

WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY AND THE SILVERSHIRT LEGION:
A CASE STUDY OF THE LEGION IN WASHINGTON STATE, 1933-1942

The social, political and economic conditions in America during the 1930's provided an ideal breeding ground for rightist ideologies -- chief among these was fascism. For many people who looked to the extreme right for the solutions to the problems posed during the depression era, fascism represented a gospel of a new order.

The number of organizations founded indicates that, in one sense, many Americans saw fascism as a viable alternative. In fact, it has been estimated that there were between 100 and 800 fascist organizations in the United States. Estimates were made from a variety of sources: Congressman Dickstein usually cited 110; Donald Strong counted 121; Reverend L.M. Birkhead claimed 800; Albert Kahn mentioned 700; and Stanley High proposed 150-160.¹

However, the numbers of organizations tell us little about how many people were members or sympathizers with these fascist parties. Furthermore, these estimates

¹ Donald Strong, *Organized Anti-Semitism in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941), 14; Stanley High, "Star Spangled Fascists," *Saturday Evening Post*, 211 (May 27, 1939), 5; Reverend L. M. Birkhead, "Fascism in America," *Literary Digest*, 124 (August 14, 1937), 16; Albert Kahn, *High Treason* (New York: Hour, 1950), 190.

leave us with a variety of unanswered questions: What was the nature of fascism in America? Were the various fascist groups unique or cast from the same mold? Were the leaders of these organizations “true believers” or simply charlatans? Why did Americans join these organizations? Research on these groups has been of two types: the sensationalistic “scare” variety, and the more focused scholarly examinations. The sensationalistic material, although interesting, has a limited value due to its lack of substantiation and historical analysis.² However, the first scholarly examinations, providing a general analysis of the panorama of fascist organizations, were by Victor Ferkiss, “The Political and Economic Philosophy of American Fascism,” and Morris Schonbach, “Native Fascism During the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of its Roots, its Growth, and its Decline.”³ Both of these dissertations provide a foundation for much of the historical work on fascist organizations in America.

While these works provided a starting point, they took slightly different tacts. Ferkiss was interested in building a clear political philosophy for American fascism while Schonbach surveyed the social and political nature of a variety of independent organizations -- both European-based fascist organizations in America as well as native fascist groups.

²For example, see John Roy Carlson, *Under Cover* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943) and *The Plotters* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1946); John L. Spivak, *Secret Armies* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1939) and *America Faces the Barricades* (New York: Covici, Friede Publishers, 1935); John R. Lechner, *Nazism on the Pacific Coast* (Los Angeles: no. pub., 1937).

³Victor Ferkiss, “The Political and Economic Philosophy of American Fascism,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1954; and Morris Schonbach, “Native Fascism During the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of its Roots, its Growth, and its Decline,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1958.

Several studies have taken the style of these early dissertations and have filled in more details about the variety of fascist organizations.⁴ However, all of these works discuss numerous groups within a comprehensive presentation of native fascism. The problem with this approach is that it does not appreciate the fact that fascist organizations were each truly independent in how they translated their political philosophy into an American context. There still existed a need to thoroughly examine each group by itself.

Two attempts to focus in on one particular group, the Silvershirt Legion of America, were the dissertations by Donnell Portzline, "William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Shirt Legion of America," and John Werly's "The Millenarian Right: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion of America."⁵ Both of them saw the Silvershirts as an essentially fascist organization with a uniquely American perspective.

Portzline and Werly approached their study of the Silvershirt program by examining the life, philosophy and religious tenets of its leader -- William Dudley Pelley. They argued that the organization had no independence outside of Pelley and, therefore, an examination of Pelley provided the philosophical grounding not only of the group but of as one example of fascism in America.

⁴For example, see Geoffrey S. Smith, *To Save a Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Gustavus Myers, *History of Bigotry in the United States* (New York: Capricorn, 1960); David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969); Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

⁵Donnell B. Portzline, "William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Shirt Legion of America," Ed.D. dissertation, Ball State University, 1965; and John M. Werly, "The Millenarian Right: William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion of America," Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1972.

However, this is not to indicate that both dissertations interpreted Pelley in the same way. Portzline saw Pelley as little more than a carbon copy of European fascist political movements in that “the tenets and programs of the European fascist leaders were known, interpreted, endorsed, and expounded.”⁶ Werly, on the other hand, argued that Pelley was not a fascist in the European sense because “when the political and economic ideology of Pelley is measured against the tenets of National Socialism, it becomes obvious that his [Pelley’s] was not a Nazi ideology.”⁷ Werly went on to argue that Pelley’s organization had a religious aspect to it, which had been largely ignored by other historians because of the more obvious resemblances, although only symbolic, to political fascism.

