

BLOOD ON THE PLOW: EXTREMIST GROUP ACTIVITY DURING THE 1980s FARM
CRISIS IN KANSAS

by

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On February 23, 1983, Phil Donahue started an episode of his talk show seated across a table from a bespectacled, well-dressed man in a blue suit and black tie. Donohue's guest was the self-titled "National Director for Counter-insurgents of Posses of America" James Wickstrom. Wickstrom's respectable appearance became secondary to his diatribes, which came wrapped in a rapid-fire cadence with a Midwestern accent. Wickstrom indicted a complex system he believed was disenfranchising white Christian farmers in the United States: "international bankers and the private central bank called the Federal Reserve of the United States." When Donohue pressed Wickstrom on the antisemitic and racist beliefs of his group, Posse Comitatus, Wickstrom answered that they were "pro-Christian" and dedicated to defending what he described as a Supreme Court-affirmed "Christian republic" in the United States. Wickstrom also stated that Jews had "their own nation in Israel" and that he did not "believe anyone should pay a progressive Communist income tax." Phil Donahue later asked Wickstrom about the legal theories of Posse Comitatus, in respect to property foreclosures, to which Wickstrom replied that all lending institutions were illegal and unconstitutional. Wickstrom further clarified that in response to "despotism" of law enforcement officers and politicians carrying out foreclosures, Americans had the right under the Declaration of Independence "to overthrow or destroy this despotism." Wickstrom compared this situation to what "our ancestors" lived under in 1776 under British rule.¹

James Wickstrom's appearance on *Donahue* and subsequent notoriety in the national media came during the nationwide search for Gordon Kahl, a North Dakota farmer and Posse Comitatus adherent who killed two U. S. Marshalls' agents attempting to apprehend him in February 1983. Kahl's shootout and subsequent search were among many incidents of violence

¹ "Donahue" (Chicago, February 23, 1983), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lePZ2eYwojEI>.

that broke out during the 1980s farm debt crisis in the United States Midwest.² In contrast to the economic situation for most Americans, farmers and ranchers in the Midwest enjoyed prosperous economic conditions. The détente policies that opened the Soviet Union to American grain exports helped raise land and commodity prices to record highs. With these flush conditions and the encouragement of the Nixon administration farmers were encouraged to expand their operations to “feed the world.”³ Farmers responded to these conditions by buying more land, seed, and additional and technologically upgraded equipment. Ultimately, many farmers went deeper into debt to make these purchases. The farmers’ high indebtedness laid the seeds for an economic crisis. Eventually, the high production started bringing commodity prices down in the late 1970s, worrying many in agriculture who saw foreclosures looming. The American Agricultural Movement (AAM), with roots in the grain producing regions of Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas, began sounding the alarm early in the crisis. Under the AAM banner, farmers took to the streets of their state capitals and in Washington, D. C. with “tractorcades” (motorcades of tractors) demanding action from elected officials and threatening production strikes to stabilize prices. The farmers were not successful in convincing federal or state officials into action nor were they successful in creating a general agriculture strike.⁴

The price downturns of the 1980s particularly hit Kansas farmers hard and these farmers were at the forefront of the effort to demand relief and support. In 1980 commodity prices and land values in Kansas went into freefall after President Jimmy Carter’s decided to embargo American grain shipments to the Soviet Union in retaliation for the 1979 Soviet invasion of

² Associated Press, “AROUND THE NATION; 2 U.S. Marshals Killed In Shootout With 3 Men,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 1983, sec. U.S.; Associated Press, “Dakota ‘Fanatic’ Hunted in Slaying of 2 Marshals,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 1983, sec. U.S.; Ronald Smothers, “Vigilantism Stressed by Group Linked to Suspect,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 1983, sec. U.S..

³ Barry J. Barnett, “The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000): 366.

⁴ Barnett, “The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s.”

Afghanistan. Midwestern farmers started losing their farms to foreclosure at a record pace, and agriculture in the United States was in a full-blown crisis. The 1980s farm crisis hit Kansas agriculture particularly hard as it was one of the leading grain-producing states.⁵ Similar to Kansans before them in the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Populist movement in the late Nineteenth Century, Kansans in the 1980s took to populist political activism. Some Kansas farmers even took to direct-action, like tractorcades, protesting farm auctions, reviving the “penny auctions” of the 1930s, and the ubiquitous planting of white crosses on the county courthouse lawns in memoriam of the farms lost to foreclosure. Then, too, a few rural Kansans decided they needed to take more drastic measures by following calls to execute a radical revolution through a group called Posse Comitatus.

A disparate group of angry Kansas farmers, in their struggle for answers to their economic travails, turned to out-of-state far-right extremist groups. These groups offered Kansas farmers facing foreclosure solutions to save their farms through arcane court filings. They also embraced the use of armed resistance. Posse Comitatus and similar groups railed against what they claimed was an illegitimate banking and economic system controlled by an international Jewish cabal that deliberately dispossessed distressed Kansans from their farms. Posse activists warned that these Kansans would—and should—take up arms to keep farmers on their land and ultimately, protect white Christian dominance of the United States. These extremist groups fused older traditions of agrarian populism with emerging white nationalist ideologies and conspiracy theories to give an outlet to rural Kansans who felt dispossessed amid an economic crisis. The number of Kansans who joined these far-right extremist groups were small and made little

⁵ Barnett, “The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s”; Neil E. Harl, *The Farm Debt Crisis of the 1980s*, 1st ed, The Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Studies (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990); Jay Ward, “Agriculture During the Reagan Years” (Ph.D., University of Missouri - Columbia, 2015).

impact on saving family farms. However, through violent threats and incidents, these groups' ability to spread extremist rhetoric gave law enforcement officials in Kansas much cause for concern in the 1980s. While few Kansas farmers joined the cause of the extremist groups, their right-wing neo-Populist ideology amid an emerging conservative political climate in the 1980s irrevocably influenced rural Kansas beyond the end of the farm crisis. The 1990s saw a rise in conservative economic populism in rural Kansas that persisted into the next century. The early twenty-first century conservative Republicans took over the state government and representation in Washington. They borrowed a similar language that far-right activists in Kansas in the 1980s had utilized amid the farm crisis, particularly in calls for a modern-day Boston tea party.

