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Without Prejudice:
What Sovereign Citizens Believe

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Abstract

When surveyed, United States law enforcement consistently ranks sovereign citizens as the top domestic extremist threat, even greater than that presented by homegrown jihadists.[1] Despite the considerable size of the movement, estimated to include hundreds of thousands of adherents, few Americans know what sovereigns believe and how those beliefs inform their actions.[2]

So-called sovereign citizens believe in an alternate history of the U.S., replacing reality with a vast conspiracy governed by complex, arcane rules. They believe that if someone understands and properly invokes those rules, that person is exempt from many laws, including the obligation to pay taxes, and that he or she can be empowered to seize private property, enforce legal actions against individuals, and claim money from the government. When faced with arrest for illegal actions that they believe are legal, sovereign citizens can become violent.

What exactly do sovereigns believe? The answer is complicated. There are many variations on sovereign ideology, and while some are more common than others, any two sovereign citizens might offer different explanations. And the explanations that are offered may seem incoherent to people who are not immersed in sovereign subculture. Although the movement itself is relatively young, first meaningfully coalescing in the 1990s and growing rapidly since, it is based on beliefs that go back decades.

In order to bring light to this topic, this paper will:

1) Outline the basic concepts to which at least a plurality of sovereigns subscribe.

2) Provide information on the origins of the most significant sovereign ideas.

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[1] Charles E. Loeser, "From Paper Terrorists to Cop Killers: The Sovereign Citizen Threat," *North Carolina Law Review* 93, (2015): 1106.
[2] Michelle Theret, "Sovereign Citizens: A Homegrown Terrorist Threat and Its Negative Impact on South Carolina," *South Carolina Law Review* 63, no. 4 (2011): 853.

A Sovereign History of the United States

The most fundamental tenet of the sovereign movement is an alternative version of American history that roughly accords with the outline given below, along with a set of alternative laws that extend from that history.

Not all sovereigns understand, subscribe to, or care about every one of these points, but this broad narrative is fairly common within the movement. This understanding of history undergirds sovereign ideological beliefs about legal powers and privileges, even if those invoking those powers and privileges are unfamiliar with their derivation.

To support their beliefs, sovereign citizens frequently cite real laws, but their understanding of these laws in context is incorrect, and attempts to take action in accordance with the beliefs outlined here are almost always illegal, as hundreds of courts have ruled over the course of many years.

In most cases, sovereigns use multiple synonyms for the terms given here. Sovereigns also believe capitalization and punctuation are extremely important in written law, and they may take issue with the capitalization or punctuation used here. Concepts outlined below are presented in an order intended to reflect cause and effect, with each building upon the previous.

There are no definitive sovereign texts. Rather, adherents draw on a variety of published sources, and increasingly on books, videos, and manifestos distributed over the Internet. Thousands of pages of content online describe different variations on the sovereign theme. Adherents usually pick and choose from these elements to create their own individualized beliefs that loosely conform to this general template. Individual sovereign "gurus," who sometimes present themselves as attorneys or judges, also promote specific versions of the sovereign worldview.

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Fourteenth Amendment

While most sovereigns have erroneous beliefs about the Founding Fathers and the early history of the United States, the most useful starting point for understanding the movement's alternate history is the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868.

The Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed citizenship to slaves freed after the Civil War, states that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside."

Most sovereign citizens believe this amendment created a form of second-class citizenship, less empowered and more subject to the federal government, which is seen as distinct from the state-centered form of citizenship articulated in the Constitution. "Fourteenth Amendment citizens" are seen by sovereigns as inferior, limited, or in more extreme views, as slaves. However, sovereigns believe they can opt out of Fourteenth Amendment citizenship by understanding certain legal provisions and reclaiming their constitutional citizenship.

The Fourteenth Amendment also stipulates that the validity of "public debt" of the U.S. government cannot be questioned. In the eyes of some sovereigns, this provision opened the door to a financial conspiracy starting with the implementation of a commercial legal system

superseding the previous constitutional system.

Common Law

Sovereigns believe that soon after, and in conjunction with, the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, the U.S. ceased to be a constitutionally governed republic that reflected the will of the people. Referred to as the *de jure*, or legally rightful, government, this original republic was governed under "common law" or "constitutional law."

