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Idaho resurfaces for a new generation as a Western refuge of the radical right

In this Oct. 28, 2000, photo, white supremacist Richard Butler speaks at an Aryan Nations rally in Coeur d'Alene. TOM DAVENPORT AP FILE

BY MICHAEL WILNER

UPDATED JULY 22, 2022 2:16 PM



Counterterrorism experts and U.S. officials are watching the evolution of extremism in Idaho with alarm.



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Hate in Idaho

"Some cry 'ETHNOSTATE!! I say 'Idaho,'" one white nationalist wrote on a messaging app. In search of an "ethnic enclave," far-right leaders have stationed themselves in the Western red state. Counterterrorism experts are now flagging Idaho as a cause for concern as they watch the presence of hate groups with alarm. This two-part series exposes the length to which Idaho has become a bastion for white nationalists who seek a future generation of extremists.

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Extremists arrested en masse on June 11 in Idaho's idyllic lakeside city of Coeur d'Alene came from all over the country. The Patriot Front's leader traveled from Texas, and followers joined from the Midwest, the Deep South, and across the border in Washington. Of [all 31 people arrested that day](#), seeking to disrupt an LGBTQ pride celebration with a potentially violent riot, only two were Idaho residents.

Yet some locals had their own plans to protest.

The pride alliance of North Idaho expressed concern that [the Panhandle Patriots Riding Club](#), a far-right group, intentionally scheduled its annual "Gun d'Alene" rally downtown to coincide with its June 11 event at a local park. Facebook and Telegram posts reviewed by McClatchy from members of the Panhandle Patriots and other aligned groups featured calls for warfare and an "operation order" for militia to come armed wearing red. Two posts promoted the use of snipers against adults attending pride. Multiple groups were mobilized.

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[d'Alene's mayor](#), Jim Hammond, after the arrests. "We are past that."

But Idaho may be going in a more ominous direction. Counterterrorism experts and U.S. officials are watching the evolution of extremism in Idaho with alarm, as the state that has won hard-fought victories against entrenched but isolated extremist groups becomes a refuge for a broader range of far-right ideologies.

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An attendee waves a flag at the 6th annual Pride in the Park celebration in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, on June 11, 2022. North Idaho Pride Alliance *North Idaho Pride Alliance*

“We are looking at a resurgence in this type of activity, whether it be white nationalism, white supremacy, anti-government rhetoric — a combination of them all,” said Josh Hurwit, U.S. attorney in the District of Idaho. “From a law enforcement perspective, we’re using all the tools that we have to monitor threats.”

Devin Burghart, president and executive director of the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR), said a new generation of extremists is settling in Idaho, which ranks among the top states in the nation for far-right activity.

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“They’ve now decided to make northern Idaho a home,” Burghart said, “and in essence, rekindle some of the same ideas that the Aryan Nations had 40 years ago, but instead put it in a much more palatable package — to take off the swastika armband and put on a suit and tie.”

Regional and national civil rights groups are now calling on the Justice Department to increase its criminal prosecutions targeting white nationalist groups such as the Patriot Front and Panhandle Patriots, with four major organizations writing to Attorney General Merrick Garland on Monday urging new action.

“We believe it’s past time for the Department of Justice to step up and launch a criminal investigation of this group,” said Kate Bitz, program manager and trainer at Western States Center, referring to the Patriot Front. “There have been minimal prosecutions.”

But Idaho is not just facing a challenge from one or two organizations. The Southern Poverty Law Center has identified at least 19 hate and anti-government groups spanning a vast ideological spectrum actively operating in the state. Experts at the Western States Center told McClatchy and the Idaho Statesman there are more than two dozen. And individuals switch between groups frequently

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with the anti-government militia movement,” said Rachel Carroll Rivas, lead senior research analyst for the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center. “Across the country, of course, all those groups exist. But there tends to be a trend line one way or another. Idaho really is a microcosm of what the hard-right looks like in the United States.”

U.S. officials have monitored instances of seasoned groups and provocateurs “microtargeting” regions of the country with extremist online content, including Idaho, “specifically targeting its population” due to its history as a haven for extremists, a senior official at the Department of Homeland Security told McClatchy and the Statesman.

The targeted use of online content is “not something that happens randomly,” the senior official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

“It’s being used in a very sophisticated way by threat actors to exacerbate the polarization and tribal [nature of our public discourse](#), to rip apart those fractures of our society, with the intent to sow discord and promote violence,” the official said.

