presence of Hitler in Europe as pivotal to the Second Coming. In fact, Pelley commented that "When a certain young house painter comes to the head of the German.... you take that as your time symbol for bringing the work of the Christ Militia into the open!" Pelley's quest for spirituality in his life and his obsession with Nazism led him to blend Christianity with anti-Semitism in his organization.⁶

Only a few scholars such as John Werly and Michael Barkun have noted that Pelley's movement was more about evangelical Christianity, namely apocalyptic ideas and millennial beliefs, than any legitimate political quest for power. Pelley concerned himself mostly with the coming of the Last Days and the battle of Armegedeon and what role he and his organization would have in ushering it in. In his newspaper, *Pelley's Weekly*, an article titled "What you Should Do to Prepare for the Christ Commonwealth" echoed this concern. The article urged readers to store food and ammunition and drill in a military fashion, foreshadowing the emergence of surviavlism and apocalyptic ideology which has become central to the culture of the post war right.⁷ Like many right-wing millennial groups of the 1980s, such as the Order, Pelley hoped his Silver Shirts would be soldiers of light doing battle with the forces of evil in the Last Days. In Pelley's world view these would be the forces of the Jewish conspirators.⁸

During the 1930s, Pelley exposed his followers to a combination of his own religious ideology and many other fringe philosophies. Most importantly to the development of the American right, Pelley dabbled with British or Anglo/Israelism. The ideology originated in England where it had a limited following in the 19th century. The philosophy suggests that Anglo-Saxons were the true Israelites and not the Jews. While Pelley used aspects of British-Israelism, mainly to support his anti-Semitism, many of his Silver shirt members were influential preachers and writers of the doctrine. While Pelley did not make British Israeilsim the official philosophy of his organizations, Michael Barkun has pointed out that Pelley's millennial view of the world and the impending apocalypse were influenced by one British-Israelite in particular, David Davidson., a member of the Silver Shirts and author.⁹ Davidson was best known for his ideas about "pyramidism". Davidson argued that the great Pyramid at Ghiza was constructed by

⁵ Smith, *To Save a Nation*, 56.

⁶ Suzane Ledebouer, "The Man Who Would be Hitler: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Shirt Legion," *California History* vol. 5, 1986, 129.

⁷ For a good analysis of the evangelical aspects of Pelley's movement see John Werly, "The Millenarian Right: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion of America" (Ph.D. diss. Syracuse University, 1972). Also John Werly, "Premillennialism and the Paranoid Style," *American Studies* (1977).

⁸ Donald Strong, *Organized Anti-Semitism in America: The Rise of Group Prejudice During the Decade 1930-1940* (Westport: MacMillian, 1941), 44.

⁹ Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*. Revised Edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 52-54.

ancient relatives of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, probably Noah. The great Pyramid also functioned as a prophetic clock, which could be used to predict crucial events of the end times. In 1933 when Pelley commented that Hitler's rise to power was a "pyramid event", he meant an event prophesied by the time table of the pyramids. Pelley often predicted the coming of Armageddon based on this time table only to be wrong on every occasion. As World War II raged in Europe Pelley fervently argued that the day of judgment was coming closer. Near the end the 1930s, he picked a new date for the coming of Christ and the revolution, September 17, 2001. This, according to Pelley is when Christ, with the help of the Silver Shirts, would rescue the world from the hands of the diabolical Jews.¹⁰ By incorporating some of Davidson's ideas Pelley not only drew on the millennial tradition of predicting dates, he also began to popularize the idea of the white race being the true Israelites, thus integrating this belief into an anti-Semitic movement. British-Israelism would eventually evolve into Christian Identity religion, which is currently the theological weapon of the extreme right.