In the sovereign worldview, "common law" refers to a legal structure that is validated by the Constitution and/or biblical or divine mandate. To sovereigns, common law supersedes the illegitimate laws currently effective in the United States. Beyond this key quality of legal primacy, the exact meaning, origin, and provisions of common law vary considerably depending upon the individual beliefs of sovereigns.[3]

Shortly after the unanimous ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1870, sovereigns believe, the government was quietly overthrown by corrupt bankers who transformed the government into a corporation and subjected the American people to an entirely new set of commercial laws. In the sovereign narrative, this new set of commercial laws usurped the Constitution and overturned its protections for citizens. This corporation is often referred to as the *de facto* government and is seen as illegitimate.

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The vehicle for this change was an 1871 law, which many sovereigns believe created a "United States corporation" to govern the District of Columbia under commercial code, rather than common law. Subsequently, the United States Code—essentially laws compiled to this point—extended this form of corporate rule to the entire country, thanks to a provision in Title 28, § 3002 (15) (A) (B) (C) that includes the phrase "'United States' means a Federal corporation."

Google searches for this statute overwhelmingly link to sovereign citizen resources, far more so than actual historical commentary on the law or the context of the section, which refers to a limited use of the term within a specific chapter of the U.S. Code.

Commercial Law

Most sovereigns make a distinction between "common law citizens" governed under the original Constitution and "Fourteenth Amendment citizens" governed under the U.S. Code, or commercial law, and thus subject to the rules of the United States corporation. Some sovereigns refer to this supposed commercial law as admiralty law, or the Law of the Sea, claiming this illegitimate law is based on principals of international commerce.

Sovereigns consider themselves common law citizens and thus exempt from many federal laws and other modern laws that are derivative of federal court rulings or otherwise corrupted by the illegitimate commercial law. Sovereigns believe specific signals that commercial law is in effect

[3] Mark Pitcavage, "Common Law and Uncommon Courts: An Overview of the Common Law Court Movement," Anti-Defamation League, July 25, 1997.

can be found in a courtroom, such as the style and type of flag displayed, and the use of specific language or capitalization practices in court filings.

Based on these, and other pseudo-legal citations, many sovereigns hold that the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC)—published in 1952 to provide a consistent framework for business transactions across state lines—is a codification of the illegitimate commercial law. However, sovereigns believe the UCC contains loopholes they can cite in legal filings or confrontations with law enforcement in order to invoke the special privileges and powers of common law citizens.

Fictitious Person

Because the UCC provides an interstate standard for things such as driver's licenses, property ownership, and bank accounts, many sovereigns believe that these documents (and associated laws and financial obligations) do not apply to them, but instead to a fictitious person created by the illegitimate law, sometimes referred to as a "straw man." Some believe a fictitious person is denoted in legal documents by listing his or her name in all capital letters. The fictitious person is a legal entity akin to a company with the same name as the citizen, sovereigns believe.

Some sovereigns create their own driver's licenses and license plates because they believe the state-issued documents are inauthentic, as they refer to the fictitious person, and that using or signing these documents exposes them to vulnerabilities under the illegitimate and tyrannical commercial laws, including debt collection, arrest, and prosecution.

The correct use of certain phrases or legal citations can reduce or eliminate these vulnerabilities, however. For instance, some believe that documents used by the illegitimate system, such as contracts or court documents, can be signed safely if the citizen appends the phrase "Without Prejudice UCC 1-308" to the signature, which they believe preserves the sovereign citizen's common law rights and privileges.

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Declaration of Sovereignty

To fully claim immunity from the illegitimate laws related to the U.S. Code and UCC, many sovereigns believe they must take certain legal steps and invoke specific language and principles.

This frequently includes writing and filing a florid "declaration of sovereignty" that renounces the fictitious person and associated entities, and claiming the rights and privileges of a common law citizen. The precise language varies.

Declarations of sovereignty can often be very complex and appear incoherent to someone who is not versed in the movement's particular rules and pseudo-legal principles. This complexity has created space for opportunistic groups and individuals to sell legal filing "kits" and guidelines to would-be sovereigns, often for hundreds of dollars or more.