Werly, then, prepared the ground for a new perspective -- that of Pelley’s religious tenets. Werly’s argument was against those contemporary sources, which nearly always either chastised Pelley as being a Nazi traitor or dismissed him as a religious charlatan.⁸ Werly also took exception to the conclusions of the early dissertations in that they never truly gave much credibility to Pelley’s beliefs.

⁶Portzline, 73.

⁷Werly, ii.

⁸For example, Travis Hoke, in a 1934 survey of “shirt” movements for the ACLU, referred to the Silvershirt leader as “some mysterious demagogue who promises to ennoble” the hatreds of anyone joining the Legion. An article in *New Republic* the same year commented “the supposition that he [Pelley] may be mentally broken, that his sudden foray into spiritualism in 1929 was the result of an intellectual collapse, has superficially, a certain measure of plausibility.” Finally, John Spivak was extremely critical of those who prey on the fears of “honest and earnest citizens” who become “easy converts to the mystic nonsense of men like William Dudley Pelley.” See Travis Hoke, *Shirts!* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1934), p. 20; Arthur Graham, “Crazy like a Fox,” *New Republic*, 78 (April 18, 1934), 265;

Ferkiss, in his dissertation, saw little political sense to the thought of Pelley, concluding that he “was a sincere madman or an imaginative charlatan.”⁹ However, Schonbach’s work rejected the “crackpots and lunatics” analysis of Ferkiss and treated Pelley’s thought as a mixture of politics, religion, metaphysics and mysticism: the last element of which “ingratiated him with a public which might otherwise have been immune to his blandishments.”¹⁰ Donnell Portzline’s thesis considered the religious thinking of Pelley as “a principal reason for the growth of the Silver Legion.”¹¹ While not calling Pelley a spiritual lunatic, Portzline, nonetheless, concluded that the Silvershirt leader exploited religious sympathies to the end of political demagoguery.¹²

Werly’s different approach was to place Pelley into the pattern of millenarian though in America by arguing that Pelley’s writings contained these major premillennial characteristics:

nondenominationalism, universalism, vivid descriptions of the Antichrist, a description of a world of absolutes, an evident trait of pessimism, a theme of imminence, a belief that conditions will steadily worsen until the reappearance of Christ and the fiery literal Armageddon, and an assertion that Christ will establish and rule a thousand year Kingdom of God on earth.¹³

John L. Spivak, *America Faces the Barricades* (New York: Covici, Friede Publishers, 1935), 229.

⁹Ferkiss, 276.

¹⁰Schonbach, 27, 30, 304.

¹¹Portzline, 30.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Werly, 192.

Through an interesting and convincing analysis, Werly concluded that the precepts of Pelley gained a unity when examined in the light of premillenarian thought.

While Werly provided a unique viewpoint on Pelley and the Silvershirts, he failed to take the next step. If Pelley's thoughts fit into a millenarian pattern and his political ideas make more sense when examined in this pattern, does this explain the reason for Pelley's support among certain Americans? In short, why did people join the Silvershirts? Did Pelley as a person, enamor them by his religious tenets, by his millenarian message, by his political agenda or by a combination of these? What is clear is that a study of the Silvershirts has yet to focus on the people who joined the organization and thereby gave Pelley a forum and a support network. This is not to say, however, that membership analysis has not been attempted.

Donald Strong, in his 1941 study of anti-Semitic groups in America, argued that fascist groups were strongest among urban, middle class, average-educated, Protestant, Anglo-Saxons.¹⁴ In his research, Strong quoted a study by an Asheville lawyer who supposedly sampled Pelley's filed correspondence of several thousand letters while they were under subpoena in 1934. The lawyer concluded that Silvershirt members:

Were uneducated (judging from the grammatical errors); poor (many had suffered recent economic reverses); few professional people; a high proportion of neurotics (to judge from the language they employed); practically all elderly; a high proportion were females; they were seldom prominent in their community, or if prominent, they wrote either because of their metaphysical interests or because they were interested in opposing the liberal trends of the

¹⁴ Strong, 172-175.

administration. They came from small communities in general, mostly from the Middle West and the West Coast.¹⁵

