

University of North Carolina at Asheville

For Christ and Country: The Vision and Ideals of William Pelley

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By

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On the night of January 31, 1933, William Dudley Pelley was at his office at Galahad College in Asheville, North Carolina. As he picked up the evening paper he read the headline stating that Adolph Hitler had been declared Chancellor of Germany. Without a pause, his reply was "Tomorrow, we have the Silver Shirts!"

With these words William D. Pelley created the Silver Shirt Legion, a right-wing Christian political group with a wide range of political and social goals, most importantly a return from the decadence that Pelley perceived was taking over the country, the disenfranchisement of Jews, and a return to the Christian values by which he had himself been raised. While never a staggeringly large organization, even in comparison to other extremist groups of the period, the Silver Shirts were notable in that they drew upon the full abilities of their founder to promote their cause. Through the sizeable amount of written work Pelley has left behind, it is possible to trace the development and progression of his vision for a new Christian America, and set it within the framework of other similar groups during the time period. The best avenue for understanding Pelley's vision is by the examination of *Liberation*, his main publication advocating the views of the Silver Shirts, and his extensive rapport with other like-minded groups.

### **A Brief Background on Political Climate, Pelley, and the Silver Shirts**

While the formation of the Silver Shirts and the publication of *Liberation* would not occur until the 1930s, the wheels were set in motion to allow for such groups to come into existence well beforehand. Perhaps the most important reason why the Silver Shirts were a viable entity in the 1930s was the impact of the Great Depression upon America. Two of the most easily observable results of the Depression were poverty and unemployment; Peter Fearon wrote that "Unemployment never smites the working

population with equal severity," noting that those working in manufacturing were hit relatively hard, while those employed by the federal government or in insurance companies fared much better." It is important to note those classes which bore the brunt of the Depression in studying the Silver Shirts, as it would be members of these classes who would later comprise the bulk of Silver Shirts membership. In a study conducted using a sample of 327 members, less than 6% were readily identifiable as above the middle class, the majority being working or "solid" middle class, which included small businessmen, teachers, and clergy.<sup>3</sup> Many of these people were still, comparably, less well off than those of the upper classes, and benefited little from the "inadequacy of welfare capitalism" that had begun to develop in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

Membership in the Silver Shirts was also encouraged by a sense of distrust of the current establishment. Historian Benjamin Friedman writes that the Depression was "the most subversive of belief in the free enterprise system and, more broadly, of confidence in the durability of Americans' freedoms and even of the republic itself."<sup>5</sup> When these Americans, feeling themselves disenfranchised, began to look for an outlet via which they could be represented, many found William Pelley. Particularly applicable to this situation is a statement made by Thomas Carlyle in his book *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History*, paraphrased by Edward Glaeser:

It is a literal fact. . . Printing . . . is equivalent to Democracy. . . Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures: the requisite thing is

" Peter Fearon, *War, Prosperity, & Depression: The U.S. Economy 1917-45* (UK: Peter Fearon Ltd., 1987): 137.

<sup>3</sup> Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1983): 65.

Elliot Rosen, *Roosevelt, the Great Depression, and the Economics of Recovery* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2005): 158.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin M. Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005): 158.

that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite. With his later prolific publishing businesses, Pelley's influence would be expanded by his ability to disseminate his views. The ability to reach large audiences with his numerous journals would be a vital aspect of the rise of the Silver Shirts.

William Dudley Pelley, as de facto leader of the Silver Shirts and prolific writer and publisher in the 1920s and 1930s, was a multifaceted man who held strongly to his views, which were not limited to political thought by any measure. Prior to the formation of the Silver Shirts, he had already established what could be considered, at the very least, an extensive collection of writings regarding topics such as metaphysics, the afterlife, religion, and social and cultural movements. Pelley was born in Lynn, Massachusetts on March 12, 1890, to a "staunch" Methodist family headed by his father, a minister.<sup>7</sup> Pelley himself, writing later in his autobiography, believed that his political views were a result of his upbringing, stating that "politics [has] much in common with religion - or for that matter citizenship itself... [Y]ou are born into all of them."<sup>8</sup>

While Pelley would owe much of his basic beliefs to his early life, he would develop his views to a greater extent during the following years. Throughout the 1910s Pelley was a journalist traveling through Russia and Japan, seeing first hand the results of the Bolshevik revolution and the Japanese expansion in Korea and Manchuria. These experiences would be key in the formation of some of his views later in life. Pelley would later describe Japan as "fighting the Christians' fight" against the "Communist

<sup>6</sup> Edward Glaeser and Claudia Goldin, ed. *Corruption and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006): 187.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2005): 1.

<sup>8</sup> *The Door to Revelation*, 21 .

Chinese."<sup>9</sup> Pelley would continue his written support of the Japanese cause throughout the lifespan of *Liberation*, including articles which depicted the Japanese troubles in China in 1938 as a result of "Jewish meddling" in the Chinese theater.<sup>10</sup> He would also reference his time in Russia, often describing the atrocities which he claimed to have seen during his time in the country.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1910s, Pelley would be forced to return to America due to financial complications; it would be this period of his life wherein he would propel himself to fame as a prominent novelist and screenplay writer in Hollywood.