Many adherents are drawn to the sovereign citizen movement after experiencing financial stress, and they can be vulnerable to scammers who charge money for document filing kits or seminars

that teach "secret knowledge" regarding how to discharge tax obligations or bank debt, or claim significant sums money from the government.

For example, some sovereigns believe they are not obligated to pay a debt addressed to the fictitious person, in that the proper sovereign court filings can discharge that debt. Other filings, illegally presented as liens, may attempt to collect damages from government officials for violations of a sovereign citizen's common law rights. Some sovereigns believe they can seize foreclosed homes and other real estate using "quit-claim deeds." Some even believe they can arrest people who they think have violated the Constitution or common law. None of these techniques work, and all of them are illegal.

The failure of a government official to comply with the sovereign's imagined rights and privileges is seen as a grave crime and even an "act of war." Sovereigns may become violent when they perceive they are being denied the rights and privileges to which they feel entitled.

Redemption

Some sovereigns go even further, believing that the government secretly holds funds to which the citizen is entitled. Under this theory, known as "Redemption," certain legal filings can be used to access these funds by filing a pseudo-legal document meant to serve as a repayment of debt.

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The United States corporation is bankrupt, some sovereigns believe. The cause of this bankruptcy is often understood as related to the U.S. government's decision to abandon the gold standard in 1933. Because of this, some believe, the United States corporation had to incur foreign debt, using its citizens as collateral.

Redemption theory usually holds that a birth certificate, issued under corporate law, creates a fictitious person, or "straw man," with the same name as a person. Each person born in the United States and issued a birth certificate is used as collateral for the corporate government's debt. A loan is taken out in the name of the fictitious person, they believe, and the proceeds are deposited into a secret government account, sometimes called a Treasury Direct Account, associated with the fictitious person's name. Variations on this theme hold that the issuance of a social security number performs the same function, with some believing that a social security number is equivalent to the "Mark of the Beast" described in the Book of Revelations.

Sovereigns who subscribe to redemption theory generally believe they can access these funds through a series of arcane legal filings. Sovereign "gurus" or "experts" are particularly active in selling fraudulent document-filing kits or teaching seminars on redemption theory, in keeping with its easy-money allure.

In addition to the money wasted on such fraudulent instructions, sovereign citizens may expose themselves to additional legal and financial penalties when they attempt to use the fictitious person's funds—for instance, by presenting a legal filing authorizing a creditor to recover a debt from the Treasury Direct Account in lieu of payment.

The Secret Origins of Sovereignty

Sovereign citizen ideology is a syncretic melding of conspiracy theories and legal theories from a wide variety of sources. In order to better understand the many strains of thought that contribute to the current movement, it is useful to examine where some of the specific concepts originated.

The pursuit of the movement's origins is, in many ways, a trip down the rabbit hole. The discovery of any single precedent for sovereign beliefs often leads to still older movements, ideas, and webs of conspiracy theory, many of which pre-date the Internet and currently exist as an incomplete records contained in ephemeral small-press publications and pamphlets. Therefore, this review is not intended to be a definitive history of the development of sovereign citizen concepts, but rather to highlight elements of that history.

Fourteenth Amendment

The Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of citizenship to freed slaves and role in remedying several other outstanding Civil War issues ensured that it would be a magnet for criticism by white nationalists. Among other things, the Fourteenth Amendment overruled previous legal precedents that barred people of color from claiming citizenship. It was controversial from the beginning due to both its content and the process by which it was adopted—Southern states were required to ratify the Amendment before rejoining the Union, forming the basis of white nationalists' procedural objection to its adoption.

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One provision in the Fourteenth Amendment was the subject of a number of court cases in the late 1800s, in some ways foreshadowing the sovereign movement's language concerning the legitimacy of the post-war U.S. government. In May 1869, *The Nation* reported on a problem that stemmed from the Fourteenth Amendment's third section, which stipulated that people who had engaged in insurrection or rebellion were disqualified from holding public office.