Strong never documented this quotation and further inquiries by Portzline suggest that this survey was never done. However, documented or not, this analysis has become the basis for much of the interpretation of membership. For example, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. paralleled much of this interpretation when he argued that membership came from the

old lower-middle classes, now in an unprecedented stage of frustration and fear, menaced by humiliation, dispossession, and poverty. They came from provincial and traditionally nonpolitical groups in the population, jolted from apathy into near-hysteria by the shock of economic collapse. They came, in the main, from the ranks of the self-employed, who, as farmers or shopkeepers or artisans, felt threatened by organized economic power, whether from above, as in banks and large corporations, or from below, as in trade unions. To a considerable degree, they came from the evangelical denominations; years of Bible reading and fundamentalist revivalism had accustomed them to millennial solutions. They were mostly men and women of native-born old-immigrant (Anglo-Saxon and German) stock.¹⁶

Thus, analysis of membership seems to focus on one general theme: that members came from the lower middle-class, were disaffected from their society, frightened by the economic difficulties, and backed by a fundamentalist faith.

Even the dissertations of Portzline and Werly fail to give a more in-depth examination of the membership. Portzline, using a quote from a letter of one former member who tried to answer why he joined the legion, could only conclude that:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 69-70.

It is doubtful that there will be in this question any understanding of William Dudley Pelley's attempts to stem the tides of perfidy by means of the dramatic gesture that was known as the Silver Legion, nor will it be understood why certain of us who were attracted to him in those days were so attracted, or how it was possible for us to recognize his genius.¹⁷

This hardly tells us why people actually joined the organization. Was it economics, displacement, millenarian views, or a desire to model their lives by the use of the same mystical references that were similar to the leader? Portzline gives us no answers to these questions.

Werly's approach simply used the percentages of ethnic origins and general occupations to reach his conclusion about why he believed people joined. However, peoples' motivations are much more complex. A thorough analysis of membership characteristics -- especially on a local level -- has yet to be done.

The technique of membership analysis has been applied in recent studies of National Socialism (NSDAP). These studies have begun to examine the membership of the local party units as a way of clarifying the nature and appeal of the organization to the individuals who joined. The result has been a more sophisticated understanding of how the NSDAP functioned in the various parts of Germany, accounting for geographical, political, social, religious and economic differences in the country.¹⁸

¹⁷ Portzline, 31-32.

¹⁸ For example, see William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965); Jeremy Noakes, *The Nazi Party in Lower Saxony, 1921-1933* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Eric Reiche, *The Development of the SA in Nuremberg, 1922-1934* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986); Michael H. Kater, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); and Thomas Childers, *The*

This dissertation will approach the study of the Washington State Silvershirt Legion by first providing an overview of the Legion's leader, William Dudley Pelley. An examination of his thought is necessary since the Legion had no apparent philosophical independence outside of the leader. This overview will focus on Pelley's political, economic and religious thought, as it existed within a larger national intellectual context in America. Once Pelley's thought is discussed, a careful analysis will indicate to what extent Pelley was a fascist, as Portzline argued, or a millenialist, as Werly argued. It is proposed that Pelley offered something quite new to both concepts -- a unique blending of seemingly contradictory viewpoints.

This unique blending, since Pelley and the Legion were intimately at one, would lead one to suppose that any unit associating itself under the Legion's banner would most likely also adopt these tenets. However, was that the case? To explore this issue, this dissertation will take, as a next step, an examination of how one particular state's units operated, both actually and philosophically in Washington State. A discussion of the impact of the Depression and the New Deal in the state will allow an examination of how important those events were to the membership as justifications for participation. By carefully examining census data, economic surveys, relief records from both the national and state level, state surveys on religious affiliations, and election results, tentative conclusions about the socio-economic-political makeup of the membership will be offered. Furthermore, through intense study of obituaries, birth and death records, city directories, military service records, social security records, church

membership rosters, bankruptcy proceedings, civil and/or criminal suits, New Deal work program personnel lists, as well as conducting interviews with former members, a clearer picture of why these people joined the Legion and, importantly, what they hoped to get out of their active participation will be revealed.

This dissertation will begin to answer questions about how the Silvershirt Legion was actualized in a local community; how that community used the Legion to represent their local concerns; how members were recruited and why they joined; and, what the Silvershirt Legion represented to these members. Finally, this dissertation will explain how through a study of local organizations, we can begin to understand the pattern of participation by “ordinary folks” in American fascist organizations.

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