Historians have published little on the 1980s farm crisis in Kansas and the extremist group activity it produced.⁶ R. Douglas Hurt has done the only major work about the crisis. He, however, focused on the less extreme AAM and their “lofty rhetoric, occasional violence, and practical politics” to define radical farmers during this period.⁷ Other scholars have written more generally about the actions of Posse Comitatus in connection to the farm crisis. Catherine McNichol-Stock wrote of two strands of rural radicalism: a left-wing populist rural producer radicalism and a culture of far-right wing vigilantism. Stock argued that a convergence of the two strands in the late twentieth century produced a new kind of political and cultural radicalism. This new political hybrid was embraced by a sliver of Americans during the 1980s farm crisis

⁶ Primary source research for this thesis comes from media accounts, law enforcement records, and the far-right literature of the 1980s. The Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements in the Spencer Research Library on the University of Kansas campus is one of the largest repositories of radical and extremist political materials in the United States and contains many documents from the groups active in Kansas. Also, the investigation records of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation in the Kansas State Archives were useful as law enforcement was keenly aware of and concerned about extremist group activity in Kansas during the 1980s. Media accounts shaped the broad contours of extremist group activity during the period from local Kansas newspapers such as the *Ottawa Herald*, *Salina Journal* and the regional papers of larger circulation such as the *Kansas City Star* and *Wichita Eagle*.

⁷ R. Douglas Hurt, “Agricultural Politics in the Twentieth-Century West,” in *The Political Culture of the New West*, ed. Jeff Roche (Lawrence (Kan.): University Press of Kansas, 2008), 51–73.

and later, in the militia and survivalist movements as seen in Ruby Ridge and the Oklahoma City bombing.⁸ Evelyn Schlatter, in *Aryan Cowboys*, has described late 20th Century trends of “vigilantism, fraternalism, and political and social extremism (especially rightist) ...” that encouraged Western men to embrace ideologies that protected white male supremacy.⁹

On the other hand, Robert H. Churchill, another scholar of rural political extremism, claimed the reactions of law enforcement, anti-racist activists, and scholars to Posse Comitatus were essentially just a moral panic.¹⁰ The thesis will expand and complicate some of the defining themes presented by these scholars, in particular, the work of R. Douglas Hurt by analyzing the historical roots of agrarian revolts in Kansas; the role ethnicity of in white nationalist ideology; and the technological change driving the increased indebtedness of Kansas farmers.¹¹ This thesis will show that the violence and extremist rhetoric of Posse Comitatus represented the lengths that a few Kansans were willing to go to in the 1980s. Like the unsuccessful AAM, the Posse Comitatus embraced the “ideology of anticorporate neo-Populism.” This ideology became a potent aspect of Kansas political culture well beyond the 1980s farm crisis with the emergence of a populist conservative politics in the late 20th Century and early 21st Century.

⁸ Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁹ Evelyn A. Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970-2000*, 1st ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). In Chapter 4, “From Farms to Arms: Populists, Plowshares, and Posses” (pp. 84-123) Schlatter focuses on extremist group activity during the 1980s farm crisis. Schlatter briefly detailed Posse Comitatus as a group active in Kansas in the 1980s under this context. While she includes Wickstrom and Gale, she also lumps in the far less extreme AAM into the same mold of extremist agrarian populism.

¹⁰ Robert H. Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant’s Face: Libertarian Political Violence and the Origins of the Militia Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). Churchill also takes issue with Schlatter, Stock, and David Bennett’s reliance on anti-racist watchdog group’s data for their analysis. While care must be taken with sources from these groups, especially when trying to assess firm numbers of extremist group membership, their comprehensive research remains some of the more useful sources. See also David Harry Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

¹¹ R. Douglas Hurt, “The Agricultural and Rural History of Kansas,” *Kansas History* 27 (Autumn 2004): 194–217. R. Douglas Hurt’s historiographical essay on Kansas agriculture did not discuss the 1980s farm crisis.

Late 20th Century Kansas farmers did not invent populist activism in response to agricultural economic crises. This agrarian populism has a long history in the United States. Prior farm crises in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spurred rural Kansans to populist agrarian radicalism. White supremacist conspiracy theories flourished in these crises. Farmers declaimed against banks and the Federal government which they contended created an inherently unjust system that dispossessed rightful owners of farms, specifically, productive white Christian males.

The emergence of radical right-wing agrarian activism in the late 20th Century began with the 1970s agricultural economy's boom, its subsequent bust, and the toll it took on the rural landscape. This economic crisis pushed some Kansas farmers to embrace a specific far-right ideology primarily promoted by two individuals, James Wickstrom and William Potter Gale. Gale played a vital role in the development of the ideology of Posse Comitatus and Christian Identity. Wickstrom and Gale were the two most active and prominent exporters of these ideologies to rural Kansans. These men's efforts influenced the rise in extremist group ideology and incidents of violence that happened in rural Kansas in the early 1980s. While this study of Kansas explores only a few incidents by a small number of farmers, these local historical studies can help place these explosive political conflicts in a broader historical context in the American West and even across the United States during the late twentieth century. The endurance of "anticorporate neo-Populism" into Kansas politics after the end of the 1980s farm crisis, as well as the rise of extreme right-wing movements that morphed into the militia movements of the 1990s and the alt-right of the twenty-first century show the importance of undertaking a historical analysis of reactionary movements in the rural United States.

From Boom to Bust: Agriculture's Rise and Fall in the 1970s and 1980s

Rural Americans faced economic ruin in the 1980s farm debt crisis on a scale not seen in a generation. Families in agriculture had not been struck so hard since the Great Depression of the 1930s. While farmers in the grain producing plains states like Kansas most acutely felt the effects of the crisis in the first half of the Reagan years of the 1980s, one must look back to the 1970s to see how the crisis began. In the 1970s, American farmers saw some of their most prosperous years. International developments caused by Richard Nixon's policy of détente increased economic trade with the Soviet Union and encouraged farmers to expand their operations to meet Soviet grain demand. This boom, however, came to an end when Jimmy Carter instituted hardline policies towards the Soviet Union in response to the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan. After the Carter administration instituted a grain embargo against the Soviet Union, demand for American grain plummeted. One of the farmers' largest markets for their products were closed, leading to the 1980s farm debt crisis. Farmers were left feeling like pawns on the Cold War chessboard. Kansas farmers saw their livelihoods leveraged by Washington bureaucrats who jerked them from prosperity to ruin. First, farmers were needed by the Nixon administration to feed new markets and advance a new American foreign policy of détente. Just a few short years later, the Carter administration used farmers' products as tools of punishment when the Soviets upset the new understanding. Left to the whims of global forces, farmers ended the decade desperately trying to hang on to their land and way of life.

Most Americans experienced economic stagnation and inflation in the 1970s. However, for farmers, economic conditions were ripe for growth. The United States faced its first trade deficit in the post-World War II era. Many economic observers believed the American dollar was overvalued, leading to President Nixon's decision to devalue the dollar and eventually abandon the gold standard in 1971. These reforms led to a more flexible fiscal policy and increased

foreign trade. Federal tax policies for capital gains and investment tax credits in the 1970s also encouraged farmers to buy more land and equipment. Long-term agricultural policy trends of price supports and supply controls also encouraged farmers to produce large amounts of commodities, which eventually created a bubble. The Farmers Home Association backed loans for farmers with below market interest rates, creating an incentive for farmers to go into debt to expand their operations. Because inflation was high in the 1970s, farmers were paying back their loans with depreciated money, making the real interest rates even lower.¹² This increased indebtedness, however, put many farmers at risk if and when commodity prices dropped. Unfortunately for farmers, all of these trends had created an economic bubble that was ready to burst.