Pelley contributed in many ways to this transformation because of his obsession with millennialism. It could be argued that Pelley's obsession with the concept of the Last Days gave meaning to his conspiracy theories, allowing for the development of the blatantly anti-Semitic Christian Identity religion. Because Pelley borrowed millennial language and rhetoric from mainstream Protestant fundamentalism he was able to attract people with anti-Semitic sentiments and extremist desires from different denominations. In addition, Pelley's obsession with the last days and Armageddon and his belief in the literal existence of forces of good and evil in the world, allowed him to create vivid descriptions of whom the evil doers were. This stands in contrast to the often vague descriptions of the "enemy" by earlier nativists like the Klan. Pelley created a world where international bankers backed by world Jewry stood ready to battle his Silver Shirts as soldiers of Light.¹¹

By the middle of the 1930s, Pelley's obsessions were propelling his rhetoric and his movement in a more militant direction. As different Silver Shirt posts across the nation plotted sieges of cities and threatened use of violence, Pelley denied sanctioning such an image, but his literature painted a different picture. His articles and writings contained descriptions of the coming battle of Armageddon, which was going to be the most violent battle the world had ever seen. John Werly noted that it would have been easy for Silver Legion members to confuse the timing of Pelley's references and interpret them as referring to the present rather than to the far off future Second Coming.¹²

By the end of the 1930s, Pelley's increasingly militant rhetoric was beginning to draw the attention of government officials. Amid allegations that the group's main purpose was to plan and execute the violent overthrow of the United States, the Special House Sub-Committee on Un-American Activities subpoenaed Pelley to testify in order to conduct an investigation of his Silver Shirt Legion. At a hearing before the committee in 1939, one witness who knew Pelley stated that he was in fact planning to "bring about the overthrow of this government by force and violence." In Cleveland, a woman familiar with the local silver shirts described the organization as "revolutionary and militant."¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, 91-96. Christian Identity is a vehemently anti-Semitic movement, claiming not just that Jews are not the "chosen people," but that they are literal descendents of Satan. For a thorough discussion of Identity see Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*.

¹¹ Werly, "Premillennialism," 45.

¹² Werly, "The Millenarian Right," 228.

¹³ House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, 76th Congress, First Session, 1940, vol. 12, 7254.

Pelley was forced to explain writings which he encouraged “the forcible removal of the Jews from office,” and other writings that appeared to advocate violence.¹⁴ Pelley defended his words claiming that he was being forceful without employing violence. Clearly many of Pelley’s Silver Shirts did not see it this way. A local leader in Cleveland told a crowd to be prepared for armed conflict, and urged them to be prepared to rise in arms against “the red revolution” and recognize it when it comes. In the mid 1930s reports came back to government officials that Silver Shirts in San Diego were drilling in a military fashion and had in fact planned a siege of the city. Informants told officials that in May of 1935 the Silver shirts had planned to converge on San Diego and take hold of the city. An informant explained further that suspected Jewish officials would be “liquidated.” The San Diego Silver Shirts had acquired weapons from a local Navy depot, but the siege never took place. Pelley’s Silver Shirts made the threat of violence by such groups on the right a real possibility, motivated by preparation and anticipation of the Last Days.¹⁵

As the Second World War approached, dressing in Nazi-like uniforms became less and less socially acceptable. In addition, Pelley was arrested in 1942 on charges of insurrection and sedition for talk and preparations for the attempted overthrow of the government. Despite not being found guilty of the more serious sedition charge, Pelley was found guilty of other charges and sentenced to 15 years. Pelley was released in 1952, and died in 1965.¹⁶ He was gone as a vocal leader of extremist ideas, but what did not fade was the millennial conspiracy theory that Jews are at the heart of America’s problems, and that zealots must prepare for a final battle in the last days which will reverse this. It has been said that although Pelley died a forgotten man as the defendant in one of America’s rare sedition trials he had a great impact on people during the 1930s. It could also be argued that the Silver Shirts and William Pelley are still alive in the ideology of the extreme right. The best example is perhaps the emergence of Posse Comitatus in 1969. The radical anti-tax organization, which embraces Christian Identity to attack government and Jews, was founded by an ex-Silver Shirt, Henry “Mike” Beach. Pelley’s millennial extremism could be viewed as a microcosm of what the American far right has become.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Henry Shwartz, “The Silver Shirts: Anti-Semitism in San Diego” *Western States Jewish History* vol. 25, 1992, 54-56.

¹⁶ David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 247.