“There certainly seems to be an increased level of online activity from groups of people who are coalescing around anti-government ideological beliefs: conspiracy



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Kyle Chapman is arrested in California for brandishing a large stick at a protest and hitting counter-protesters. The incident earns him the nickname Based Stickman in far-right extremist circles. He was sentenced to five years of probation after agreeing to a plea deal on a charge of possession of a leaded cane or billy club.

Joshua Guerra/ Austin American-Statesman via AP
Kevin Kamath, left, and Kyle Chapman, right, get into an altercation at the Texas State Capitol during a march against President Trump calling for his impeachment Sunday, July 2, 2017, in Austin, Texas.



Based Stickman



'A DIFFERENT CHALLENGE'

Richard Butler's decision to [found the Aryan Nations in North Idaho](#) in the 1970s fueled the state's reputation as a hotbed for neo-Nazis and white supremacists. But it was locals like Tony Stewart who successfully uprooted the group back then.

Stewart has been a part of Idaho's fight against extremism for 41 years. A co-founder of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations and now secretary of its board, he has seen what he described as the state's "cycles up and down" of far-right threats.

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“We had our successes with both Republican and Democratic governors in the 1980s and ‘90s,” Stewart said. “But in those days, we had such unity within our state in combating the Aryan Nations, the Klan, and all that.”



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“The folks I’ve spoken with in North Idaho on the front lines of this issue from a policy perspective, or a community organizing perspective — they’re ready to push back against this threat,” Hurwit told McClatchy and the Statesman. “Many have told me, ‘We’ve done this before, we’ll do this again.’ That’s a cause for optimism.”

But the ability of these organizations to secure political support across Idaho has waned.

Leading up to the state’s primary election in May, [Janice McGeachin, Idaho’s lieutenant governor](#), hosted a voter rally in the Boise area and invited several national far-right figures to join, including former [Fox News commentator Michelle Malkin](#), Arizona state Sen. Wendy Rogers and podcaster Stew Peters.

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right-wing political candidates in attendance, while promoting conspiracies about COVID-19 and 2020 election fraud.

McGeachin went on to lose the Republican primary by more than 20 percentage points. Fellow right-wing candidates who also appeared lost their statewide races, too.

But others have proven more successful.

“In recent elections in the north here, those who have advocated discrimination have really been very successful,” Stewart said. “These people who are very far-right, it’s not about violence — it’s about taking over political offices and targeting curriculum in schools and such. It’s a different challenge.”

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Idaho Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin, center, and state GOP vice chair Machele Hamilton, right, attend a rally in Boise with hundreds of others in support of a group of long-haul semi-truckers who drove to Washington, D.C., to protest COVID-19 mandates, on March 2, 2022. Kevin Fixler kfixler@idahostatesman.com

New [research](#) from IREHR found that 24 Idaho state lawmakers have joined far-right Facebook groups, representing nearly a quarter of the state Legislature — more than any state in the nation but Alaska and Arkansas, Burghart said.

Most of these groups insist they are peaceful. But Thomas Rousseau formed the Patriot Front as an offshoot of a neo-Nazi organization after [participating](#) in the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that resulted in a woman’s death. Michael “Viper” Birdsong, head of Idaho’s Panhandle Patriots, was in Washington for the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol and [called the violence](#) of that day “a necessary evil.”

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“In some ways, with the Aryan Nations, it was a much easier battle — they were a very clear and obvious threat, but they were contained,” said Sophie Bjork-James, an assistant professor of anthropology at Vanderbilt University. “There was one compound. They were very marginal. They were responsible for violence and harassment, and they were widely looked down upon by the majority of Idahoans, including the Legislature.”

“Today, there’s a much broader part of the population that holds extremist ideas, and they’re in local government,” Bjork-James said. “They’re in state government. They’re organizing gun rallies.”

STOKING CONFLICT

After Diana Lachiondo, a fourth-generation Idahoan and a Democrat, won a seat on the Ada County Board of Commissioners in 2018, she was placed on a local health board where the most controversial issue at the time was septic tank approvals.

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit.