Overall, Richard Nixon's foreign policy reforms had helped American farmers. The Nixon administration opened relations with the Soviet Union, who were hungry for grain. This Soviet demand helped create an agricultural boom for the grain-producing states in the Great Plains, including Kansas. In 1973, the Soviet Union decided to increase its meat production. As a result, the Soviets needed a corresponding increase in grain imports for livestock feed. However, the Soviet Union had difficulty producing enough grain to meet their goals. This opportunity spurred the Nixon administration and the Soviets to strike a deal for Americans to export grain to the Soviet Union. The détente-era deal opened a massive new market for American grain farmers. Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz encouraged American farmers to plant "fence row to fence row" to "feed the world."¹³ Commodity prices began to rise, and farmers' land values rose alongside those of their crops. The high land values gave farmers more equity to use as collateral to draw more debt to expand. With favorable economic conditions and the

¹² Barnett, "The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s."

¹³ Jay Ward, "Agriculture During the Reagan Years" (Ph.D., University of Missouri - Columbia, 2015), 175–76.

increased availability of lending, as well as federal tax incentives, farming became a debt-heavy operation. While farm incomes doubled in the mid-1970s, almost 90% of agricultural investments in land became mortgaged.¹⁴

The end of détente at the end of the 1970s signaled an end to farmers' halcyon years. With their economic success tied to the Soviet Union buying their grain, many Americans were happy their country was doing business with a nation once feared as a communist menace. This pro-Soviet foreign policy changed drastically in 1979. Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer himself, came to office in 1977. He inherited the good relations with the Soviet Union nurtured by the Nixon and Ford administration. Everything, however, changed after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Carter responded with an embargo on American grain sales to the Soviet Union in January 1980.¹⁵ With the world's largest market for grain shut off to American farmers, grain commodity prices started to fall precipitously throughout 1980 and 1981. Still, farmers' debt from the good years in the 1970s remained even as the price of farmland dropped. With commodity prices and land prices down and debt high, many farmers were unable to make their loan payments.¹⁶

With so many farmers in debt and facing foreclosure, the rural people in the Plains states faced an unexpected crisis which threatened their property and livelihoods. Many farmers started looking for someone to blame. Least of all, it was not themselves. American farmers believed they had worked hard and sacrificed; it had been their patriotic duty to feed the world. Now, they were being used to punish the very people they were supposed to feed. Many blamed Jimmy

¹⁴ Barnett, "The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s," 371–72.

¹⁵ Ward, "Agriculture During the Reagan Years," 332.

¹⁶ Barnett, "The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s," 375–76; Neil E. Harl, *The Farm Debt Crisis of the 1980s*, 1st ed, The Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Studies (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990).

Carter, who consequently lost reelection to Ronald Reagan in 1980. The Reagan administration was no godsend as it did little to alleviate the farmers' conditions.¹⁷ Many farmers placed blame on the banks for being greedy and unwilling to work with farmers to make it through the tough times. These farmers also saw elected officials and bureaucrats in the federal government as unwilling to help with proper price supports to help them gain a profit above the cost of production. A few farmers saw the debt crisis in much more conspiratorial terms. They started listening to new voices which spoke to their fears and despair. These ideologues told farmers that an unfair system had them caught in its crosshairs – a system that needed radical, violent change.

Posse Comitatus and the Roots of the 1980s Far-Right

During the 1970s, when farmers went from boom to bust in the agricultural economic crisis in Kansas, another trend was emerging outside the state which would intersect with the farmers in the 1980s. After the cultural and political changes of the post-World War II-era in the United States ended the norms of white male dominance, a backlash of far-right wing extremism brewed in the American West. William Potter Gale helped foment that new brew. Gale began his activism within the fervent anti-Communist groups of the 1950s and the burgeoning anti-tax conservatism of the 1960s. Gale fused these ideologies with white nationalism and founded the Posse Comitatus in the early 1970s. With Gale in the lead, the Posse Comitatus and like-minded groups spread throughout the United States in the 1970s. Wisconsin became a center for such extremists. There, James Wickstrom started preaching the Posse Comitatus ideology to rural Midwesterners. Gale and Wickstrom's efforts paid off eventually as their ideology found a foothold amid the 1980s farm crisis.

¹⁷ Ward, "Agriculture During the Reagan Years."

Posse comitatus was an English common law concept that empowered a local or county sheriff to call all able-bodied men over the age of fifteen into service to enforce the law. A posse comitatus also was the name of such an organized group. While the British disposed of posse comitatus as a common practice in the nineteenth century, it remained in use in the United States. Federal lawmakers further defined the concept in an American context after the Civil War and Reconstruction. In 1878 Congress, in response to the use of federal troops as a posse comitatus, passed the Posse Comitatus Act to forbid the use of the federal army in law enforcement. Following European American settlement of the West in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the present, sheriffs utilized posses comitatus particularly in rural areas with few law enforcement officers and rugged terrain.¹⁸

William Potter Gale of California was the leading proponent of a very different far-right interpretation of posse comitatus during the late 20th Century. William Potter Gale attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Army during World War II. Gale regularly fabricated and exaggerated his service in the Army, notably with claims that he trained Filipino guerillas to burnish his credentials for propagating paramilitary and militia tactics. However, Gale did serve on the staff of General Douglas MacArthur during the occupation of Japan.¹⁹ As General MacArthur later rose to become a right-wing hero after his battles with President Harry Truman during the Korean War, Gale also used his experience on the general's staff as evidence of his military and rightist credentials.²⁰ Gale received a medical discharge in 1950 and returned stateside to Southern California where entered right-wing politics. In his return to the United

¹⁸ David B Kopel, "The Posse Comitatus And The Office Of Sheriff: Armed Citizens Summoned To The Aid Of Law Enforcement," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 104, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 761–850.

¹⁹ Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right*, 1st ed (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2002), 19–21.

²⁰ Levitas, 35–36.

