ANTI-SEMITISM, EXTREMISM AND THE FARM CRISIS

A Background Memorandum

Dr. Ellen Isler, Special Projects Administrator,
National Affairs Department

Rabbi A. James Rudin, National Director,
Interreligious Affairs Department

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, Institute of Human Relations, 165 East 56 Street, New York, N.Y. 10022
The economic crisis in rural America has grown more severe during the past eighteen months. In an attempt to capitalize on fears and insecurities growing out of this crisis, 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 20/20 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.

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, AJC's Interreligious Affairs Director, 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 threatened farmers.
The current plight of the family farmer cannot be exaggerated. It is reliably estimated that thirty percent of Iowa's 113,000 farmers will lose their land within the next twelve to eighteen months, while another thirty percent will barely survive. The destructive political and social consequences from such massive dislocation will be staggering.

Everyone the AJC leaders spoke with stressed the growing sense of despair felt by these 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 because farmers will then seek to obtain loans for planting the 1986 crop. Seeds, fertilizers, feed and farm implements are needed, and there is a real question as to whether new loans will be extended by the banks. Suicides, as well as alcoholism and wife and child abuse, have increased within the farming community.

Organized purveyors of violence and hate are exploiting and perhaps exacerbating the farm crisis to gain adherents from the ranks of the desperate. Most in evidence are the "Posse Comitatus,*" the Populist Party, the Aryan Nations, The Order, The Covenant, Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA), and the National Agricultural Press Association. Of these, some are survivalist groups which maintain large arms caches, including many illegal automatic weapons; others seek to broaden their political base in the farm states.

*The Posse is the only white supremacist, paramilitary organization currently listed by the FBI as a "terrorist organization." However, the U.S. Marshalls Service estimates that, apart from the 23 members of the Order recently arrested, there remain 500 hard core members and between 1500-2000 sympathizers.
In addition to mouthing the traditional anti-Semitic canards about malevolent "Jewish bankers," these groups preach suspicion and hatred of the Federal Government, especially the Federal Reserve System, the IRS, and the Farm Credit System. They offer simplistic and extremist solutions to complex economic problems and question the efficacy of democratic processes for the airing of grievances. In so doing they pose a distinct threat to traditional American values.

These extremist organizations often harbor and are being aided by the adherents of the blatantly anti-Semitic "Christian Identity" movement. Its leaders, most notably Richard Butler of the Aryan Nations, advance the doctrine that the "true Israel" is the community of white Anglo-Saxon Christians and the intended promised lands of the Bible are the United States and Great Britain.

The media have focused national attention on the populist radical right wing forces exemplified by the white supremacist Liberty Lobby* and well represented in recent headlines by the Order and the Aryan Nations, but the symptoms of anti-Semitism and of the spread of Identity theology are many and varied. AJC leaders were told of the frequent casual references to "Jewish bankers" overhead in bars and restaurants throughout western Kansas. A bumper sticker seen in Iowa and attributed to the Posse Comitatus read "KNOW YOUR LEADERS, THEY'RE YOUR ENEMY!" In support of the latter contention, extremist leaders often refer farmers to the 1962 report of the Committee for Economic Development, which urged "excess resources (people, primarily) to move rapidly

*The organ of the Liberty Lobby is The Spotlight, published by the long time anti-Semite, Willis Carto. It has a national circulation of 155,000 a large proportion of which is in the Middle West.
out of agriculture." Pat Quinn, a UAW representative, reported to AJC leaders that at a farmers' meeting in Dyersville, Iowa, early this year, one extremist speaker read aloud to the audience from Henry Ford's scurrilous book, *The International Jew* (which Ford himself later repudiated). Naturally enough, much of the farmers' ire is directed not at local banks (which are often in severe economic straits themselves) but at so-called "Eastern" and/or "Jewish" banks.

The AJC was also informed that Rick Elliot, the NAPA leader, often makes overt anti-Semitic references in his speeches to farmers, though his primary purpose is to thwart the establishment by urging farmers to flood the courts with law suits charging land fraud. These suits are almost always without merit, but they delude farmers with false hopes of rectifying their grim fiscal situation and they also tie up an already crowded court system.

Against this bleak backdrop, some constructive strategy must be developed. Fortunately, many positive forces and networks are at work in the Middle West. These include the political leaders of the region, the Christian clergy, the business community and several progressive farm coalitions, such as Prairiefire of Iowa.

It must be stressed that the vast majority of farmers are law abiding citizens who reject anti-Semitism and extremism. They and their community leaders must be encouraged to speak out individually and collectively against all forms of anti-Semitism and extremism, thus carrying the message to all sectors of society that scapegating, stereotyping, and religious bigotry are unacceptable responses in America. Statewide and regional conferences should be convened to counter the radical right. And the farmers of the region must be assured that other Americans are responsive 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 proponents of extremist ideologies.

It is impossible to estimate with accuracy the precise number of farmers who have accepted the message of hate and violence. However, AJC observers came away from Kansas and Iowa convinced that the threat is real and growing and that a comprehensive campaign is needed now to prevent the pathology from spreading.

* * *

BO57(NAD-2)
/arb 9/18/85
85/970/1