

Bard Center for the Study of Hate

Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights

Summer 2024

Institutional Support for Grassroots Antifascism

The Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR) is a small but influential organization working to combat groups that infringe upon others' human rights. Right now, it consists of Leonard Zeskin, Devin Burghart, and Chuck Tanner. The institute of three members has been advised by the likes of C. T. Vivian, lieutenant of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and no longer uses a physical address due to an attempted pipe bombing. It received official status in 1983, when I'm told they wanted a nonprofit postal rate for their newsletter. IREHR began with a few people who were "concerned about the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and similar groups. [This was in the context of the] resurgence in early 80s of the Klan and the farm crisis with the far right coming in to recruit, [using the crisis] as a vehicle to spread far right ideology. There were 5 initial board members in [19]81," when the organization began (Tanner and Burghart, July 16 2024). They achieved official status two years later.

What do they do, and where do smaller organizations like them fit in the struggle against fascism in the United States? After all, big name human rights organizations often have hundreds of employees. Many of those nonprofits primarily ground their work in the legal field, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and the American Civil Liberties Union. IREHR, on the contrary, tries to get at public opinion and spread awareness of fascist groups' true colors before their rhetoric hits the mainstream. According to Chuck:

we see ourselves as trying to continue in the tradition of civil rights, labor, and antifascist struggles in this country, as well as the struggle for indigenous sovereignty and civil

rights. We see ourselves as supporters of all those things, [...] recognizing that if we want to continue to advance with the civil rights leaders of the 60s' deal, we have to counter. We have to address these organizations and we've allowed the worst elements [to proliferate.] We've continued in the tradition of civil rights labor struggles that address inequality. (Tanner, July 10 2024.)

IREHR sees itself as allied with grassroots activist movements, providing support and furthering their goals.

As an antifascist organization, IREHR considers fascism to be a “far-right nationalist movement that seeks to institute a dictatorship and use the state to both violently suppress its political enemies and coerce[]the public that they consider part of their nation into conforming to the world as they see it,” (Tanner, Aug. 30 2024.) The shift towards fascism in contemporary U.S. politics is reminiscent of that during the interwar period, where a popular reactionary movement was pushed out of the spotlight by a revolutionary fascist movement. They do not consider fascism to have won out, as of yet, in the United States. However, it's becoming increasingly mainstream and amassing broader support, as well as power.

Constitutional Sheriffs

One of the groups I got to learn about in my internship was the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA), which has been more and more influential in American politics over the past few election cycles. You may have heard of its founder, Richard Mack, a former sheriff who also sits on the board of directors of a white nationalist militia called the Oath Keepers. He draws from the white supremacist Posse comitatus' rhetoric for his own organization:

The far-right pro-paramilitary group promotes the long-discredited idea derived from the violently racist and antisemitic Posse Comitatus that sheriffs can usurp the judicial branch's role in interpreting the Constitution and unilaterally override federal, state, and local laws. ("IREHR's Letter to Idaho Sheriffs and Governor.")

CSPOA recruits sheriffs and encourages them to take advantage of what CSPOA asserts to be their constitutional rights. One of their prominent trainers, KrisAnne Hall, teaches that the 14th, 15th, and 19th Amendments are unconstitutional and should not be followed. She, like the leadership of CSPOA, ascribes to the Christian Patriotism ideology of the Posse Comitatus. They also put a strong focus on protecting the right to bear arms. They feel that inevitably, gun control will completely erase the 2nd Amendment, and guns will be removed from American households by force. They believe that sheriffs must stand up for the 2nd Amendment by refusing the order to carry out this disarming. That idea rang a bell - I'd heard right-wing criticism of sheriffs for failing to exercise their constitutional authority before, especially with regards to gun ownership.

