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UNDYING ARYAN DREAMS

A Voice of Hatred Is Gone, but Not Its Echo

By SARAH KERSHAW

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SEATTLE — Toward the end of his life, the man who was once the nation's most visible face of white supremacy, a Nazi-uniform-wearing, jackbooted ideologue whom his critics called "the grandfather of hate," was a frail old widower gasping for breath in a tiny donated house in northern Idaho.

And when he died in his sleep on Wednesday at 86, Richard G. Butler, who founded the Aryan Nations in the 1970's, had already long ago lost his power and influence over the radical right, a collection of extremist subcultures, militias and neo-Nazi offshoots that his movement spawned.

Still, the death of one of the founders of the 20th century white separatist movement signals the end of a chapter in the nation's social history. And it certainly marks the failure of Mr. Butler's ambition to create what he had envisioned as "an autonomous Aryan homeland" in the Pacific Northwest.

"Butler's death, in a way, marks the end of an era," said Daniel Levitas, author of "The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right" (St. Martin's Press, 2002). "But it certainly is not removing somebody from the scene who was actively



Members of the Aryan Nations and the Ku Klux Klan gather outside Twin Falls, Idaho, for a cross-burning in 1987.

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playing a role of any great significance at the time of his death."



Mr. Butler's brand of white supremacy was based on a theology known as Christian Identity, combining a heretical interpretation of the Bible and a belief that Jews were Satanic and blacks "mud people." Before the seams of that movement began to come apart, Mr. Butler's 20-acre compound in the pine-forested hills of northern Idaho was a gathering spot for white supremacists.

But Mr. Butler had become increasingly isolated. "Christian Identity long ago lost its kind of hegemonic sway within the radical right," Mr. Levitas said.

Most experts agree that though white supremacy may be ebbing, it has certainly not died along with Mr. Butler. Indeed, there are signs on the Internet and in rallies that it may still be thriving, from Washington State to West Virginia, although in new forms.

"Is the radical right in trouble, faltering and fading away?" said Mark Potok, who tracks extremist groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala. "I don't think so. I think it's yet again starting to morph."

Though it may have lost its dominance, Christian Identity is still strong within the white supremacy movement, particularly in the South. On the rise, experts say, are groups like one in Portland, Ore., called Volksfront, which says it champions whites' civil rights while rejecting racial violence.

In the Pacific Northwest, a bastion of white separatism, anti-government militias and survivalists, a new dogma has begun to spread, drawing on Odinism, a pre-Christian theology that worships Norse deities and derives its name from the chief one, Odin.

There is some debate as to how prevalent Odinism is among white supremacists. People who are studying the cult say it has taken hold most notably in prisons. Skinheads and other separatist groups who have rejected Christian Identity are drawn to Odinism because it rids them of the messy problem of having to contend with Christian values like compassion and forgiveness and frees them to justify violence, said Randy Blazak, a professor of sociology at Portland State University and director of the university's Hate Crimes Research Network.

Mr. Blazak and other experts trace the rise of radical subcultures like Odinism to the turmoil in the white supremacy movement. For several years it has been riven by infighting, philosophical friction and fall-offs in recruitment.

Today there are about 17 Aryan Nations chapters across the country with a total of 200 or so members, figures that are a third to a half of what they were in the mid-80's, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. And Mr. Butler left no heir apparent when he

died in a house in Hayden Lake, Idaho, that had been given to him by a follower after Mr. Butler went bankrupt and lost his compound.

Things got worse for the radical right after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the conviction in that attack of one of its members, Timothy J. McVeigh. The known paramilitary groups and militias with roots in places like Montana and Washington State numbered 171 in 2003, down from 858 in 1996, according to the law center.

"The militia movement suffered from an aggressive federal crackdown in the wake of Oklahoma City," Mr. Levitas said. He added: "Americans in this day and age are not at all keen on the idea of being recruited into violent revolutionary organizations whose mission is to assassinate public officials. It is not a very sellable idea in a post-9/11 world."

Still, there is debate as to whether the militias are experiencing a quiet resurgence; a report released last week by the Anti-Defamation League said that their numbers were rising in a "retooling of the movement" after a long hiatus, although not to anywhere near the levels of the mid-1990's.

While it is clear that white supremacy is not in its twilight, Mr. Butler's passing was certainly a big moment for northern Idaho.

"It's been a 25-year history and struggle," said Tony Stewart, a professor at North Idaho College who helped found a local human rights group that has battled Aryan Nations. "The transition of this was already under way. But no one can say he is still operating here. There's a real finality to it."

On Wednesday, after Mr. Butler's body was taken away for an autopsy, his relatives moved the belongings of his Aryan Nations roommates out of the house in Hayden Lake and placed them on the doorstep, a local newspaper, The Spokesman-Review, reported. Then they took down an Aryan Nations flag from a window.

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