In Virginia, the report stated, there were several counties in which no qualified judges could be found. As a result, "delighted" criminals "sentenced by disenfranchised judges" made court filings that required them to be taken before a judge, and then argued that they had to be released when no qualified judge could be produced. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court wrote an opinion upholding the prisoners' sentences, arguing that the Fourteenth Amendment was not intended to be "destructive of social order" and that "there could be *de facto* judges in the interest of society as well as a *de facto* government."[4]

Opponents of the civil rights movement, such as the John Birch Society, attacked the legitimacy of the Fourteenth Amendment in the course of opposing desegregation during the 1950s and 1960s.[5] By the 1980s, some white nationalist precursors to the sovereign citizen movement adopted the formal argument that citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment was inferior to citizenship as previously defined, specifically white citizenship under the original Constitution. William Potter Gale, a former John Birch Society member, perpetuated the attack on the

[4] *The Nation* 8, no. 204, May 27, 1869.
[5] *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1961* (Belmont, MA: John Birch Society, 1962); *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1962* (Belmont, MA: John Birch Society, 1963).

legitimacy of the Fourteenth Amendment, and later spearheaded the theory of "common law" that is central to the sovereign movement.[6]

Despite the fact that the roots of this concept lie in white supremacy, some black sovereign citizens have also adopted the tactic of rejecting Fourteenth Amendment citizenship, sometimes to the consternation of other black nationalists, who recognize the Amendment's real historical importance. Self-styled Moorish sovereigns may instead claim birthright citizenship in a supposed North American black nation that predates the United States, or in an organization claiming to continue that nation.

Common Law

William Potter Gale was an Army veteran who split from the John Birch Society to form a series of paramilitary organizations with an increasingly white supremacist bent. The final iteration of his vision was a 1971 Christian Identity group known as Posse Comitatus, a legal term meaning "power of the county" that Gale interpreted as referring to a posse of volunteers that could be called up to carry out various tasks.[7]

In the view of Posse Comitatus, "the County Sheriff is the only legal law enforcement officer in these United States." Gale believed that county sheriffs had an obligation to protect citizens from illegal acts by the federal government, going so far as sanctioning the hanging of federal officials whose actions did not conform to his understanding of what was legally correct.[8]

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A key element of Posse Comitatus' intricate ideology argued that the Constitution represented Christian law, including a doctrine alternatively called Natural Law, Common Law, and Christian Common Law. While details were infrequently enumerated in Posse writings, common law was described as being based on biblical precepts. Violations of common law could be rightfully opposed by force. Posse Comitatus also employed "paper terrorism" similar to that practiced by sovereign citizens, filing bogus liens against perceived enemies.[9]

Financial Conspiracy Theories

Posse Comitatus drew some of its ideology from a boutique industry of financial conspiracy theories that sprang up during the early 20th century in response to the growing complexity of the American economy and banking system. In particular, the creation and function of the Federal Reserve has fueled an immense reservoir of conspiracy theories regarding public debts, the value of currency, and the "international bankers" who profit from America's supposed economic misfortunes. The U.S. abandonment of the gold standard has also contributed significantly to

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[6] William P. Gale, *The Faith of Our Fathers* (Mariposa, CA: Ministry of Christ Church, 1963), Chapter 5.
[7] Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2009), pp. 72-73.
[8] William P. Gale, "Guide for Christian Posse Comitatus," *Identity* 6, no. 3, circa 1972; "United States Christian Posse Association," *Identity* 6, no. 4, circa 1972.
[9] Gale, "Guide for Christian Posse Comitatus"; "Hate Group Expert Daniel Levitas Discusses Posse Comitatus, Christian Identity Movement and More," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, June 15, 1998.

these conspiracy theories, as many people within the sovereign movement believe U.S. currency is without real value if it is not backed by gold.

The American people have assumed the burden of hundreds of billions of dollars of debt simply because we let a handful of enemy aliens take over our monetary system. The three most important architects of our present monetary system are almost completely unknown to the average American citizen, who pays a heavy annual rate of taxation because of their machinations.

They are Paul Warburg, the German Jew who wrote the Federal Reserve Act, Emmanuel Goldenweiser, the Russian Jew who supervised the details of Federal Reserve Board operations through its first thiry years, and Harry Dexter White, son of Lithuanian Jews, who set up the International Monetary Fund. Paul Warburg was one of the financiers of the Communist revolution in Russia, and Harry Dexter White was a key man in the Communist conspiracy here in America.