Following his perceived revelation on the night that Adolph Hitler ascended to the Chancellorship in Germany, Pelley began his dramatic rise to leader of a national fascist movement, perhaps the first such group that was almost entirely homegrown in America. From 1931 to 1939, membership in the "Silver Shirt Legion of America" would explode, in some respects creating a cult of personality surrounding William Pelley. In cultivating the Silver Shirts, Pelley would draw first and foremost upon his own strict views regarding topics such as Jews, Communism, and morality. He would also notably draw much from the contacts which would develop during the 1930s between the Silver Shirts and other international pro-fascist organizations.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Liberation* (Asheville: Galahad Press) Dec. 9, 1933.

<sup>10</sup> *Liberation*, August 21, 1938.

Various articles reference these views, notably those in the April 15, 1933 and August 19, 1933 issues of *Liberation*.

Pelley's life prior to the formation of the Silver Shirts is perhaps best covered in his autobiography, however due to the extremely disorganized nature of this work, a citation would cover over fifty pages. For a brief summation of Pelley's travels abroad in both Europe and the Far East, one may refer to Ribuffo's *The Old Christian Right*, pages 33 to 34, or Chapter 2 of Beekman's *William Dudley Pelley* for more in depth coverage.

<sup>13</sup> Pelley attributes much of the development of his own basic views to his upbringing, as stated in *Door to Revelation* on page 21. The further development of Pelley's views through the 1920s and 1930s is quite clearly detailed in *Door to Revelation*, notably pages 147 and 204 regarding "religious experiences" which would later be incorporated into *Liberation* articles, and also through his extensive contact with organizations abroad, most importantly Deutsche Fichte Bund chairman Oscar Pfau.

## **Existing Historiography of Pelley and the Silver Shirts**

Perhaps the leading scholar on the personal life and experiences of William Pelley is Scott Beekman, the author of the only significant work covering both the life of Pelley himself as well as the history of Silver Shirts. In his book, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*, he details the numerous forces which acted upon Pelley during his life, from his travels throughout Europe, Russia and Asia as a journalist for a number of popular and prominent magazines during the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in the West and the neo-imperialism of the Meiji government in Japan. Beekman's work is also the only notable source which references Pelley's time in Europe and also his successful career as a screenwriter and author in Hollywood. The final portion of the book is also important, as it examines not only Pelley's stand against the American government and eventual dissolution of the Silver Shirts, but also his final years as an author writing works solely of a metaphysical nature. Beekman conducted perhaps the most extensive study of Pelley, going so far as interviewing living relatives for his book. This is the only full biography of Pelley that appears to have been published, barring Pelley's disorganized, self-published autobiography titled *The Door to Revelation*.

There are few other scholars who have written to a decent extent on Pelley (and more specifically the Silver Shirts), other than Leo P. Ribuffo, author of *The Old Christian Right and Protestants on the Right: William Dudley Pelley, Gerald B. Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith*. In *The Old Christian Right*, Ribuffo correctly places Pelley and the Silver Shirts within the sphere of Protestant ring-wing movements, and provides a concise introduction to the life of Pelley prior to his trial for sedition in 1942. He does

this despite devoting less than sixty pages of this book to the topic of William Pelley. In *Protestants on the Right*, the political involvement of Pelley and the Silver Shirts is examined to a slightly deeper extent. This work is, given the devotion of over two thirds of the book to other right-wing figures, far less important historiographically than Beekman's book.

Following Ribuffo and Beekman, there is little in the way of work outside of scholarly journals which makes any great mention of either Pelley or the Silver Shirts movement. Frederic Jaher, in his book *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: the Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America*, makes brief mention of both in regards to Pelley's anti-Semitic views and his denial of Jesus' Jewish heritage.<sup>15</sup> Martin Dies, writing in 1977, devotes a brief portion of one of his many books, *The Trojan Horse in America*, to Pelley and the Silver Shirts. This book focuses largely on what Dies calls Pelley's "un-American activities," and his conclusions are based on Pelley's extreme vocal opposition to the American government and his anti-Semitic views.<sup>16</sup> Martin Marty, in his book entitled *Modern American Religion*, focuses upon Pelley's attempt at the presidency in 1936, when he ran on the ticket of his self-formed and Silver Shirt-supported Christian Party. Within this book, a respectable amount of space is devoted to covering the intertwining of religion and politics in groups such as the German American Bund and the Silver Shirts in particular during the 1930s.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate, using sources which have not been referenced in previous studies of the topic, the extent to which Pelley and the Silver Shirts were connected to other international political groups, and that the development of

<sup>14</sup> *The Old Christian Right*, 25-79.

<sup>15</sup> Frederic Jaher, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994), 247.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Dies, *The Trojan Horse in America* (Manchester: Ayer Press, 1977), 324-331.

these ties was appropriately reflected in the content of *Liberation*, the main outlet for Pelley's views. Records of communication between the most important of these other groups, the Deutsche Fichte Bund, and the Silver Shirts are quite numerous, and are preserved in the form of court transcripts of a trial in which Pelley stood charged with securities fraud in North Carolina. By using primarily these sources, the intent herein is to demonstrate the extensive ties which both Pelley and the Silver Shirts had with numerous international pro-fascist groups, and to detail the progression of *Liberation* from a publication primarily concerned with domestic affairs, to one which professed an extremist view along with the development of these contacts and Pelley's own views.

