ANTI-SEMITISM, EXTREMISM, AND THE FARM CRISIS

The economic crisis in rural America has grown more severe during the past eighteen months. During that time radical right extremist groups, many of them espousing virulent anti-semitism, have intensified their proselytizing activities among the farmers of the Middle West. The recent airing by ABC Television of a segment documenting the preaching of anti-semitism and extremist ideologies among dispossessed and struggling farmers has generated a great deal of anxiety among those searching for constructive solutions to the farm crisis. National attention has focussed once more on the populist radical right wing forces long exemplified by the white supremacist Liberty Lobby and notoriously well represented in recent headlines by the Aryan Nations, and the entire Identity movement. These purveyors of violence and hate are exploiting and perhaps exacerbating the farm crisis to gain adherents from the ranks of the desperate. They do this by advocating simplistic and fallacious solutions to complex economic problems and from anti-semitic rhetoric. The Identity movement holds that the Jews are not the Chosen People but the offspring of Satan and that the intended chosen people of the Bible are white Anglo-Saxon Protestant -- and that America is the Promised Land. All established Christian denominations, and in particular the Catholic Church, are perceived by these people at worst as their enemies and at best as mis-guided Christians.

Within the past ten days, Jonathan Levine, the AJC's Chicago regional director, Marcia Lazar, President of AJC's Chicago Chapter, and Rabbi James Rudin, Director of Inter-Religious Affairs, conducted intensive fact-finding trips in Kansas and Iowa. They met with farmers, public officials, law-enforcement officers, including the FBI, leaders of the Christian clergy, faculty members of an agricultural
college, newspaper editors, radio talk-show hosts, community organizers of progressive farm coalitions, bankers, and representatives of the Jewish communities in both states. All agreed that the radical right is making significant gains among some of the economically desperate farmers.

The current plight of the family farmer cannot be overstated. It is reliably estimated that thirty per cent of Iowa's 113,000 farmers will lose their land within the next twelve to eighteen months, while another thirty per cent will barely survive the deepening crisis. The destructive political and social consequences from such massive dislocation will be staggering.

Preying upon the farmers' woes with sophisticated and subtle rhetoric are such groups as the "PosseComitatus"*, the Populist Party, the Aryan Nations, the Order, the Covenant,Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA), the National Agricultural Press Association, and a number of other extremist organizations. Some are violent survivalist groups with stock-piled arms caches, which include large numbers of illegal automatic weapons; others seek to broaden their political base among the farmers. All of them offer simplistic and extremist solutions to complex economic problems, while challenging the legitimacy of American governmental institutions questioning basic democratic values. All these and like-minded groups are a distinct threat to traditional American democratic values.

*The Posse is the only white supremacist, paramilitary organization currently listed by the FBI as a "terrorist organization". However, the U. S. Marshall Service estimates that apart from the 23 members of the Order recently arrested there remain 500 hard core members and between 1500-2000 sympathizers.
These extremist organizations often harbor and are being aided by adherents of the blatantly anti-Semitic "Christian Identity" movement. Its leaders, most notably Richard Butler, preach that the "True Israel" is limited to white Anglo Saxon Christians and the "true promised lands" are the United States and Great Britain. The Spotlight, published by the long time anti-Semite, Willis Carto, has a national circulation of 166,000, a large proportion of which is in the Middle West. It is also clear that these radical right extremist groups communicate and perhaps conspire with one another.

Above and beyond the traditional anti-Semitic canard citing malevolent "Jewish bankers," these groups also preach suspicion and hatred of the Federal Government, especially the Federal Reserve System, the Farm Credit System. One bumper sticker seen near Cedar Rapids, Iowa and attributed to the Posse Comitatus read: KNOW YOUR LEADERS, THEY'RE YOUR ENEMY! Extremist leaders refer to the 1962 report of the Committee for Economic Development that urged "excess resources (people primarily) to move rapidly out of agriculture." Interestingly enough, much of the ire among the disgruntled farmers is NOT directed against local banks (which are often in severe economic straits themselves), but rather is aimed supposedly at "Eastern" and/or "Jewish banks."

We were told of frequent casual references to "Jewish bankers" heard in bars and restaurants throughout western Kansas. Copies of the infamous forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, were recently distributed to a group of farmers at a meeting in Dyersville, Iowa, and Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa was approached with anti-Semitic literature by some of his constituents during his visit.
to the 1985 State Fair in Des Moines. We were also reliably informed that Rick Phillips, the NAPA leader, makes anti-Semitic references during his speeches to farmers. One of Phillip's favorite tactics is to encourage people to flood the courts with many law suits charging land fraud. These suits are usually without merit, but they seduce the farmer with a false hope of rectifying his grim economic situation and they also tie up the already crowded court system.

Everyone we spoke with stressed the growing sense of despair felt by these financially distressed farmers. Although a large harvest is currently in the ground, farmers will gain little or no profit from it. Indeed, because of their indebtedness, farmers will lose money on almost every bushel or animal they are able to sell.

The months of November and December will be especially critical this year. During that time farmers will need to obtain loans for planting the 1986 crop' seeds, fertilizers, feed and farm implements are all needed, and there are very real questions as to whether new loans will be extended by the banks. There are already reports of suicides, increased wife and child abuses as well as alcoholism within the farming community. The potential for violence also exists at every land foreclosure.

It is against this bleak backdrop that some constructive strategy must be developed. Fortunately, many positive forces and networks are functioning at present in the Middle West. These include the political leaders of the region, the Christian clergy, The Business Community and the several progressive farm coalitions such as Prairiefire of Iowa. Unfortunately, the farmers themselves are not well-organized. Though there are many farmers' groups, sadly,
they lack articulate, indigenous leadership.

Those responsible figures who are present in the region must be encouraged to speak out individually and collectively against all forms of anti-Semitism and extremism, carrying the message to all sectors of the society that scapegoating, stereotyping, and religious bigotry are unacceptable responses in America. State-wide and regional conferences need to be convened to counter the radical right. At the same time, the farmers of the region must be assured that other Americans are sensitive to their plight and support the quest for an equitable and just national agricultural policy. Too often the farming community suffers in isolation, and thus becomes vulnerable to the outrageous "solutions" offered by the proponents of extreme ideologies.

The vast majority of farmers are of course, law abiding people who reject anti-Semitism and extremism. It is, of course, impossible to estimate with accuracy the precise number of farmers who have accepted the message of hate and violence. However, we came away from Kansas and Iowa convinced that the threat is real and growing. A prominent Iowa banker described the anti-Semitism and extremism now present as "not inconsequential", while a Jewish community leader termed the problem a "serious one." Clearly, a comprehensive campaign is needed now to prevent the pathology from spreading.