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PIONEER PRESS

Jewish scholar slides hate groups under a microscope

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Newhouse News Service

NONFICTION

Under a microscope, hatred might look like a hardy organism with a knack for adapting to environmental changes.

In "The Terrorist Next Door," activist Daniel Levitas puts hate movements under the microscope. He shows how the ideologies that have inspired the likes of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh date back more than a century and how the groups that hold them are remarkably nimble in bending social and political events to suit their own purposes.

Levitas, who is Jewish but describes himself as secular in his life and religious beliefs, is wary of recent alliances between the Jewish community and certain Christian evangelical groups that support Israel but also embrace anti-Semitic views.

On the other hand, he adds, "It used to be one of the cardinal rules within the Jewish community to build coalitions with African-Americans and other minorities. ... I think the Jewish community has turned inward and turned away from those external pursuits." He believes that thoughtfully made coalitions remain essential.

Raised in the melting pot of Manhattan, Levitas graduated from the University of Michigan in 1982, then went to work for PrairieFire, a nonprofit agency that taught cash-strapped farmers how to fight foreclosure and lobby for farm-friendly public policy. As he traveled the Midwest, Levitas saw how a minority of virulent white supremacy groups were making emotional inroads with a beleaguered middle America.

It was common enough to hear farmer friends utter comments about "the international Jewish banking conspiracy." He'd see them reading the Spotlight, a radical-right newsletter. If he mentioned that he was Jewish, the speaker might backpedal, telling him that obviously he was a "good"

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Jew.

These encounters were curiously devoid of vitriol, he says. "It was kind of casual, a received wisdom." Behind these opinions were people such as Bill Gale, a Californian who founded a radical-right movement called the Posse Comitatus in the 1970s. He was part of another group, the Christian Patriots, in the '80s and helped inspire the "citizens militias" that appeared in the 1990s.

The book chronicles how, during the farm crisis, hate groups pretended to help farmers with business advice while spreading anti-Jewish sentiment, as well as loathing of blacks, communists, the federal government and banks.

Throughout the '80s, Prairie-Fire worked both to help the farmers and to inoculate them against the purveyors of hate, as well as the business scams these groups sometimes used.

"In 1983, we began our counter-effort," Levitas says. "By 1986, the radical right was wholly on the defensive." Since then, he has delved full time into the study of these groups and has become an expert witness on subjects including the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations and the tax-protest movement.

His assessment of today's climate is that "things are better than they were in the '80s because the organized far right is really on the defensive. There was a concerted law enforcement crackdown after Oklahoma City, and the events of Sept. 11 have put a bitter taste in the mouths of most Americans for doing violence against members of their own community.

"On the other hand," he adds, "the people who remain in the movement are more dangerous than they were 20 years ago. They're more hard-core, more committed to violence, more sophisticated in their commitment. I'd also say that while the groups themselves may be having difficulty, the ideas and ideologies that help drive them are in many ways thriving."

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