**The Development of Pelley's Views in tandem with *Liberation*** The formation of the Silver Shirts came in 1933 on the day after Hitler's ascension to the chancellorship of Germany. Pelley created the Silver Shirts, he would later recount, due to a "spiritual vision" he experienced in New York in the 1920s stating that he should take the "coming to power in Germany of a young painter" as the signal to form his own organization.<sup>17</sup> He acted upon this apparent vision and created the Silver Shirts Legion, a group which has been rightly called the most Right-Wing and anti-Semitic group in America during its time. One of the foremost points of the group was a strong adherence to the belief that "the Hebrews", as Pelley often called modern Jews, were secretly conspiring not only to drain America of her finances, but also to control the country from "secret cartels" in Europe orchestrating the infiltration of all levels of government, notably Congress and the Presidential Cabinet.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *The Door to Revelation*, 261.

<sup>18</sup> The supposed extent of the "Hebrew infiltration" is laid out in nearly every issue of *Liberation* published from 1933 to 1938. Of particular note in concern to the infiltration of "cartels" is the July 8, 1933 issue, wherein the "three particularities of the Jew" are explained.

The vision which Pelley alleged received in New York which led to the foundation of the Silver Shirts was far from the only such experience he claimed to have had. In March of 1928, he wrote an article for *The American Magazine* entitled "Seven Minutes in Eternity" wherein he apparently met two hooded figures who told him that the body is merely a vessel for the spirit, among other things, and that more would be revealed to him as needed.<sup>19</sup> This experience, although vague even to readers of *Seven Minutes in Eternity*, was the pivotal experience in his life, and marked the beginning of his "spiritual work." More importantly, it gave him cause to claim the ability to write about metaphysical matters in many of his works, including *Liberation*, often titling the articles as "psychically received."<sup>20</sup>

Pelley also based his philosophies greatly upon "pyramidologist" David Davidson and a group known as the British-Israelites. He "turned [Davidson's] ideas in a direction neither their author nor other British Israelites would have approved [...] and integrated Davidson's work into an unabashedly anti-Semitic political movement."<sup>21</sup> He did this by drawing lines between an already shaky outlook concerning the importance of dates relating to the measurement of pyramids and the ability to foretell future events in line with Davidson's theories. While the name "British-Israelites" may suggest a connection with modern Israel or those of Jewish conviction, Pelley believed that modern Europeans were the true successors of Abraham and the proper children of Israel.<sup>22</sup> This means that, according to his beliefs, modern non-European Jews were *not* the true successors of

<sup>19</sup> William Dudley Pelley, "Seven Minutes in Eternity: The Amazing Experience that Made Me Over," *The American Magazine* (March, 1928): 139.

<sup>20</sup> Throughout the publication life of *Liberation*, a great number of articles began being subtitled "psychically received", the most notable increase in references occurring during the fall of 1933.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1983): 53.

Abraham. Surprisingly, there were more than a few members of the British-Israelites who shared similar views and additionally later enrolled in the Silver Shirts.<sup>22</sup>

Pelley was greatly influenced by the work of other anti-Semites even if he did largely bend their ideas to his own specific brand of anti-Semitism. Perhaps foremost among those whose work and ideals he admired was Adolph Hitler. Writing in the July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1938 issue of *Liberation*, Pelley claimed that he was "the first man in the United States to step out openly in support of Adolph Hitler"<sup>23</sup>. Additionally, a letter from Pelley's publishing company in the 1930s to a member of the Fichte Society in Germany enthusiastically states: "... I hope the day comes when we may give more attention to German[y] and the achievements of the National Socialists. [...] I see the pattern forming in Germany of things that are to be, in our own individualistic way, in this country."<sup>24</sup> The admiration which many key figures in the Silver Shirts held for the National Socialist party is made abundantly clear in letters such as these.

It is not readily determinable, however, exactly how much Pelley relied upon the works of the National Socialists to create his own political ideas. While the views of the Silver Shirts and the National Socialists do coincide in a great number of areas, specifically in the areas of anti-Semitism and anti-communism which form the basis of Pelley's particular ideology, they also diverge in a number of key places, specifically the question of religion. Pelley considered himself an ardent Christian by virtue of birth and practice, and devoted a great deal of time to writing about religion in almost all of his works, including *Liberation*. While there exist other journals which Pelley published

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 53, 92+.

<sup>23</sup> *Liberation*, July 28, 1938.

<sup>24</sup> State of North Carolina v. William Dudley Pelley. Supreme Court of NC, Buncome County. June, 1942. Exhibit 40c.

which had much more religious overtones, notably *Reality*, which was devoted almost entirely to metaphysical and religious topics. Many of these other journals, however, lacked the extensive political rhetoric of *Liberation*, and they were thus not particularly concerned with the international themes which *Liberation* commonly contained.

The Silver Shirts had, by the mid-1930s, established extensive contacts with foreign right-wing political and ideological groups. Foremost among these was the Deutsche Fichte Bund, or the German Fichte Society, a group which scholar Nelson Edmondson referred to as a "chapter in Germany's Conservative Revolution" ~ - effectively a string of events resulting in the National Socialist Party gaining power in Germany and ending with the nation's defeat in World War Two. The Fichte Society was essentially a Christian nationalistic group whose effective purpose by the 1930s was the reinvention and "strengthening [of] the appreciation of German cultural heritage" through lecture, discussion, and publication. While the importance of the Fichte society in Germany past the middle of the 1930s is debatable, the relations expressed in these letters certainly took a number of years to build up, and contributed a great deal to the formation of views within the Silver Shirts, and most importantly those of Pelley himself.