States, Gale believed he found a changed United States after World War II. Gale became involved in the far-right California Constitution Party and met San Jacinto Capt and Wesley Swift, former Klansmen who introduced him to the ideology of Christian Identity.²¹

Christian Identity was a white nationalist religious sect developed in the interwar period by Swift. Christian Identity held fast to antisemitic conspiracy theories. Adherents believed the economic and financial sectors were dominated by an international Jewish cabal, in conspiracy with the federal government. As part of his theory, Christian Identity followers considered the Federal Reserve as an illegitimate system. Another related anti-Semitic theory crucial to the Christian Identity supporters was British Israelism. This theory claimed Anglo-Saxon Christians as their God's real "chosen people" as opposed to the Jews.²² As such, believers in Christian Identity held that white Christian Anglo-Saxons were superior to all others and destined to dominate the United States.

William Potter Gale, armed with his newfound Christian Identity ideology and religion, set forth to spread these ideas to the masses. Gale proselytized to his followers in the 1950s and 1960s while also remaining active in far-right politics in California. Gale rose to the position of state chair of the California Constitution Party and served as the party's nominee for governor in 1958.²³ He left the party and ran in the Republican Party primaries for California's Twenty-Seventh Congressional District in 1964 and 1968. Gale eventually abandoned electoral politics after these last two failed runs for office.²⁴ He began formulating a more militant bent to Christian Identity in the late 1960s. Gale connected with the burgeoning anti-tax movement of the period. In 1971 and 1972, Gale began advocating for the use of "Christian Posses." He

²¹ Levitas, 22–23.

²² Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys*, 51–52.

²³ Levitas, *The Terrorist next Door*, 61–62.

²⁴ Levitas, 93.

advocated the legal concept of posse comitatus where, under the supreme authority of the county sheriff, it could be applied to stop what he saw as unlawful overreaches by the federal and state governments. Thus, Gale created an ideology of Posse Comitatus which combined conservative anti-tax economic beliefs with Christian Identity antisemitic conspiracy theories about the illegitimacy of banking and currency. As Gale and the adherents of Posse Comitatus spread their ideology across the United States in the 1970s, they found a receptive audience among rural peoples in the Midwest.²⁵

One of these rural Midwesterners who took to Posse Comitatus was James Wickstrom of Wisconsin. The founder of Wisconsin Posse Comitatus, prominent far-rightist Thomas Stockheimer, recruited Wickstrom into Christian Identity and Posse Comitatus ideology in 1973. Stockheimer took to the Posse Comitatus after reading copies of Gale's writings made by Mike Beach of Oregon. Beach founded the Citizens' Law Enforcement and Research Committee (CLERC).²⁶ Wickstrom embraced the ideology with unique zeal and quickly rose to lead the Wisconsin Posse Comitatus. Wickstrom styled himself as "National Director for Counter-insurgents of Posses of America," making himself appear as a national leader of a mass movement.²⁷

James Wickstrom, like William Potter Gale, dabbled in electoral politics to little success. Wickstrom served on the state executive committee of the Wisconsin Constitution Party.²⁸ Wickstrom ran under the banner of the Constitution Party for the U. S. Senate in 1980, coming in third place, but he did gain over 16,000 votes and performed better than any other third-party

²⁵ Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys*, 105–12.

²⁶ Levitas, *The Terrorist next Door*, 120–29.

²⁷ Levitas, 127–29.

²⁸ H. Rupert Theobald and Patricia V. Robbins, eds., *The State of Wisconsin 1981-1982 Blue Book* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, 1981), 823; H. Rupert Theobald and Patricia V. Robbins, eds., *The State of Wisconsin 1983-1984 Blue Book* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, 1983), 821.

candidate.²⁹ Then, in 1982, Wickstrom entered the race for Governor of Wisconsin where he came in fourth, receiving only 7,721 votes.³⁰ While electoral success eluded Wickstrom, he was more successful in his efforts in spreading the teachings of Posse Comitatus. However, Wickstrom was not merely satisfied with preaching to his rural neighbors in Wisconsin. A salesman by trade, Wickstrom took to spreading the word about Posse Comitatus across the rural Midwest.³¹ In the early 1980s, as farmers suffered from the agricultural economic crisis, Wickstrom found willing listeners to his sermons about Christian Identity and how farmers could save their farms from foreclosure with the legal concepts of Posse Comitatus.

An Uprising on the Plains

On December 31, 1981, an article written by Lynn Byczynski appeared in the *Salina Journal* with the headline “Posse Comitatus: Angry citizens adhere to strict interpretation of constitution, doubt law enforcement power.” This article acted as a primer to what was to come in the next few years. Byczynski described a trucker in Northeastern Kansas’ Doniphan County who refused to use the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) scales. The man argued the DOT had no authority over his rig and that if he were to pay his fine, it would only be in gold and silver. Byczynski wrote that Western Kansas’ Wallace County Attorney felt inundated with gold and silver tax court cases. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation warned that people in Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas were stockpiling weapons. Byczynski cited James Wickstrom and his Posse Comitatus group as the driving factors in these developments.³²

²⁹ Theobald and Robbins, *The State of Wisconsin 1981-1982 Blue Book*, 908.

³⁰ Theobald and Robbins, *The State of Wisconsin 1983-1984 Blue Book*, 900.

³¹ Levitas, *The Terrorist next Door*; Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys*, 110–11.

³² Lynn Byczynski, “Posse Comitatus: Angry Citizens Adhere to Strict Interpretation of Constitution, Doubt Law Enforcement Power,” *Salina Journal*, December 31, 1981.

While Byczynski named Wickstrom as the “only visible member” of the Posse Comitatus, it is clear from the article that law enforcement across Kansas had begun to take notice of the group. A few officials were ambivalent toward the early reports of Posse Comitatus activity. Brown County Sheriff David Nigus attended a local meeting but stated the conversation mostly centered on constitutional rights. Some officials characterized the Kansas chapters of Posse Comitatus “disorganized and watered down” in comparison to “more radical Wisconsin” Posse groups. Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) director Tom Kelly confirmed he heard reports of Posse Comitatus activity in the state “But we have not really had any problem with them.” However, Kansas Attorney General, Bob Stephan, who became the state’s biggest critic of the group, did not take these first reports lightly. Stephan’s administrative assistant Neil Woerman complained about the numerous frivolous Posse-inspired lawsuits filed in Kansas county courts. Stephan told Byczynski that he had, “little patience” for Posse Comitatus.³³

Heading into the summer of 1982, Posse Comitatus continued to appear on the radar of the media and law enforcement in Kansas. In June 1982, the *Salina Journal* published a two-part feature on James Wickstrom and the Posse Comitatus. In the first part, “The Posse Comitatus,” United Press International journalist Leon Daniel described Wickstrom’s roots in “the lush and rolling northeastern Wisconsin farm country that produced the late Sen. Joe McCarthy.” Wickstrom point-blank told Daniel, “I’m a racist. I believe a racist is anyone who’s proud to be what he is. I’m proud to be a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.” Wickstrom continued to rail against African Americans, Jews, Latinos, and other minorities using racist slurs. He described to Daniel the paramilitary training he conducted in Wisconsin including “booby-trap applications and studying guerilla action situations. Wickstrom painted politicians as “liars and thieves”