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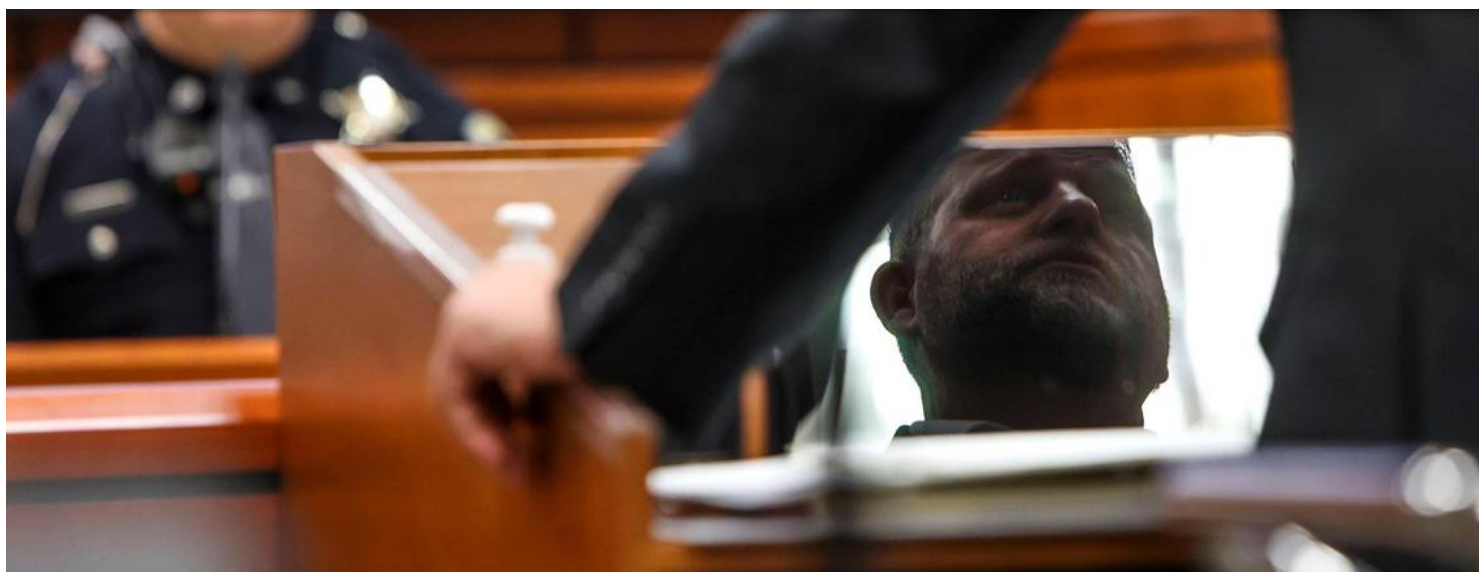
“I have chosen to back away from public life, for my mental health,” Lachiondo said, tearing up as she recalled the episode in a video interview. “There was a breaking point of — I have let my children down. My children are being affected and targeted because I’m on this health board.”

Protests were not limited to Lachiondo’s home. At least one other board member was targeted. A larger group tried to force their way into the Central Health District building, prompting Boise’s mayor, Lauren McLean, to call on the board to cancel its meeting.

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Ammon Bundy opted to defend himself against two trespassing arrests in Ada County Magistrate Judge Kim Dale's courtroom Tuesday, March 15, 2022, in Boise. In April 2021, Bundy was arrested twice in one day for entering the Idaho Capitol while under a one-year ban from the building stemming from an arrest in August 2020. Darin Oswald doswald@idahostatesman.com

The protests were organized by the People's Rights Network, a group founded by Ammon Bundy, an anti-government activist who led a [2016 standoff](#) with federal law enforcement at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Bundy is now [a candidate for Idaho governor](#).

"We like to refer to it as a network, not necessarily an organization — it's only as effective as people make it," said Casey Whelan, who became an Idaho "state assistant" for People's Rights in Coeur d'Alene in 2020 and promoted a protest of the June 11 pride event. "It's a tool if people want to use the network to notify their neighbor of any kind of government overreach."

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members in the People's Rights Network per capita in the United States. Whelan said that more recent internal numbers indicate the group has over 5,000 members in Idaho alone.

Membership rolls in these groups are always more fluid than an email list would suggest. "People often operate in more than one group, or move between various groups," said Rivas, of the Southern Poverty Law Center. But the emergence of COVID-19 restrictions undoubtedly led to an explosion of engagement.

Bundy and other leaders in People's Rights will occasionally put out "calls to action" that prompt protests such as the one outside of Lachiondo's house. But while group leaders take credit for the size of its membership, Whelan said the mission of People's Rights to promote liberty precludes them from telling members how to conduct themselves.

"It's been demonized quite a bit," he said of the group. "It's not pretty all the time, and (members) will act depending on the situation maybe differently than someone else would. We don't advise people how to act."

That position allows groups like People's Rights to fuel political discord without taking responsibility for the consequences, experts said.