The correspondence which Pelley and the Silver Shirts carried out with the Fichte Society is of particular importance in examining the aims and goals of the Silver Shirts movement. By the spring of 1939 there was a considerable rapport established between many members of the Silver Shirts, notably between those working in the publishing offices and headquarters of the Silver Shirts in Asheville, North Carolina, and Oscar C. Pfau, the director of the Fichte society in Hamburg, Germany. Alfred H. Talpey, an

<sup>25</sup> Nelson Edmondson, "The Fichte Society: A Chapter In Germany's Conservative Revolution." *Journal of Modern History* 38, no. 2 (June, 1966): 161.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 165-167.

employee in the Asheville publishing offices owned by Pelley was one of the main correspondents with Pfaus and others in Germany. It is clear that there was considerable trust between these men, as noted in a letter from Pfaus to Talpey stamped August 2, 1939, in which Pfaus inquires into the matter of a man turning up at the Washington, D.C. offices of Pelley: "tell me more about his s[ecret?]. activities, his name, etc. One never knows when information like this might be needed."<sup>27</sup> Given the apparent paranoid style in which much correspondence originating from the Silver Shirts is written, it would seem extremely out of place for Pfaus and Talpey to converse regarding such internal matters were there not a strong link between the groups the two represented.

Of particular interest in examining the ties between these groups is one of the earliest letters from the "Pelley files" seized by North Carolina authorities during a raid on the Asheville publishing offices for securities fraud in the late 1930s. In a letter dated February 4, Oscar Pfaus signs his name as "formerly of Chicago and the S.S."<sup>28</sup> While the reference of "S.S." is unclear, the connection with Chicago may point to Pfaus himself being a member of the Silver Shirts during his time in America, as there was a

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Chicago branch of the Silver Shirts in operation well before December, 1933." The implication that the head of a large ideological movement in Germany may have held membership in the Silver Shirts Legion is an extremely important point in the study of the Silver Shirts movement, especially given that such correspondence occurred on the eve of war in Europe and the later troubles which would befall the Silver Shirts as William Pelley appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> State of North Carolina v. William Dudley Pelley. Exhibit S-37.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, Exhibit S-32.

<sup>29</sup> *Liberation*, December 30, 1933.

<sup>30</sup> *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*, 127-128.

The existence of direct, high level political contact between the Silver Shirts and the Nazi German government has never been adequately revealed. There was however a strong indirect link between the two - according to Beekman, members of groups "backed by Germany" were made "charter members of the American branch of the German Nazi Party" which would later become the famous German-American Bund, with which the Silver Shirts had extensive high level contacts and correspondence.<sup>31</sup> In direct opposition to this link between the two groups, Lawrence Brown, an editorial researcher at the Asheville offices of the Silver Shirts wrote to G. A. Schon, a member of the Detroit chapter of the Silver Shirts, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1939, declaring that: "We state correctly we have no official connections with official Germany, and that is 100 percent true, but oftentimes correspondence with non-political organizations would be twisted and misconstrued."<sup>32</sup> It is not stated in this letter whether there were unofficial connections with "official Germany," as Brown calls it. There are a number of letters existing in the Pelley files which show that a number of Germans in important positions were well read in Silver Shirts' literature and vice-versa. Evidence also exists referencing members of the Fichte Society holding permanent subscriptions not only to the Silver Shirts magazines, including *Liberation*, but also holding permanent subscriptions to all larger materials, such as those books written by Pelley independent of the specific Silver Shirts-related material.<sup>33</sup>

The rapport which the Silver Shirts had with persons and groups in Germany extends beyond just members of the Fichte society. Dr. Hermann J. Boldt, in particular, a world-renowned German doctor and surgeon at the time, appears to have had extensive

<sup>31</sup> *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> State of North Carolina v. William Dudley Pelley. Exhibit S-38.

<sup>33</sup> State of North Carolina v. William Dudley Pelley. 257+.

correspondence with the Silver Shirts. In a letter dated April 22<sup>nd</sup>, Boldt wrote to Talpey: "Please ask Mr. Pelley if there is anything with which I can serve him in Germany, since I am going to be in a number of cities where I am well known: Berlin [...] etc. I shall be glad to serve him."<sup>34</sup> The letter continues on into a rant regarding the Jewish origins of a Mr. and Mrs. Perkins, apparently having gone so far as to inquire into Mrs. Perkins' birth records in Boston and supposing that both she and her husband had changed their names, apparently to hide their Jewish roots.<sup>34</sup> This letter is chronologically the first contained within "the Pelley Files" to include such an extensive display of anti-Semitism, and one of the more personal examples of correspondence to display such views.