³³ Byczynski.

reserving praise only for the segregationist conservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms and then-nascent libertarian (and future Presidential candidate) Texas Congressman Ron Paul. He claimed that the Posse Comitatus was growing the fastest in Colorado, Kansas, and Texas because “of the massive invasion of Mexicans into those states.”³⁴

In the second part of the *Salina Journal* series on the Posse Comitatus, “Don’t Tread on Me!” the paper’s Great Plains editor Linda Mowery detailed the group’s activities in Western Kansas in the early 1980s. Mowery focused on the legal strategies employed by self-educated distressed farmers using James Wickstrom’s interpretations of the law. Farmer Leonard Cox said, “We’re learning how corrupt these lawyers and judges are.” Wallace County Attorney Jerry Fairbanks admitted that Posse Comitatus activity concerned him saying, “It’s scary.” Fairbanks also believed that the “increased noise” of the Posse Comitatus was “a sign of times” given that farmers in Wallace County had not only lost farms to foreclosure but also lost crops in a devastating hail storm. Mowery also reported that a Colorado-based group, the National Commodity and Barter Association, was gaining a foothold with farmers utilizing a similar ideology on banking and economics.³⁵

During 1982, Keith Shive, a radical agricultural activist in Halstead, Kansas, gained notoriety for forming the Farmers’ Liberation Army (FLA). Responding to questionnaire for the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements, Shive stated that the FLA’s primary goals were “putting profit in agriculture,” “eliminating the private owned Federal Reserve system,” and “doing away with big business control over government.”³⁶ However, when the UPI interviewed Shive in July 1982, he admitted to extreme means to accomplish these goals.

³⁴ Leon Daniel, “The Posse Comitatus,” *Salina Journal*, June 6, 1982.

³⁵ Linda Mowery, “Don’t Tread on ME!,” *Salina Journal*, June 13, 1982.

³⁶ Keith M. Shive, “Ephemeral Materials” (Farmers Liberation Army, October 19, 1983), Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements, Spencer Research Library.

Shive called for using force to stop shipments of commodities and to “wipe out the livestock and crops” of any farmers and ranchers who disagreed with his militant stance. Shive criticized the AAM for its moderation calling it a “social club” that “stopped doing anything for us.” The AAM responded by disavowing Shive and tactics. The UPI article also described police intelligence reports which connected the FLA “posse comitatus ‘school’” of paramilitary training in March 1982.³⁷ Despite their differences in methods to combat the farm debt crisis, the FLA, Posse Comitatus, and the AAM all deployed similar demands. These activists wanted the federal government, which they saw as overly influenced by large corporations, to be more responsive to farmers’ demands to ensure profitability in agriculture and

After Kansas farmers harvested their crops in the Fall of 1982, radical activities inspired by Posse Comitatus continued to concern Kansas law enforcement officials. On October 14, 1982, the Wallace County Sheriff Vernon Vincent, his deputies, and an official from the Farm Credit System (FCS) attempted to repossess a Sharon Springs farmer’s equipment. When Vincent, the deputies, and the FCS official arrived at the farm, more than 40 people stood hard to meet them, forcing them to turn around. Vincent then called Attorney General Robert Stephan. A few weeks later in November 1982, Stephan convened a meeting of county sheriffs and attorneys from Southwest Kansas to strategize on how to deal with the rise in radical militants associated with the Posse Comitatus and similar groups in the region. Stephan said he believed that these groups were, “a danger to the entire system of government.” Stephan also told the law enforcement officials that he “advocated meeting force with force.” He justified this tough

³⁷ United Press International, “‘Farmers Liberation Army’ Adopts Rhetoric of Terror,” *Salina Journal*, July 27, 1982.

approach by warning, “Because of the racial hatred spewed by some of them, the potential danger is serious. It’s nothing people ought to sneer at.”³⁸

Stephan’s crusade against the Posse Comitatus continued later that month after the group sent letters which purported to be “indictments” to all 105 Kansas county sheriffs, nine Kansas District Court judges, and one U. S. District Court judge. The letters, sent by the “Citizens Grand Jury of Kansas” accused the judges of “crimes of malfeasance and misfeasance against the citizens of Kansas” including conspiracy to obstruct justice, unlawful seizure of personal property, and the unlawful threat of military force against citizens. The letters ordered the county sheriffs to incarcerate the judges for three to ten years. The letters also claimed that if the sheriffs did not incarcerate the “outlaw” judges, “then said Outlaws will be buried in Potters field” or otherwise executed. Stephan said the letters were likely the product of Posse Comitatus because “It sure looks like their type of idiocy.” The Attorney General warned, “the organization appeared to be getting bolder.” Stephan admitted that the group’s activities were under surveillance by his office and “There’s fear their influence is growing.” Stephan considered the letters a “terroristic threat” and “something to be taken seriously.”³⁹

At the beginning of 1983, evidence came to light which gave credence to the warnings by Stephan and the early intelligence reports of paramilitary trainings by Posse Comitatus. In February 1983, Stephan confirmed to the UPI that a “paramilitary seminar” was held in 1982 in Weskan, Kansas. Stephan received a 10-page report on the three-day training session from an infiltrator whom he declined to identify beyond only being a man not affiliated with any state agency. Stephan also refused to disclose how he obtained the report but asserted that the

³⁸ Harris News Service, “Repossession Incident Spurs Action; Stephan Tells Sheriffs to Stand Firm,” *Salina Journal*, November 6, 1982.

³⁹ Jolene Hoss, “‘Citizens Grand Jury’ Calls for the Jailing of 10 Judges,” *Salina Journal*, November 21, 1982.

attendees might have been Posse Comitatus members. Despite the secrecy surrounding the infiltrator and his actions in obtaining the intelligence on the Weskan paramilitary camp, Stephan insisted that Kansas state law enforcement officials were going forward as if it were accurate. Stephan characterized the Posse Comitatus-led training as “a study in how to disrupt this country and government.”⁴⁰ In a June 1983 story in *The New York Times*, Wayne King found that James Wickstrom and William Potter Gale were two of the primary facilitators of what they termed “counterinsurgency seminars” across the Midwest, including the one in Weskan.⁴¹

The infiltrator reported on the specific skills that Kansas farmers learned at the military trainings and seminars in Weskan. The three-day event was billed as an “ecological seminar to clean up this land of ours. Fifty-five people attended the camp in Weskan, with Wickstrom and Gale charging \$100 for men, \$50 for women, and \$35 for children. In his report, the infiltrator wrote that trainers included “Vietnam Special Forces veterans” and “a mercenary with experience in Africa and Central America.” In was in settings like these where Gale would act as an authority on guerilla warfare tactics due to his supposed military experience in the Philippines during World War II.

