



SOVEREIGN CITIZENS MOVEMENT

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The strange subculture of the sovereign citizens movement, whose adherents hold truly bizarre, complex antigovernment beliefs, has been growing at a fast pace since the late 2000s. Sovereigns believe that they — not judges, juries, law enforcement or elected officials — get to decide which laws to obey and which to ignore, and they don't think they should have to pay taxes. Sovereigns are clogging up the courts with indecipherable filings and when cornered, many of them lash out in rage, frustration and, in the most extreme cases, acts of deadly violence, usually directed against government officials. In May 2010, for example, a [father-son team of sovereigns](#) murdered two police officers with an assault rifle when they were pulled over on the interstate while traveling through West Memphis, Ark.

The movement is [rooted in racism and anti-Semitism](#), though most sovereigns, many of whom are African American, are unaware of their beliefs' origins. In the early 1980s, the sovereign citizens movement mostly attracted white supremacists and anti-Semites, mainly because sovereign theories originated in groups that saw Jews as working behind the scenes to manipulate financial institutions and control the government. Most early sovereigns, and some of those who are still on the scene, believed that being white was a prerequisite to becoming a sovereign citizen. They argued that the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed citizenship to African Americans and everyone else born on U.S. soil, also made black Americans permanently subject to federal and state governments, unlike themselves.

The Sovereign Belief System

The contemporary sovereign belief system is based on a [decades-old conspiracy theory](#). At some point in history, sovereigns believe, the American government set up by the founding fathers — with a legal system the sovereigns refer to as "[common law](#)" — was secretly replaced by a new government system based on admiralty law, the law of the

sea and international commerce. Under common law, or so they believe, the sovereigns would be free men. Under admiralty law, they are slaves, and secret government forces have a vested interest in keeping them that way. Some sovereigns believe this perfidious change occurred during the Civil War, while others blame the events of 1933, when the U.S. abandoned the gold standard. Either way, they stake their lives and livelihoods on the idea that judges around the country know all about this hidden government takeover but are denying the sovereigns' motions and filings out of treasonous loyalty to hidden and malevolent government forces.

Though this all sounds bizarre, the next layer of the argument becomes even more implausible. Since 1933, the U.S. dollar has been backed not by gold, but by the "full faith and credit" of the U.S. government (in fact, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ended private ownership of gold in large amounts in 1933; governments could still sell gold for dollars to the U.S. Treasury for a fixed amount after that, until that practice was ended by President Richard Nixon in 1971). According to sovereign "researchers," this means that the government has pledged its citizenry as collateral, by selling their future earning capabilities to foreign investors, effectively enslaving all Americans. This sale, they claim, takes place at birth. When a baby is born in the U.S., a birth certificate is issued, and the hospital usually requires that the parents apply for a Social Security number at that time. Sovereigns say that the government then uses that birth certificate to set up a kind of corporate trust in the baby's name — a secret Treasury account — which it funds with an amount ranging from \$600,000 to \$20 million, depending on the particular variant of the sovereign belief system. By setting up this account, every newborn's rights are cleverly split between those held by the flesh-and-blood baby and the ones assigned to his or her corporate shell account.

The sovereigns believe evidence for their theory is found on the birth certificate itself. Since most certificates use all capital letters to spell out a baby's name, JOHN DOE, for example, is actually the name of the corporate shell identity, or "straw man," while John Doe is the baby's "real," flesh-and-blood name. As the child grows older, most of his legal documents will utilize capital letters, which means that his state-issued driver's license, his marriage license, his car registration, his criminal court records, his cable TV bill and correspondence from the IRS all will pertain to his corporate shell identity, not his real, sovereign identity.

The process sovereigns have devised to split the straw man from the flesh-and-blood man is called "[redemption](#)," and its purpose is two-fold. Once separated from the corporate shell, the newly freed man is now outside of the jurisdiction of all admiralty laws. More importantly, by filing a series of complex, legal-sounding documents, the sovereign can tap into that secret Treasury account for his own purposes. Over the past 30 years, hundreds of sovereigns have attempted to perfect the process by packaging and promoting different combinations of forms and paperwork. While no one has ever succeeded, for the obvious reason that these theories are not true, sovereigns are nonetheless convinced with the religious certainty of a true cult believer that they're close. All it will take, say the promoters of the redemption scam, is the right combination of words.

Numbers

It is impossible to know how many sovereigns there are in the U.S. today, in part because there is no central leadership and no organized group that members can join. Instead, there are a variety of local leaders with individualized views on sovereign citizen ideology and techniques. Those who are attracted to this subculture typically attend a seminar or two, or visit one of the thousands of websites and online videos on the subject and then simply choose how to act on what they've learned. Some start by testing sovereign ideology with small offenses such as driving without a license, while others proceed directly to taking on the IRS as tax protesters.