There were additional contacts with other groups in both Italy and England as well. There is evidence that in England, a group known as the British Union of Fascists also held permanent subscriptions to *Liberation*. Kenneth Duffield, Assistant District Leader for Propaganda for the Union made such inquiries in the late 1930s.<sup>35</sup> The connection with Italian groups is much more concrete, notably the group entitled "The World Problem of Rome." A letter from the Silver Shirts headquarters dated February 2<sup>nd</sup> references "information regarding Secretary of State Hull's activities," and makes further evidence of the Silver Shirts' political stance: "In view of the fact that our President and our foreign office, are doing all possible to foment troubles between this country and Italy, Germany, and Japan, we should be glad to have this information [regarding Hull's activities] for editorial purposes".<sup>3</sup> These sorts of communications between members of the Silver Shirts and other groups occur frequently in the files seized from Pelley's Asheville publication offices, and it is of particular importance that

<sup>34</sup> State of North Carolina v. William Dudley Pelley. Exhibit S-41a. <sup>33</sup> Ibid, Exhibit S-42. <sup>36</sup> Ibid, Exhibit S-50.

many of these groups with which the Silver Shirts corresponded were in nations with right-wing governments already in power, such as Italy and Germany.

The connections to other political groups are not limited solely to those in foreign countries. Groups within America also held keen interest in the views of Pelley and the Silver Shirts, and especially espoused interest in *Liberation* itself. The German American Bund, for example, made repeated and consistent requests for copies of *Liberation*, and also purchased abnormally large numbers of other literature written by Pelley, such as *What Every Congressman Should Know*, a pamphlet which essentially is one of many rambling writings regarding the supposed infiltration of the United States government by Jews with ulterior motives.<sup>37</sup> Notably missing, however, is evidence of connections with many other major political and ideological groups within America itself. There is no evidence that groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, for example, held much interest in the Silver Shirts or the literature published by Pelley, and vice-versa. While to some extent these groups held similar views, it appears that the aims of these groups or their fundamental beliefs did not coincide in a sufficient manner as to warrant correspondence.

Also lacking are connections with groups in Russia or Japan. Both of these are countries in which Pelley spent a great deal of time in the 1910s while working as a journalist. Despite a significant number of articles published during his time in Russia, it appears that the locus of his work at the time was developing his anti-Semitic and anti-communist views. In particular, he later wrote of this time that it provided him with a first hand account of the "horrors" that arise when Communism takes over a country<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *State of North Carolina v. William Pelley*, Exhibit S-39

<sup>38</sup> *Liberation*, December 16, 1933.

and the perceived "Jewish-Communist Threat" demanded a response. He would write in detail, although largely incorrectly, of Communism in *Liberation* throughout the years.

It is abundantly clear that it was not for lack of perceived similar goals that relations were not established with Japanese organizations. Pelley and the Silver Shirts to an extent seemed to admire the Japanese, noting that they are "amazingly resilient to Jewish infiltration" and have done well to protect their country in that respect. In the December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1933 issue of *Liberation*, a headline reads: "The 'Heathen Japs' Fight the Battle of the Christians" and continues on to declare that "Japan, by throwing the gauge of battle to Communistic China at the present time, has been really engaged in fighting the true battle of Christian America for her own survival."<sup>40</sup> The article also mentions that America, under control of the Jews, is intent on sending both the Pacific and Atlantic fleets to the Philippines in a "show of force" intending to deter Japan from declaring war on Russia, the only measure which would save Japan from obliteration at the hands of Jews.<sup>41</sup> The question as to why contacts were not established in Japan may have simply been a result of the notable cultural and social differences between America and Japan at the time, or perhaps even a problem of language; the true answer, sadly, will likely never be revealed.

The point that the Silver Shirts had more extensive contact with European political and ideological organizations than those in other areas does not diminish the fact that within America the publications of Pelley appear to be widely read. Numerous groups within America, including the German-American Bund, held permanent

<sup>39</sup> David Lobb, "Fascist Apocalypse: William Pelley and Millennial Extremism" *Journal of Millennial Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 2 (Winter 2000).

<sup>40</sup> *Liberation*, December 9, 1933.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

subscriptions to *Liberation* and also routinely requested in excess of fifty copies of other works such as pamphlets and bound books. There was also a sufficient outlet for the material being created by the Silver Shirts to warrant the continued operation of the wide-range of publications that they produced. While many of Pelley's previous journals had floundered and gone bankrupt, the extensive lifespan of *Liberation* which totaled nearly a decade indicates that there was at the very least a sufficient subscriber base to support the operation.<sup>43</sup> Pelley also apparently had sufficient funding to cover his near-continual tours of the United States to speak at Silver Shirts conventions and also to support a sizeable staff in the Asheville publishing offices, a status that could not have been supported without a sufficient number of subscribers.

Before the creation of the Silver Shirts in 1933, *Liberation* had already been in existence as the *New Liberator*, a magazine which, while billed as a journal intended to be devoted to political discourse, ended up rather as a magazine which combined metaphysical topics with rants against the government and Jews.<sup>44</sup> The details of this change are laid out in the April 15, 1933 issue of *Liberation*, the first issue under the new title.<sup>44</sup> *New Liberator* in itself was never a successful publication, and experienced a five month delay in the release of its second issue due to funding problems. ~ Even when funding was acquired, it was clear that the journal was ailing from a lack of subscriptions<sup>4</sup>. With its name changed to *Liberation* and acting as the "new weekly organ of the Silver Legion"<sup>47</sup>, membership in the Silver Shirts was effectively linked to

<sup>42</sup> *State of North Carolina v. William Pelley*, exhibit S-39.

*William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*, 6-16.

<sup>44</sup> *Liberation*, April 15, 1933.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Policy, Door to Revelation*, 261.

subscription to the magazine. With subscription free to members for a time, *New Liberator* finally found an audience albeit with a somewhat altered format, and would not again experience significant difficulty until the Asheville publishing offices were raided

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on suspicion of securities fraud.