Other far-right ends are facilitated by the Constitutional Sheriffs. CSPOA also encouraged sheriffs to treat enforcement of public health regulations as though it was criminal during the COVID-19 lockdowns and the mask mandates. IREHR identified individual CSPOA members' actions in their letter to Idaho sheriffs. Sheriff Dar Leaf, who was on the CSPOA Advisory Board, attempted to organize seizure of Dominion voting machines as a part of #stopthesteal. #Stopthesteal was a right-wing campaign to rectify the allegedly fraudulent results of the 2020 election in which Joe Biden was elected and Donald Trump lost. Former sheriff Joe Arpaio won a CSPOA award in 2012 and was criminally investigated for stealing money from undocumented people ("IREHR's Letter to Idaho Sheriffs and Governor"). In the past, Texas law enforcement officers were offered official continued training credits for CSPOA events. IREHR

put a stop to this through spreading the news about the issue until Texas ceased the partnership on the grounds of being unable to offer credit for political content, (Tanner, Aug. 30 2024.)

Fortunately, the Constitutional Sheriffs aren't entirely what they advertise themselves to be. According to Jessica Pishko, "Political loudmouths and wanna-be politicians use the CSPOA to reach a core audience of people – highly motivated individuals willing to pay \$49 and who already buy into a variety of conspiracy theories. Many of them are members of other far-right groups[...] They are the '3,000 members' CSPOA claims[...] and] the sheriffs who attend the CSPOA events do not have a great deal of influence," ("These Are Not the Sheriffs You're Looking For.") That doesn't mean that the group should be disregarded - quite the contrary. It's worth focusing on them because, while they don't yet have much power, they're trying to build their support. Many people don't yet have preconceived notions of who the Constitutional Sheriffs are or what they're trying to do. In order to keep them from writing their own story in their favor, we have to spread awareness of what's actually going on. These ideas are harmful and should not be mainstream.

Countering Far-Right Campaigns

To combat CSPOA, IREHR lets sheriff's departments know that they're being watched. They sent out [this letter](#) to Idaho sheriffs and the governor. It detailed what CSPOA is, what its members are known to have done, and what their white supremacist ties are. They plan to send out similar communications for other states. In 2023, they sabotaged a CSPOA event in Illinois titled "The County Sheriff, America's Last Hope" by sending out these emails ahead of time, and in the end, "barely anyone attended," ("The CSPOA Event that Wasn't"). I compiled the contact information for sheriffs in a number of states so that they could be alerted when events are planned in their state. [This letter](#) was sent to sheriffs in Florida using the information I put

together. I was surprised by how variable the number of sheriffs in each state is - Nevada has fifteen sheriffs and Texas has 254. Since Texas has a history of links with CSPOA, it was important to list all of them in the database.

Tracking the Political Mainstream

In addition to my work on CSPOA, I looked at videos of legislators with known ties to far-right groups. The list of such legislators is dishearteningly long, but it isn't surprising that so many American politicians are involved with these groups - they've become relatively mainstream. I compiled these videos in a spreadsheet, listing which legislator was speaking, what focus topic they were covering, and the video title and link. The topics we focused on were globalism and conspiracism, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, anti-abortion rhetoric, COVID denial/opposition of restrictions, immigration, critical race theory, January 6th, election fraud, and Project 2025. Conveniently (but unpleasantly), many legislators would address multiple of the selected topics in the same video.

I began by looking at videos these legislators had published on their personal and professional Facebook pages. However, as I had created another account to do so, I had to verify my identity by sending a picture. Meta staff apparently decided that I was not real and deactivated my account, so I resorted to YouTube. Ultimately, I found that it was much easier to collect these videos on YouTube and accumulated a list of quite a few. I skimmed all the videos I could find concerning each legislator on the list, and I successfully made it through 20 of them, compiling a list of 42 videos. I also included two channels that featured videos of legislators speaking on the listed issues. One of these was Idaho Freedom TV.

Idaho Freedom TV is run by the Idaho Freedom Foundation, which aims to “defeat Marxism and socialism by building a culture of liberty around America's founding principles”

according to their YouTube bio (“Idaho Freedom TV”). Idaho Freedom TV features far-right legislators like Glenneda Zuiderveld and Heather Scott. These legislators have connections to Ammon Bundy, the “far-right antigovernment crusader”: former gubernatorial candidate, militia member, and founder of the anti-mask People’s Rights Network, (“Ammon Bundy, Wanted for Arrest in Idaho, Reportedly in Utah.”) The Freedom Network itself is allied with Ammon Bundy and maintains a relationship with him. Far-right figures with histories of violence, such as Bundy, are concerningly prevalent in American politics.