Figure 1: Excerpt from The Federal Reserve Conspiracy *by Eustace Mullins*

"Only falsehoods and false principles need be discussed in mysterious terms," wrote Gertrude Coogan, author of the 1935 tract *Money Creators*, cited by Posse as a guide to American economic history. "Any citizen of ordinary mentality can readily understand the money system of this country."[10] This concept—that something must be simple in order to be true—paradoxically serves to undermine the reality of history and modern economics, even as its proponents generate conspiracy theories that are often themselves breathtakingly complex.

Among other things, Coogan claimed the Civil War was not about slavery but instead was the result of a conspiracy by "certain bankers" and "internationalists" to weaken America for future economic exploitation. Coogan's book was coy about the identity of the "international money masters and their domestic pawns" who were responsible for subverting the Constitution and destroying capitalism, but other authors cited by Posse did not bother to mask their anti-Semitism. Eustace Mullins, author of the Posse-recommended *The Federal Reserve Conspiracy,* dutifully enumerated the biographies of the "enemy aliens" who had seized control of the American banking system with information cited to the "Who's Who in American Jewry."[11]

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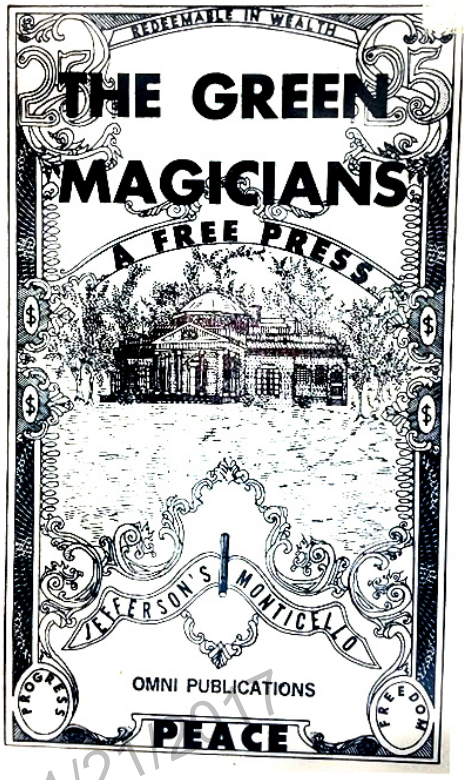
Coogan, Mullins, Wickliffe Vennard, and other favored authors cited by Posse Comitatus were all published or republished by a company known as Omni Publications, which today continues to distribute their works under the name Omni Christian Book Club. Omni represents one of the most significant propagators of these conspiracy theories. Over the course of decades, Omni has propagated a vast array of material related to "international banking conspiracy," some of it carefully generic, others overtly anti-Semitic. (The company also distributed the infamous anti-Semitic hoax, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.)

The short version of these various theories is that "international bankers," usually meaning Jews, rendered U.S. currency worthless in 1913 with the creation of the Federal Reserve. These theories generally hold that the international banking conspiracy was intended to subject Americans to "economic slavery." A 1968 Omni Publications pamphlet, *The Green Magicians*, blamed World War II on an "internationalist" effort to crush Hitler's superior financial system and includes an anti-Semitic quote falsely attributed to Ben Franklin. The "bankers" were in turn tied to the spread of Communism, a common theme in such publications from the 1950s onward.

[10] Gertrude Coogan, *Money Creators*, (1935).
[11] Eustace Mullins, *The Federal Reserve Conspiracy* (Union, NJ: Christian Educational Association, 1954).



Many of these concepts have filtered into the sovereign citizen movement, but usually in a much-diluted form. While white supremacy and anti-Semitism can certainly be found among sovereign citizens, sovereign texts tend to strip out many details, including direct references to Jewish conspiracies, presenting a greatly simplified version of events with vague references to "bankers" as the source of the conspiracy. Key elements that have been carried into the modern movement, at something of a distance from their original context, include the sinister nature of the Federal Reserve, a host of incorrect inferences related to the effect of America's public debt, and the illusory nature of credit and the U.S. currency, with the accompanying implications for money-making procedures and schemes.