With membership in the Silver Shirts tightly wound into the reading of *Liberation*, Pelley could claim his first extensively successful dissemination of a self-published journal. While other journals which Pelley published, such as *Reality* experienced fairly long publication runs, none could match the popularity of *Liberation*. Evidence was presented by Martin Dies that from January to July of 1938, the Asheville publishing office sent more than 1,100 shipments to the West Coast alone.<sup>49</sup> While not all of these shipments may be attributed solely to subscribers of *Liberation*, there does exist evidence of at least a partial number of confirmed sympathizers to Pelley's cause in Washington State. Pelley ran in the 1936 Presidential election on the ticket of the Christian Party, which amounted to the Silver Shirts' own official political organization, and secured over 1,500 votes in Washington, the only state where he was listed on the ballot.<sup>50</sup>

It has been established by scholars, predominantly Beekman and Ribuffo, that Illinois, California, and Washington were the states where the Silver Shirts had their largest member bases. In the December 1933 issue of *Liberation*, plans were laid out for the creation of nine separate districts within America for the better organization of the Silver Shirts that included instructions for members to first contact their district office before mailing headquarters directly, due to an overflow of mail/ The final page of this

<sup>48</sup> William Dudley Pelley: *A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*, 107-110.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Dies, *The Trojan Horse in America*, 328.

<sup>50</sup> Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right*, 114.

"*Liberation*, December 30, 1933.

issue ends with "The year 1933 saw the Silver Shirts born. The year 1934 will see them expand to a staggering influence."<sup>52</sup>

The growing ranks of the Silver Shirts and Pelley's plans to run for the 1936 presidential election on the ticket of the Christian Party demanded a further dissemination of information regarding the new order which he had planned. The ideas for the new, Christian America which the Silver Shirts would supposedly usher in was detailed throughout the first half of the nine year run of *Liberation* and its predecessors, as well as through numerous additional pamphlets, most importantly *No More Hunger*. This pamphlet in particular detailed the points upon which the "Christ Democracy" would be established: opposition to all things socialist or communist, referendum on all bills by voters via weekly digest, all bills requiring at least 51% of the vote to pass.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, United States would be organized into a "corporation" with every citizen both a common and preferred stockholder, the establishment of regulations to prevent future takeovers of the country by outside influences, Jews in particular, and the requirement that only members of the "Christian Militia", in other words members of the Silver Shirts, may be elected to office.<sup>54</sup>

Pelley considered the ultimate goal of the Silver Shirts to be establishing a Christian Democracy in America, writing that "[...] the piece de resistance of The Silver Legion was the ultimate setting up of the Christian Commonwealth."<sup>55</sup> He expands upon the goals of the movement laying out in an issue of *Liberation* the "Five Indubitable

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> American Jewish Committee, *The Silver Shirts: Their History, Founder and Activities*, Bulletin No. 3 (August 24, 1933, accessed September 15, 2007); Available from [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/THR-SS 1 .PDF](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/THR-SS 1 .PDF); internet.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Pelley, *Door to Revelation*, 262.

Activities" that the Silver Legion was to perform. The first among these was the "enlighten[ment of] the citizens of this nation in the nature and identities of the persons and agencies working current diableries"<sup>56</sup> - diableries being a reference to the perceived ill-intentioned acts being performed. This passage is a clear reference to the unwanted infiltration of Jews in the government that Pelley believed was occurring. Second was the election to office of men "secretly committed" to the principles of the Silver Shirts.<sup>57</sup>

The final three goals, while less extreme, demonstrate some important points in the ideology of the Silver Shirts. The third accused government agencies of being "impotent to deal with the national crime situation" and stated that *"The Silver Shirts are no[t]T* This article continues on to state that the Silver Shirts can "demonstrate ways to make this a land where safety of property and life are inviolate."<sup>58</sup> The fourth goal stated that the nation was in the stranglehold of cartels based in Europe, which in some way affected the Great Depression upon America, and that the Silver Shirts know of ways to destroy the "Money-Bund" and rehabilitate the country." The final goal was the reorganization of all charities such that no charity officers will receive any salaries from funds donated, instead diverting 100 percent of the donations to the needy.<sup>60</sup> Who would administer these charities was never made clear, but the existence of the fifth goal shows at least some intention to create a more just society in America.

It is clear that the Silver Shirts were dependent upon Pelley for instruction, and although the "Christ Democracy" was never realized, his views nevertheless struck a chord with a significant number of people at the time. Without his extensive writing, the

<sup>56</sup> *Liberation*, March 4, 1933.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

organization would have lacked the figurehead it needed, and without the founding father of the movement, would likely have never come into being. The extensive use of *Liberation*, correctly called "the most pro-Nazi and racist publication in the United States," as well as other mediums such as pamphlets and newsletters, allowed Pelley to spread his message throughout the world.<sup>61</sup> Standing as such an incredibly radical movement, even in comparison to other extremist groups in the nation during the time, the Silver Shirts espoused the ideals of a man with a deep seated hatred of Jews, their religion, and Communism above all. It is perhaps justifiable that Pelley has been referred to as the "American Hitler," and not without cause that George Lincoln, the leader of the later American Nazi party, would look to groups such as the Silver Shirts to gauge the potential numbers to which his group could swell.