The anonymous informant said the Posse Comitatus organized the three-day event with four training sessions every day. In these sessions, attendees could learn about “camouflage, munitions, killer teams, troop movements, usable poisons, silencers, enemy detection, combat ambushes, and knife fighting.” The trainees learned in the “killer team” sessions how to operate in “two- and three-man killer teams” where they would “harass and demoralize the enemy by quick lethal attacks in a hit and run operation.” The Posse Comitatus also gave the attendees

⁴⁰ United Press International, “Paramilitary Seminar Infiltrated in Kansas,” *Salina Journal*, February 17, 1983.

⁴¹ Wayne King, “Link Seen Among Heavily Armed Rightist Groups,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 1983, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/11/us/link-seen-among-heavily-armed-rightist-groups.html>.

“easy-to-follow instructions” on they could craft homemade explosives. Other guerilla warfare tactics the trainers taught encompassed “trip wires for flares and booby traps in addition to land mine, punji stick and barricade techniques designed for protecting a campsite.” Trainers even displayed what the UPI article characterized as “James Bond-style” covert poisoning methods.⁴²

In February 1983, Kansas Attorney General Robert Stephan, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, local law enforcement in rural Kansas, and the media were alarmed in response to the actions by Posse Comitatus. For the rest of the year, Kansas law enforcement officials, local and national media, and anti-racist groups paid close attention to the actions of Posse Comitatus concerning the farm debt crisis. These various groups heightened attention from coincided with the high-profile case of Gordon Kahl. James Wickstrom became nationally prominent with his appearances on programs like *Donohue*. On television, Wickstrom, through his fiery oratories strongly defended farmers like Gordon Kahl and others who took up arms against to save their farms from foreclosure. Wickstrom also did not shy away from emphasizing Posse Comitatus’ racist Christian Identity ideology and anti-government stances.

Robert Stephan, in his position as Kansas’ chief law enforcement officer, took a strong publicized position against Posse Comitatus and their efforts to recruit farmers in the state. Stephan’s motivations for his public campaign of vehement denunciations of Posse Comitatus within the political context of Kansas in the 1980s are worth exploring. While many farmers in Kansas were disenchanted with policymakers in all levels of government for what they perceived as indifference to their plight, very few took to the Posse Comitatus’ calls for violent resistance

⁴² United Press International, “Paramilitary Seminar Infiltrated in Kansas”; Roger Verdon, “Weskan Training School Tought ‘killer Team’ Tactics?,” *The Salina Journal*, February 20, 1983, Vol. 112, No. 51 edition.

to governments and banks. No one was ever injured or killed in Kansas from the actions of Posse Comitatus members in connection to the farm crisis.⁴³

It was within the context of the farm crisis that Stephan nurtured his ambitions of higher office. With the crisis on the forefront of many Kansans' minds during the early 1980s, In 1982, Democratic Governor John Carlin had just won reelection and was term-limited from running in 1986. Stephan was the most prominent Republican statewide executive officer in Kansas and was primed to be the presumptive front runner for governor. Stephan had cultivated strong national connections as President of the National Association of Attorneys General and with the Reagan administration. Stephan planned to run for governor in 1986 using several political operatives from past Reagan campaigns.⁴⁴ Stephan's efforts to raise his profile for his intended campaign for governor included a highly visible presence of maintaining law and order in the state. Stephan's crusading against the threat from racist extremists preying upon desperate Kansas farmers placed him as the chief opponent against Posse Comitatus in the state and national media.⁴⁵

Under these conditions, Posse Comitatus members and law enforcement officials used each other's opposition in the media to garner publicity for their specific ends with several high-profile incidents throughout the middle years of the 1980s. Shortly after the news of the Weskan paramilitary camp, Dodge City-area residents started complaining about the unusual broadcasts

⁴³ As explained below, there were violent incidents in Franklin County, Kansas in 1984 which resulted from the actions of Posse Comitatus members resisting farm equipment repossessions. Several arrests of farmers and other activists at foreclosure auctions occurred. See Linda Mowery-Denning, "Farm Auctions Bring down the Law," *Salina Journal*, April 15, 1985.

⁴⁴ Douglas L. Bailey and Donald E. Sipple, "A Campaign Plan for Robert T. Stephan to Become Governor 1986" (1985), Kansas State Archives, Robert Stephan Collection, Kansas Historical Society.

⁴⁵ Stephan scuttled his plans to run for governor in 1985 as the result of media reports of his settlement of a sexual harassment lawsuit with a former clerk. The Associated Press, "Kansas Official Is Indicted on Perjury Charge," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1992, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/02/us/kansas-official-is-indicted-on-perjury-charge.html>.

emanating from the local radio station KTTL-FM. The station was owned by Charles and Nellie Babbs, who started the radio station in 1977 with a standard mixed format of country music and religious programming. During the beginning years of the farm crisis, the Babbses wholeheartedly adopted the ideology of Posse Comitatus. In November 1981 nearby-Gray County, the Babbses ran afoul with the authorities for refusing to pay property taxes on the land where the KTTL-FM transmission tower stood. The Babbses offered a “Public Office Money Certificate” which intended to serve as a notice to pay their taxes pending “official determination of the substance of said money.” In line with the Posse Comitatus ideology, the Babbses challenged the ability of the Federal government to print fiat currency as opposed to a U.S. dollar backed by gold or silver. As a result of their failure to pay their taxes, Gray County garnished the revenue the Babbses received from KTTL-FM advertisers, driving them to operate the station solely off paid programming.⁴⁶

These paid programs included the incendiary sermons from James Wickstrom and William Potter Gale. In their sermons, Wickstrom and Gale railed against the government, Jewish peoples they perceived to control the international economy and federal government and praised the supremacy of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Wickstrom and Gale called for Americans to rise up and take back their country. With a powerful 100,000-watt transmitter and a 100-mile broadcast radius that covered most of Western Kansas, these broadcasts reverberated across the plains to some of the most distressed farmers and ranchers. Eventually, Dodge City citizens complained to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) about the anti-Semitic and racist broadcasts from the Babbses’ radio station.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Roger Verdon, “KTTL Airs Controversial Right-Wing Views,” *Salina Journal*, February 22, 1983.

⁴⁷ Verdon.