Tax Protesters

Posse Comitatus also took some of its inspiration from the tax protest movement, which blossomed in the 1950s amid efforts to repeal the income tax. A key figure in the tax protest movement was a Kansas businessman named Arthur Porth, cited in Posse's newsletter as a "good citizen [who] believed in the Constitution and attempted to defend it."[12]

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Porth sued the government to recover $135 in income taxes that he paid in 1951. He argued that the Sixteenth Amendment, which authorized the federal income tax, was "illegal and unconstitutional." Porth claimed in a filing that he had been "placed in a position of involuntary servitude by operation of the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution."[13] Porth attempted to justify his claim with a dizzying array of sovereign-like arguments, none of which were found to have merit. For instance, in a subsequent tax year, he submitted a blank tax return, citing the Fifth Amendment's protection against being forced to make self-incriminating statements.[14] The argument was not enough to keep Porth out of prison, but some tax protester concepts spread through Posse circles widely enough that the group was sometimes inaccurately characterized as a tax protester group itself.[15]

Another infamous tax protestor, Gordon Kahl, spent time as a member of Posse Comitatus before killing two federal marshals and being killed himself in a shootout with the FBI. Virulently anti-Semitic, Kahl believed his tax dollars were "tithes to the synagogue of Satan," fusing a number of previously discussed themes into a manifesto that made reference to restoring "common law"

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[12] *Identity* 5, no. 5 (circa 1971).
[13] Porth v. Broderick, 214 F.2d 925 (10th Cir. 1954).
[14] "Extremism in America: Tax Protest Movement," Anti-Defamation League.
[15] Ronald Smothers, "Vigilantism Stressed by Group Linked to Suspect." *The New York Times*, February 16, 1983. "In the last few years posse members have often been viewed as adamant and principled Federal income tax resisters and opponents of state licensing authority and land use laws."

from the "statutory law" that had replaced the original Constitution as the result of the actions of "Jewish Communist(s)."[16]

Redemption Scam

Redemption theory also originated in Posse Comitatus circles. Roger Elvick, an associate of Gale's, took advantage of the concept of currency devaluation, creating his own financial instruments which he claimed could be used to pay off debts.[17] He ended up in prison for currency fraud during the 1990s. When he was released, he continued to push redemption theory in paid seminars, and ended up in prison again in the 2000s.[18] The redemption movement began in the 1980s and has morphed significantly since then, with a number of variations springing up. In recent years, redemption theory has become almost indistinguishable from the sovereign citizen movement. However, while most proponents of redemption are sovereign citizens, not all sovereigns subscribe to redemption.

Syncretic Influence

As the sovereign movement integrated many different, but ideologically similar, strains of thought into a chimeric, unified theory of how the world works, it has also embedded its concepts and language in a wide variety of domestic fringe and extremist movements. Today, the language and some concepts of sovereignty, particularly the idea of common law, have spread to movements that are not primarily sovereign in orientation, including the Patriot movement, white and black nationalism, and anarchism.

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This influence was particularly visible during the Malheur Wildlife Refuge standoff in early 2016. The seizure of the refuge by Ammon Bundy and prominent Patriot movement members was initially framed as a protest over federal land use (an issue that was also prominent within the Posse Comitatus movement[19]), but the occupiers of the refuge represented a wide and often bewildering range of views.[20] As the siege dragged on, a number of sovereign-influenced elements became more prominent, as so-called "constitutional judges" flocked to the scene, while Ammon Bundy's father, Cliven, issued sovereign proclamations and pseudo-legal statements from his ranch in Nevada.[21]

Sovereign concepts have also crept into popular culture. For instance, in 2012, a claim of copyright regarding content posted to Facebook went viral and was widely reposted by users.