In the 1940s, the Silver Shirt movement began to come undone. As the war in Europe began, most Americans favored neutrality, and Roosevelt was clear in his support of the Allies.<sup>63</sup> Those in America proposing alignment with Germany became increasingly alienated, and many of Pelley's fellow extremists began to come under fire from the government - "the leadership of the German-American Bund was the first to fall afoul" of the new laws strictly prohibiting any form of opposition from the extreme right, and other groups, such as the Charles Lindbergh's America First Committee were outmaneuvered by campaigns against them.<sup>64</sup> In late 1940s, the Silver Shirts were disbanded, and shortly later Pelley's trial for securities fraud began - it was the first of

<sup>61</sup> Robert L. Jenkins and Johnpeter H. Grill, "The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?" *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 38, No. 4. (Nov, 1992): 679.

<sup>62</sup> Frederick J. Simonelli, *American Fuehrer* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999): 107.

<sup>63</sup> Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley*, 131.

<sup>64</sup> "The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s", 679.

two major trials, the second being for sedition, which would silence Pelley politically until his death in 1965.

In January of 1941, Pelley disbanded the Silver Shirt Legion in accordance with an agreement he had previously made with Martin Dies, chair of the House Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>65</sup> By this period in time, however, the Silver Shirts were already in a "downward spiral" of sorts. Beekman notes that with the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the end was in sight for the Silver Shirts - most Americans favored neutrality in the conflict, and those groups and people who loudly declared their support for Germany and dissent found themselves increasingly under pressure from the government.<sup>66</sup> It was perhaps the testimony of former Silver Shirts member Henry Allen who provided "particularly damaging details" to the committee who sealed the fate of the Legion, as Pelley would eventually be called before the committee in August of 1939 to testify.<sup>67</sup> Rather than appearing before the committee, Pelley ignored the subpoena and even went to the extreme of evading authorities and then publishing articles in *Liberation* as to how "he had outwitted them".

The first of two final blows to Pelley came in 1942, when a North Carolina judge ordered him to serve two to three years for violation of his probation terms stemming from the 1939 securities fraud case. The second, on April 4, 1942, occurred when Pelley was arrested and charged with seditious activities under the 1917 Espionage Act by FBI agents in Darien, Connecticut.<sup>69</sup> The trial for sedition was for all intents and purposes never in doubt; first-hand reports by witnesses including Charles Lindbergh and two

<sup>65</sup> *The Old Christian Right*, 76.

<sup>66</sup> *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*.<sup>69</sup>

*Ibid*, 137.

former congressmen report that the defense team was completely inept, at one point accidentally referring to Pelley as "Mr. Hitler" during questioning.<sup>70</sup> On August 15, 1942, Pelley was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. He would be given parole in 1950 under the restriction that he not engage in political activities, marking the end of any opportunity to form a new movement. Pelley's spent his remaining years writing purely spiritual and metaphysical works, and he would die on July 1, 1965 of heart failure in Noblesville, Indiana.<sup>71</sup>

Pelley and the Silver Shirts laid the groundwork for extreme anti-Semitic and anti-communist groups to come, although in some respects he was, perhaps accidentally, longer lived politically than he should have been. His intense hatred of communism likely granted him some initial immunity from the House Un-American Activities Committee, but by the end of 1939 he would begin to fall more and more under their scrutiny. The particular mix of metaphysics, religion, and political views which combined to form the focus of the Silver Shirts movement has not been replicated any other group in America since the fall of the Silver Shirts, and in many ways the group represents the ability of certain people in certain circumstances to accomplish astounding and quite uncommon feats. It was not, however, solely the work of William Pelley which formulated the views of the Silver Shirts but rather Pelley would draw upon many external sources for his inspiration in the creation of his vision, and it would ultimately be this vision which led to his downfall.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 158.

## Primary Works Cited

American Jewish Committee, *The Silver Shirts: Their History, Founder and Activities*, Bulletin No. 3, August 24, 1933, accessed 13 September 2007; available from [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/THR-SS 1 .PDF](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/THR-SS 1 .PDF); internet. This bulletin is of interest in that it depicts not only the views which may have been held by Jews during the time period regarding the Silver Shirts, but also in that the article shows that the American public was, at least to a degree, aware of the Silver Shirts movement. Especially important is that this article lays out quite clearly the fundamental views of the Silver Shirts in 1933.

Dies, Martin. *The Trojan Horse in America*. Manchester: Ayer Press, 1977. Martin Dies had a number of encounters with William Pelley, most notably during the House Un-American Activities commission. As a member of this committee, he had first hand access to research and information regarding Pelley and the Silver Shirts which is not readily available in many other sources. Although this work is written nearly 35 years after he initially meets William Pelley, it is nevertheless largely concerned with the events that occurred, and the groups which existed during the 1930s and 1940s. Pelley, William D. *The Door to Revelation*. Asheville: Galahad Press, n.d. William Pelley's autobiography, despite being disorganized and to an extent incoherent in some parts, is nevertheless one of the most insightful works available regarding his personal views. Additionally, this book, while rare, is one of the best available for the study of Pelley's early life.

—. "Seven Minutes in Eternity: The Amazing Experience that Made Me Over," *The American Magazine*, March, 1928.