Local and national news reports were captivated by the Babbyses willingness to use the public airwaves to broadcast messages of hate to incite economically distressed farmers. National Jewish groups and anti-racist watchdogs decried the Babbyses airing Wickstrom and Gale's sermons.⁴⁸ Robert Stephan called the station "offensive and embarrassing to the community" of Dodge City. When interviewed by Roger Verdon, Harris News Service, Nellie Babbs told him, "Your newspaper is a damn pimp for the attorney general. He's using you guys to tell lies."⁴⁹ Even Kansas' senior U.S. Senator Bob Dole lobbied the FCC to revoke the license KTTL-FM.⁵⁰ However, for all its bluster, the saga surrounding KTTL-FM ended with a whimper. The Babbyses divorced in 1984 and sold the radio station to new owners who reformatted it to Top 40 under a new call sign, KMCS.⁵¹ Despite all the public outcry, the federal government the Babbyses hated so much through the FCC sided with them, declaring the broadcasts of Wickstrom and Gale as protected under the First Amendment.

The backlash against Posse Comitatus went beyond public statements from officials like Robert Stephan and moved into the realm of policymaking. In February 1983, the Judiciary Committee of the Kansas House of Representatives conferred a bill to the full House which would ban paramilitary trainings like the one in Weskan. State Representative Robert Frey, a

⁴⁸ United Press International, "Washington-Based Civil Rights Group Attacks 'vile' Dodge City Radio Station," *Salina Journal*, May 8, 1983.

⁴⁹ Verdon, "KTTL Airs Controversial Right-Wing Views."

⁵⁰ Robert J. Dole, "Press Release: Dole Urges FCC to Review 'Hate and Violence' Programming on Kansas Radio Station, 5/12/1983" (May 12, 1983), Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Series 23: 1983, Box 25, Folder 17, Item 7, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas; Robert J. Dole, "Dole Submits Testimony On Controversial Kansas Radio Station KTTL-FM, 'Violence Not In The Public Interest', 8/4/1983" (August 4, 1983), Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Series 23: 1983, Box 26, Folder 4, Item 14, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas; Robert J. Dole, "Anti-Semitic, Racist Broadcasts Investigated Dole Announces On FCC On-Site Probe Of Dodge City Radio Station KTTL, 10/21/1983" (October 21, 1983), Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Series 23: 1983, Box 26, Folder 6, Item 18, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas; Robert J. Dole, "Dole Urges Fcc To Make Kttl Decision" (June 5, 1984), Digitized Press Releases, 1961-1996, Series 24: 1984, Box 1, Folder 165, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

⁵¹ Dennis McDougal, "FCC 'Racist' Ruling Stirs Protests," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-05-01-ca-11796-story.html>.

Republican from Liberal, sponsored the bill that took language from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith in response to what he termed Posse Comitatus members as using “radical activity that is being taught and can be used against Kansans.” Frey’s House colleagues did not agree. Democratic State Representative Dean Shelor of Minneola sympathized with Posse Comitatus, saying that their trainings were not racist, but simply from Kansas based on economic and constitutional concerns. Shelor criticized Robert Stephan for sensationalizing the threat of Posse Comitatus and “distorting the views” of Kansas farmers. In a UPI article, Shelor said, “I don’t like his insinuation that farmers out west (in Kansas) are tearing this state apart.” On the other hand, some legislators like Republican State Representative Keith Farrar of Hugoton agreed “in principle” with Frey’s efforts to combat Posse Comitatus, but feared the bill infringed on Kansans’ Second Amendment right to bear arms. Ultimately, Frey’s bill failed on the House floor.⁵²

Throughout 1983, Posse Comitatus gained a high profile through its actions and extreme rhetoric which backfired in its cause to gain more supporters. While lawmakers and law enforcement officials were concerned with the group, Kansas farmers and agriculture activists began to distance themselves from the far-right extremists. In a May 1983 feature story by UPI journalist Charles Cannon, the AAM and its leaders Alvin Jenkins and Gene Schroder called for a more measured, non-violent approach to combating the farm crisis. Jenkins expressed regret for calling the group “naïve” for using more extreme tactics like tractorcades that were not effective in getting Congress to listen to their concerns. Jenkins said the AAM had taken a new approach of “education” over “confrontation.” Jenkins also explicitly denied any links between

⁵² United Press International, “Legislators Work on Bill to Limit Paramilitarists,” *Salina Journal*, March 15, 1983; United Press International, “House Rejects Paramilitary Bill,” *Salina Journal*, March 3, 1983.

the AAM and extremist groups such as the Farmers' Liberation Army or Posse Comitatus.⁵³ In another case of the AAM turning to conventional activism, in 1984, former AAM leader Darrell Ringer of Quinter made an unsuccessful run as a Democratic candidate for Congress in the Kansas First Congressional District against then-Congressman Pat Roberts.⁵⁴

Despite the distance many farmers wanted to keep between themselves and Posse Comitatus, there were still sporadic incidents of violence from the group in Kansas. In May 1984, Randall Reineking, an acolyte of Wickstrom from Wisconsin who was active in the Midwest in teaching Posse Comitatus legal strategies to farmers, tried to help Kansas farmer Emil Wiley to fight the repossession of his tractors in Franklin County. The two men visited the Franklin County courthouse in Ottawa and attempted to serve Franklin County Sheriff Rex Bowling with documents which purported to be from the U.S. District Court. Bowling had the two men arrested on forgery charges and held in the Franklin County jail.⁵⁵ The next day, Donald Zabawa, a Holton Posse Comitatus follower, traveled to Ottawa where he telephoned threats to the Franklin County Sheriff's office to release Reineking and Wiley. Zabawa also shot at a patrol car and threatened the officer over the phone with "that's what's going to happen to you too." Zabawa was arrested later in May 1984 and charged with numerous felonies including criminal damage to property, aggravated interference with a public performance, aggravated assault, and terroristic threats.⁵⁶

While in jail, Zabawa decided to make a deal with the Franklin County Attorney in exchange for providing the Kansas Bureau of Investigation information on Posse Comitatus

⁵³ Charles J. Cannon, "AAM: Changing from Confrontation to Education," *Salina Journal*, May 1, 1983.

⁵⁴ Ward Sinclair, "Democrats Try to Reap Harvest of Farm Woes," *Washington Post*, October 21, 1984, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/10/21/democrats-try-to-reap-harvest-of-farm-woes/96d364d2-2cd9-4598-886f-4c001a14929a/>.

⁵⁵ "Two Jailed in Repossession Caper," *Ottawa Herald*, May 12, 1984, Vol. 88, No. 121.