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government, whether it be federal or local.”



Ada County Commissioner Diana Lachiondo is striving to have developers pay impact fees to help defray the cost of needed public construction projects that growth necessitates. Darin Oswald doswald@idahostatesman.com

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Publicly, Hemphill has since acknowledged “we were wrong,” and [lamented how extreme](#) the far-right had gone in America, before entering federal prison last week to serve a 60-day sentence.

“I was with Ammon Bundy since the very first meeting of People’s Rights,” Hemphill told McClatchy. “I left them, and I have my good reasons. They’re far-right, and they’re not good for our country.”

Lachiondo [lost her bid for reelection](#) in 2020 to Ryan Davidson, a Republican who the following year was [investigated](#) by Idaho’s attorney general for attempting to influence a judge in a case over Bundy trespassing at the Idaho Capitol. The attorney general found no criminal misconduct but suggested he get trained “on how to properly communicate with the judiciary.”

Other, more activist conservatives are slated to win elected office in November. Lawrence Wasden, Idaho’s attorney general for 20 years, [declined to join Texas’ lawsuit](#) to overturn President Joe Biden’s win in swing states. He [lost his reelection bid](#) in the May primary to Raúl Labrador, a former [congressman who expressed skepticism](#) over former President Donald Trump’s loss — and accused Wasden of [being “absent or late”](#) to critical national fights.

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CALL FOR FEDERAL ACTION

In May, the Western States Center sent a [letter](#) to Garland and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas alerting them to an ideological mix of groups — including the Panhandle Patriots — crossing state lines to harass migrants at the U.S. southern border.

The organization followed up with [another letter](#) on Monday — joined by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Anti-Defamation League, the North Idaho Pride Alliance, the Matthew Shepard Foundation and over a dozen other organizations — calling on the Justice Department to prosecute the Patriot Front and its members “to the fullest extent of the law” over its activity in Idaho.

“While dozens of the group’s members were arrested last month before they could act on plans to riot at a Pride event in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, more must be done to hold the group accountable and ensure they do not continue to intimidate historically marginalized communities,” the groups wrote.

A White House official, providing background on condition of anonymity, said the Biden administration has increased its intelligence production on domestic extremist threats three-fold in the last year, creating smartphone apps for local law enforcement to quickly access unclassified counterterrorism reports and intelligence products.

The Boise Police Department is not using these apps, said Haley Williams, a spokeswoman for the department, “but will continue to look into whether they are good tools and fits for our community.” An official with the Ada County Sheriff’s Office also said its agency does not formally use the apps. The FBI’s field office in Salt Lake City declined to comment.

A spokesman for the Idaho State Police said that fusion centers, working as a conduit between state and federal law enforcement, have analysts processing

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extremism, and are providing additional training to U.S. attorneys on reporting potential cases.



Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas speaks during a change of command ceremony at U.S. Coast Guard headquarters, June 1, 2022, in Washington. Evan Vucci AP

In May 2021, DHS established an entirely new domestic terrorism branch to produce intelligence on potential threats. And the Treasury Department has made it a priority to identify groups and individuals who are financing domestic extremist promotion and plots.

In its latest national terrorism advisory bulletin, DHS warned that the country faces a [heightened threat](#) of extremist violence leading up to the 2022 midterm

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through open-source intelligence shows that extremist groups are operating in all 50 states.

“We have observed, of course, through our communications with local law enforcement, particular pockets of activity, in terms of physical activity,” Mayorkas said. “But you know, this is one of the challenges that social media presents. It knows no boundaries.”

The senior DHS official said the department does not break down its threat picture by region.

But “when I hear from our folks deployed around the country, it’s clear that there are certain narratives that resonate in some parts of the country more than others,” the official said. “And where there’s a tradition of suspicion against the federal government, narratives that focus on government overreach and immigration as a ploy to undermine white superiority tend to resonate more, and inspire organizational activity as a result.”

The primary terrorism threat facing the United States today, the official added, comes not from foreign terrorist networks or enemy states, but individuals and small groups of people, willing to carry out acts of violence motivated by extremist ideological beliefs.

Idaho — the [fastest-growing state in the nation](#) — remains as much a draw for these groups as ever, romantically portrayed by radical networks as a white Christian haven on the old American frontier.

“Tradition matters a lot,” Burghart said. “They are drawn to the individualistic nature of the West, and constitutional interpretations that were long since left in the past.”

“These are the kind of frames they’re using,” he added, “to find that new generation.”

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