This article is particularly important in that it describes the experience which gave rise to much of the metaphysical side of Pelley's views. These metaphysical views would be particularly important in the years immediately preceding the formation of the Silver Shirts, and the years following the group's disbandment. With this experience, Pelley had effectively established a precedent for inferring that ideas he would propose were received from supernatural beings. *Liberation Weekly*. Ed. William Pelley. Asheville: Galahad Press, February 19, 1933.

Part of UNC Asheville Special Collections, William Pelley Collection. This journal was, as described by Pelley, the political organ of the Silver Shirts movement. It would be through this journal that many of Pelley's views would be distributed to the nation. This journal is perhaps the best available resource for the study of the development and propagation of these views. *State of North Carolina v. William Pelley*. Superior Court of North Carolina, Buncombe

County. June, 1942 transcript copy. Part of North Carolina Collection at Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, North Carolina.

This transcript covers the trial for securities fraud under North Carolina's Blue Sky laws. While the testimony contained within is of little importance, the evidence submitted by the state is an invaluable tool for the study of the Silver Shirts and William Pelley. Of particular importance is the fact that few secondary sources regarding these topics make reference to this transcript or the wealth of information contained therein, which exists largely in the form of letters and files seized by the state during a raid on Pelley's Asheville publishing offices.

Secondary Works Cited Barkun, Michael. *Religion and the Racist Right*. Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1994.

This book is particularly concerned with the "Christian Identity Movement" and is important in that it describes the Silver Shirts in relation to other groups with a Christian stance in their views. The majority of the work, however, is primarily concerned with more "legitimate" Christian groups which held, at least to an extent, to more mainstream versions of Christian ideologies, unlike the Silver Shirts. Beekman, Scott. *William Dudley Pelley : A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*.

Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005.

This is perhaps the most well researched and comprehensive work covering both the life of William Dudley Pelley, as well as the Silver Shirts organization. Particularly important is the devotion which Beekman gives to much of Pelley's early life, which is conspicuously absent from nearly all other works regarding the topic. Fearon, Peter. *War, Prosperity, & Depression: The U.S. Economy 1917-45*. UK: Philip

Allan Ltd., 1987.

In much the same vein as *Corruption and Reform*, this work is primarily concerned with the effects of the economy on Americans from 1917 to 1945. As this time frame corresponds quite well to the years in which Pelley and the Silver Shirts were most active, this work lends itself quite well to determining the atmosphere of the time period with which this essay is concerned. Friedman, Benjamin A. *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*. New York,

Knopff, 2005.

Covering in great detail four separate sections of development, these being the development and growth of ideas, democracy in America, European democracies, and political issues during the time with which this essay is concerned, Friedman's book is an invaluable resource in providing a glimpse as to how people viewed the obligations of government during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The perceived inability of government to fulfill its obligations during the Great Depression would, thus, propel a large number of people to join the Silver Shirts, and as such this book has been referenced due to its in depth research and statistics regarding the time period. Glaeser, Edward, and Claudia Goldin, ed. *Corruption and Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006.

This book is a collection of essays particularly concerned with early 20<sup>th</sup> century American politics. The major theme of many of the essays are the effects of policy upon the citizens of the country, which is useful in examining the mindset of peoples living during the time period, and thus the ideas of those who may be inclined to join groups such as the Silver Shirts. Jaher, Frederic. *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994.

This book is primarily concerned with anti-semitism in America, although some time is spent explaining that which occurred in Europe. There is mention made of both Pelley and the Silver Shirts, and some of Pelley's views on anti-semitism are described in appropriate detail.

Jenkins, Robert L. and Grill, Johnpeter H. "The Nazis in the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?" *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Nov, 1992).

This article concerns itself largely with the development and growth of National Socialist movements in the South. There is a section devoted to the Silver Shirts, and the depiction given to the movement is both in-depth and easily understood in the context in which this article places the group. Lobb, David. "Fascist Apocalypse : William Pelley and Millennial Extremism."

*Journals of Millennial Studies*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (Winter, 2000).

This article is important in that it is one of the few works which references the Millennial views of William Pelley. These views are fundamental in the foundation of the Silver Shirts, notably the "Pyramid dates" which Pelley uses for many of his announcements, such as the foundation of the Silver Shirts.

Ribuffo, Leo. *The Old Christian Right*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983.

Ribuffo's work here is one of the most comprehensive available in regards to William Pelley. That said, it is still on the short side, being also concerned with two other leaders during the time period. Despite the short length of the section given to Pelley and the Silver Shirts, this work is still in many respects invaluable in the study of this topic. —.

"Protestants on the Right: William Dudley Pelley, Gerald B. Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith". PhD. Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1977.

Ribuffo's dissertation appears to be the basis for his later work, *The Old Christian Right*. Regardless of this fact, it does include information which is not available within his later book regarding William Pelley.

Rosen, Elliot A. *Roosevelt, the Great Depression, and the Economics of Recovery*.

Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2005.

This book focuses much more on the period of the Great Depression and the years which immediately following, thus providing a reference for the time period from the Silver Shirts' formation until their disbandment.

Simonelli, Frederick J. *American Fuehrer*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

Although primarily concerned with the American Nazi Party post-1950, this book does mention that later Nazi leaders in America would draw to an extent on Pelley's work. In particular, Simonelli notes that later leaders would gauge potential membership by examining the constituency of the Silver Shirts.