⁵⁶ Jay Bemis, "Plot Thickens in Local Case," *Ottawa Herald*, May 21, 1984, Vol. 88, No. 128.

activity in the state. Zabawa relayed the activities of Posse Comitatus members and related groups to KBI agents. The intelligence Zabawa provided to the KBI agents, unfortunately, went ignored without action. Zabawa warned the agents that one of Wickstrom and Gale's most fervent followers, Michael Ryan was the leader of a heavily armed Christian Identity sect on the Nebraska-Kansas border. In the Summer of 1985, Nebraska authorities discovered the bodies of one of Ryan's sect members and a five-year-old boy. Michael Ryan, his son Dennis, and fellow cult member Timothy Haverkamp were charged and convicted of the murders.⁵⁷

After the farm crisis hit its peak in 1984 and with many Kansas farmers turned off from the violent rhetoric of Posse Comitatus, James Wickstrom and William Potter Gale turned their efforts towards away from farmers. However, both men, in separate incidents, found themselves ensnared in criminal charges. Wisconsin courts convicted Wickstrom of impersonating a public official in Wisconsin for attempting to set up his own township. Wickstrom served thirteen months in jail on a commuted sentence, under the conditions that he ended his association with Posse Comitatus.⁵⁸ In 1986, Federal authorities indicted Gale for threatening a judge and Internal Revenue Service agents. Gale was convicted but had his sentence commuted due to bad health. He eventually died in 1988 of emphysema.⁵⁹

Reverberations Beyond the 1980s Farm Crisis in Kansas

The 1980s farm crisis irreparably changed the cultural and political fabric of rural Kansas. Older generations of farmers who expected to leave their land and ways of life to their

⁵⁷ Jay Bemis, "Shooting Suspect Throws County A Curve," *Ottawa Herald*, May 30, 1984, Vol. 88, No. 135; Levitas, *The Terrorist next Door*, 233–37; James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads and the Rise of a New White Culture*, Newly rev. and updated 2nd ed (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995), 153–55; For a detailed account of Ryan sect murders see Rod Colvin, *Evil Harvest: The True Story of Cult Murder in the American Heartland* (Omaha, Neb: Addicus Books, 2000).

⁵⁸ Brent L. Smith, *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*, SUNY Series in New Directions in Crime and Justice Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 60.

⁵⁹ "OBITUARIES : William P. Gale; Led Several Racist Groups," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1988, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-05-04-mn-1880-story.html>.

progeny spent the final years of their lives holding on to what little they had left. Younger generations who expected to take on their family legacy of farming had to look elsewhere for prosperity. These feelings were especially acute in Western Kansas, which a half-century before had borne the brunt of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression in the 1930s. After two major agricultural crises across three generations, many in Western Kansas felt left out and unheard. While most people in Western Kansas eschewed the violent and racist rhetoric of Posse Comitatus, their feelings of disenchantment from the perceived indifference of policymakers and disconnection from centers of political, and economic power resonated widely.

In Kansas in the 1990s, the trends of neo-populist conservatism rooted in rural cultural alienation and economic disenfranchisement persisted. In 1992, the outsider independent presidential candidacy of the populist, economic nationalist Ross Perot for president did better in Kansas than any other state in the Midwest. Perot earned 27% of the vote in Kansas, winning three rural counties outright.⁶⁰

The year 1992 also saw Western Kansans voice their displeasure and what that perceived as a disconnection from the state government in Topeka. Several Southwest Kansas counties voted in non-binding resolutions to secede from the state. Residents of those counties attempted to band together in a failed secession effort with neighboring rural areas of Northeastern New Mexico, Eastern Colorado and the Panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas.⁶¹ Over the 1990s and the early twenty-first Century, social conservative factions took over leadership of the Kansas Republican Party, leading to Kansas losing two of its reliably Democratic congressional seats

⁶⁰ Kansas Secretary of State, “Kansas Secretary of State - Election Statistics,” accessed November 20, 2018, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html.

⁶¹ Peter J McCormick, “The 1992 Secession Movement in Southwest Kansas,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 247–58.

and culminating in the rise of Sam Brownback as U. S. Senator and Governor.⁶² Brownback's election as governor came in 2010, a year when conservative Republicans adopted a radical "tea party" anti-tax rhetoric that sounded very similar to that of Posse Comitatus in the 1980s.⁶³

The violent and overtly racist rhetoric of Posse Comitatus may have been absent from conservative politicians in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, but it still found a foothold in disenchanted rural white men. The tactics of far-right groups increasingly moved towards paramilitary activity and away from seeking legal or political recourse, resulting in the militia movement of the 1990s. Former rural Iowans Randy and Vicki Weaver left their home state behind amid the 1980s Farm Crisis, sensing the impending Apocalypse was coming. Mixing in the far-right circles of Christian Identity and Posse Comitatus, the Weavers took their family to Ruby Ridge, Idaho. The Weavers became nationally renowned and far-right martyrs after an eleven-day standoff with the U. S. Marshalls Service and FBI in 1992. Federal law enforcement officials initially were attempting to serve a warrant to Randy Weaver for his failure to appear in federal court on firearms charges. The siege resulted in the death of a U. S. Marshall, the 14-year-old son of the Weavers, Sam, and Vicki. Combined with the Waco siege of 1993, the far-right militia groups began pushing for retaliation against a federal government they perceived as fighting a war against patriotic Christian white people.⁶⁴

Terry Nichols, like the Weavers, was disenchanted with rural life in Michigan in the wake of the farm crisis of the 1980s and followed the far-right ideology of Posse Comitatus and Christian Identity in the early 1990s with his Army friend, Timothy McVeigh. The two men

⁶² Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

⁶³ A. G. Sulzberger, "Brownback Victory Would Shift Kansas to Right," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2010, sec. Politics, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/22/us/politics/22brownback.html>.

⁶⁴ Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 143–48; Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys*, 134–41.

seethed with anger when they saw images of federal agents attacking men like themselves at Ruby Ridge and Waco. In rural central Kansas, from August 1994 to April 1995, Nichols and McVeigh gathered materials and constructed a truck bomb. On April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the Waco siege, McVeigh drove to Oklahoma City and detonated the truck bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The Oklahoma City bombing killed 168 people and injured nearly 700 more as it was the deadliest act of domestic terrorism ever committed in the United States.⁶⁵

Americans were aware of the disenchantment and disconnection felt by the far-right in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombings. In the 2000s, policymakers were more concerned with international terrorism following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks that overshadowed the threats posed by domestic extremists. The rise of the radical right in the tea party and alt-right movements of the 2010s culminated the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. While many observers were shocked at the widening gulf between rural and urban American, research into the 1980s farm crisis shows the gaps had roots in the closing decades of the 20th Century. While very few rural Kansans committed violence nor adopted overt rhetoric of Posse Comitatus and other far-right extremist groups, the legacy of radical neo-populism persisted well beyond the 1980s Farm Crisis. Kansas was not alone. These feelings persisted in the Great Plains and beyond. The decentralized and even atomistic nature of the far right in Kansas reveals the local nature of a widespread political movement which gave people who felt powerless an outlet to voice their anger.

⁶⁵ Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys*, 145–46; Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 147–48; Levitas, *The Terrorist next Door*, 302, 318–19.

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