Hate?

When I spoke with Chuck Tanner, he said IREHR “doesn’t need to use the term hate.” According to him, focusing on hate misses the root of the problem. Hate is an emotion, while the issue with these groups is their ideologies. Emotions are involved in human rights violations, as they are with all human endeavors, but the correlated hate and anger are not the root of the issue. Rather, it is that they hold beliefs that lead them to infringe upon or attempt to infringe upon the rights of others. Chuck explained that “far-right is a better term to characterize these groups because of their aim to remake institutions and broad policies that reinforce inequality, [the term] far right gets to [the core of that commonality] quicker than a term like hate does,” (Tanner, July 10 2024). This is at odds with the idea of hate studies, which identifies hate as the motivator it wishes to focus on, (Stern, 2004). This also differentiates IREHR’s area of study from that of the Southern Poverty Law Center, for example, which does focus on hate and hate groups. IREHR doesn’t believe that these groups are *not* hateful, rather, that the hate is incidental and the ideology is what they need to look at.

Human Rights and Civil Rights

Who decides which rights are inalienable? In order to fight for dignity and equity for all people, we have to establish what that would be. IREHR primarily supports civil rights, which protect people's ability to participate equally in civil and political life without discrimination. Chuck explained that these rights "are established in societies to protect individuals', and by extension, groups of people who have been historically excluded's, right to participate fully in that society," (Tanner, Aug. 22 2024.) Many of these rights are now enshrined in American law thanks to the Civil Rights Movement. However, IREHR doesn't stop at only what is currently backed by bills and legal decisions, they believe in continually pushing the envelope and fighting for more protections. They draw from the causes that civil rights leaders supported after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed. For example, the Poor People's Campaign supported housing justice and labor struggles. Addressing the material concerns that people face daily due to economic oppression is one of the next steps IREHR sees in the path towards an egalitarian world.

What is to Be Done?

Historically, mass base social movements with a variety of tactics have accomplished what others claimed would be impossible. During the fight against Jim Crow, wide-ranging groups of people with equally diverse strategies pushed for change. People have to mobilize and express that the current state of things is unacceptable. Experiencing the rise of fascism in the United States can be disempowering. Don't just leave it up to NGOS and 501(c)3s to change the situation, though. "Look at what they're doing in your community, in every state and every city and every community in one way or another. Look at where you're seeing them emerge and try to affect institutions, at school boards, city council meetings, cultural events in town, and make sure there's a voice accurately describing them and the threat they pose, and trying to bring

people together to ensure that [these groups] don't get to set the standards for our communities," (Tanner, July 10 2024.) Only a strong opposition to fascism in every area of society can prevent it from taking over the narrative. Even seemingly minor concessions of power cannot be allowed to occur. An example that Chuck provided of a community uniting against fascism was the furry community, whom he believes quickly closed ranks and prevented Nazi ideology from becoming dominant there. They made public statements opposing Nazism and people with known ties to Nazis and white supremacists were asked to leave events, (Tanner, 30 Aug. 2024). Intolerance cannot be tolerated, as demonstrated by their success in driving far-right elements out of the mainstream.

Conclusion

Spending so much time this summer consuming far-right media output, reading about far-right groups, and talking to Chuck and Devin has been a strange experience. Being that I normally think and talk about human rights issues often, it wasn't entirely unfamiliar, but it was an unpleasant reminder of how broad this issue is in the United States. It's difficult to maintain hope in these conditions - when so many politicians and sheriffs publicly espouse white supremacist beliefs and have been granted state power with which to act on them. That's part of why this paper focuses on actionable steps people can take to change this situation.

It would be of interest to pursue research with grassroots activists to see how they could be better supported by organizations like IREHR, as well as human rights organizations more broadly. This paper is limited to the perspective of the organization itself. The success of IREHR's campaign against CSPOA is yet to be seen, and the publications that will utilize the work I've done over the course of this internship will be completed in the coming weeks.

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