In the mid-1990s, the IRS estimated that there were approximately 250,000 tax protesters in the U.S., people who believe that the government has no right to tax income. Not all of them were full-blown sovereign ideologues. Since the late 1990s, an abundance of evidence suggests that the sovereign citizen movement's growth has been explosive, although there have been no more recent IRS estimates because Congress in 1998 prohibited the agency from tracking or labeling those who file frivolous arguments in lieu of paying their taxes. But a conservative estimate of the number of all kinds of tax protesters today would be about 500,000.

Using this number and information derived from trials of tax protestors and reports from government agencies, a reasonable estimate of hard-core sovereign believers in early 2011 would be 100,000, with another 200,000 just starting out by testing sovereign techniques for resisting everything from speeding tickets to drug charges, for an estimated total of 300,000. As sovereign theories go viral throughout the nation's prison systems and among people who are unemployed and desperate in a punishing economy, this number is likely to grow.

Tactics

The weapon of choice for sovereign citizens is paper. A simple traffic violation or pet-licensing case can end up provoking dozens of court filings containing hundreds of pages of pseudo-legal nonsense. For example, a sovereign was involved in 2010 in a protracted legal battle over having to pay a dog-licensing fee. She filed 10 sovereign documents in court over a two-month period and then declared victory when the harried prosecutor decided to drop the case. The battle was fought over a three-year dog license that in Pinellas County, Fla., where the sovereign lives, costs just \$20. Tax cases are even worse. Sovereign filings in such legal battles can quickly exceed a thousand pages. While a normal criminal case docket might have 60 or 70 entries, many involving sovereigns have as many as 1,200. The courts are struggling to keep up, and judges, prosecutors and public defenders are being swamped.

The size of the documents is an issue, but so is the [nonsensical language](#) the documents are written in. They have a kind of special sovereign code language that judges, lawyers and other court staff simply can't understand (nor can most non-sovereigns).

Sovereigns believe that if they can find just the right combination of words, punctuation, paper, ink color and timing, they can have anything they want — freedom from taxes, unlimited wealth, and life without licenses, fees or laws, are all just a few strangely worded documents away. It's the modern-day equivalent of "abracadabra."

Since most sovereigns favor paper over guns, when sovereigns are angry with government officials, their revenge most often takes the form of "paper terrorism." Sovereigns file retaliatory, bogus property liens that may not be discovered by the victim until they attempt to sell their property. Sovereigns also file fake tax forms that are designed to ruin an enemy's credit rating and cause them to be audited by the IRS. In the mid-1990s, a period when the sovereign movement was also on the rise, several states passed laws specifically aimed at these paper terrorism tactics.

Recruits

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, most new recruits to the sovereign citizens movement are people who have found themselves in a desperate situation, often due to the economy or foreclosures, and are searching for a quick fix. Others are intrigued by the notions of easy money and living a lawless life, free from unpleasant consequences. Many self-identified sovereigns today are black and apparently completely unaware of the racist origins of their ideology. When they experience some small success at using redemption techniques to battle minor traffic offenses or local licensing issues, they're hooked. For many, it's a political issue. They don't like taxes, traffic laws, child support obligations or banking practices, but they are too impatient to try to change what they dislike through traditional, political means.

In times of economic prosperity, sovereigns typically rely on absurd and convoluted schemes to evade state and federal income taxes and hide their assets from the IRS. In times of financial hardship, they turn to debt- and mortgage-elimination scams, techniques to avoid child support payments, and even attempts to use their redemption techniques to get out of serious criminal charges.

Once in the movement, it's an immersive and heady experience. In the past three decades, the redemptionist subculture has grown from small groups of like-minded individuals in localized pockets around the nation to a richly layered society. Redemptionists attend specialized seminars and national conferences, enjoy a large assortment of alternative newspapers and radio networks, and subscribe to sovereign-oriented magazines and websites. They home-school their children so that a new generation will not have to go through the same learning curve that they did to see past the government's curtain to the common-law utopia beyond.

While the techniques sold by promoters never perform as promised, most followers are nonetheless content to be fighting the battle, and they blame only the judges, lawyers, prosecutors and police when their gurus' methods fail. While most have never achieved financial success in life, they take pride in engaging the government in battle, comparing themselves to the founding fathers during the American Revolution.

Violence

When a sovereign feels particularly desperate, angry, battle-weary and cornered, his next government contact, no matter how minor, can be his final straw. The [resulting rage](#) can be lethal. In 1995 in Ohio, a sovereign named Michael Hill pulled a gun on an officer during a traffic stop. Hill was killed. In 1997, New Hampshire extremist Carl Drega shot dead two officers and two civilians, and wounded another three officers before being killed himself. In that same year in Idaho, when brothers Doug and Craig Broderick were pulled over for failing to signal, they killed one officer and wounded another before being killed themselves in a violent gun battle. In December 2003, members of the Bixby family, who lived outside of Abbeville, S.C., [killed two law enforcement officers](#) in a dispute over a small sliver of land next to their home. And in May 2010, Jerry and Joseph Kane, a father and son sovereign team, [shot to death two West Memphis, Ark., police officers](#) who had pulled them over in a routine traffic stop. Later that day, the Kanes were killed in a fierce shootout with police that wounded two other officers.

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