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[16] Statement of Gordon Kahl, circa 1983.
[17] Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 262-263.
[18] "His 'Straw Man' Free, A Scammer Finds The Rest Of Him Isn't," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, July 27, 2005.
[19] "Foreclosures Lead to Violence: The Posse Comitatus," Nebraska Studies teaching resource.
[20] J.M. Berger, "What do the Oregon Ranchers Really Believe?" *Politico*, January 10, 2016.
[21] Alan Pyke, "The Crackpot Alternative Legal System that Threatens to Escalate the Oregon Standoff," *ThinkProgress*, January 15, 2016; Lauren Fox, "Has The Sovereign Citizen Movement Hijacked The Oregon Standoff?" *Talking Points Memo*. January 15, 2016; Betsy Hammond, "Self-Appointed 'Judge' arrives in Burns to Ask Local Residents to Charge Government Officials with Crimes," *The Oregonian*, January 12, 2016; Cliven Bundy, "Notice: Redress of Grievance," December 11, 2015.

The posting resembled a sovereign court filing and included references to the UCC and other sovereign and sovereign-like language. The rumor-debunking website Snopes described the notice as "an expression of the mistaken belief the use of some simple legal talisman […] will immunize one from some undesirable legal consequence," linking to related sovereign conspiracy theories.[22]

Additionally, the sovereign movement itself has undergone near constant mutation, particularly as it has expanded overseas—gaining adherents in Canada, the U.K., Germany, South Africa, and Australia[23]—despite its peculiarly American understanding of history and law.[24] For some foreign adherents, sovereignty simply means the right to make up your own laws, however organizations and institutions that generally follow the same template as the American movement (for instance, the devaluation of currency) have arisen. The movement has also specifically targeted indigenous Australians.[25]

Conclusions

The sovereign citizen movement is difficult to pin down for a number of reasons. Its integration of diverse influences from a variety of sources, including some that are decades old, results in a confusing and sometimes incoherent narrative of U.S. history. The movement is also constantly mutating and, as sovereign ideas extend into other fringe and extremist circles, it can be difficult to evaluate who is a sovereign citizen and who is not, and how that self-identification may inform their actions.

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While there are some relatively clear concepts that frame the movement and inform its principles, as outlined in this paper, court filings and writings by practicing sovereign citizens suggest that few understand the history of the movement or all of its precepts. For many sovereigns, the appeal of financial relief through the invocation of special words and phrases is enough to fuel their behavior, both in terms of "paper terrorism" and their growing propensity for violence when their expectations of their rights and privileges are not met.[26]

Nevertheless, there is utility in understanding what a typical sovereign believes and where those beliefs come from. In most cases, the ideas behind the movement traveled from one group to another via specific individuals, and understanding the transmission of these concepts can help us better anticipate how the movement will evolve.

While it is tempting to dismiss sovereign ideas as gibberish or nonsense, its framework is based on a legacy of specific theories regarding the economy and the role of race in America and abroad, including both white supremacy generally and anti-Semitism in particular. While modern sovereigns may not fully understand that legacy—for example, African-Americans seen

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[22] David Mikkelson, "Fact Check: Facebook Privacy Notice," Snopes.com, September 28, 2015.
[23] Megan Drapalskithe, "Growing Terror Threat of the 'Sovereign Citizen'," *The Australian*, December 1, 2015; James Thomas and Jeanavive McGregor, "Sovereign Citizens: Terrorism Assessment Warns of Rising Threat from Anti-Government Extremists," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, November 30, 2015.
[24] Judy Thomas, "Violent Sovereign Citizen Plots Grow in U.S.—And now go Worldwide," *Kansas City Star*, December 26, 2015.
[25] Roman Glazov, "Freemen Movement targets Indigenous Australia," *The Saturday Paper*, September 6, 2014.
[26] Judy Thomas, "Violent Sovereign Citizen Plots Grow in U.S.," December 26, 2015; "Sovereign Citizens: A Growing Domestic Threat to Law Enforcement." FBI Counterterrorism Analysis Section (2011).

"renouncing their Fourteenth Amendment citizenship"—these influences nevertheless play a role in shaping the contours of the movement and the behaviors of adherents as the movement continues to move forward.

The complex history of the sovereign movement also suggests avenues for future research, particularly regarding the role of publishers and pamphleteers who for decades promoted the financial and racial theories undergirding the movement. A number of authors from the mid-20th century still influence the thinking of American conspiracy theorists. While they are largely forgotten by the mainstream, additional study of these authors and their political context may shed light on the trajectory of white nationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-government extremism in the United States.

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