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# A Journey to Tolerance: *Overcoming the Politics of Hate*

by *Leanne Serbulo*

History was made on Election Day 2008 in the northern Willamette Valley. The small town of Silverton catapulted into national attention with its election of the first transgendered mayor. This January, Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams will become the first openly gay mayor to lead a large city. Aside from the groundbreaking nature of these electoral victories, what made these two races truly remarkable was the lack of attention that each candidate's gender identity or sexual orientation received throughout the campaigns. No protests or angry words of condemnation plagued Stu Rasmussen until the national press picked up the story of the Silverton mayoral election. A few weeks later, when four protesters assembled downtown, they were not local residents, but members of a Kansas-based fundamentalist church who travel around the country staging anti-gay rallies. Judging by the results of these two elections, the metroscapes' reputation for tolerance is well deserved.

Twenty years ago, Portland made headlines for a different type of politics, the politics of hate. In 1988, Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian immigrant and former Portland State University student, was beaten to death by three neo-Nazi skinheads in Southeast Portland. Repeated acts of skinhead violence would shake the city during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Just a few weeks before the murder of Mulugeta Seraw, Oregonians passed Measure 8, a ballot initiative that made it illegal to pass state laws protecting the civil rights of gay and

lesbians. This was the first electoral victory for the Oregon Citizen's Alliance (OCA), a conservative group that would sponsor a number of state and local initiatives including many high-profile anti-gay ballot measures. One month after the passage of Measure 8, a record number of anti-abortion protesters were arrested for blockading two Portland women's health clinics. Although the metroscapes remained politically liberal during the 1980s, it appeared as if extremism was beginning to gain ground.

## **Far-Right Extremists v. Conservatives**

During the 1980s, a significant number of extremist organizations were launched in the state of Oregon and throughout the Pacific Northwest. Far-right extremist politics differ greatly from mainstream conservatism, which believes in limited government and individual rights. Extremist groups want to create a complete political and social revolution in the United States. Although some of these groups work through the system, others prefer to use extra-legal tactics to advance their goals.

While the extremist groups that were active in Portland differed in the revolutionary visions they espoused, they shared similar values. Members of the extreme wing of the anti-abortion movement and the leaders of the Oregon Citizens' Alliance both wanted to turn the United States into a Christian theocratic state. On the other hand, Neo-Nazi skinheads followed a hodgepodge of

racist and religious doctrines; some were Christians, while others believed in a Germanic paganism. Their goal was to turn the Pacific Northwest (Washington, Oregon, and Idaho) into a white homeland. Religious extremists and the racist right had different visions, but they both shared a common goal: reversing the civil rights gains of the 1960s and 1970s that were won by people of color, women, and gays and lesbians.

Portland, a city known for its progressive politics, may not seem like the ideal haven for far-right extremist organizations. However, despite its liberal veneer, Portland has a long history of racism and intolerance. The Ku Klux Klan was a major force in Oregon politics during the 1920s. Klan initiation ceremonies were held on Mt. Scott; burning crosses could be seen for miles. It was no surprise that the Klan got such a strong foothold in the state. The Oregon constitutional clause barring African-Americans from owning property was not overturned until 1926. Public accommodations, such as restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters, were segregated in Portland up until the 1950s. When the City Council passed a ban on segregation in public accommodations, Portlanders responded by sponsoring and passing a local initiative to repeal the ban. The state legislature eventually took up the issue and banned segregation in public accommodations in 1957.



Mulugeta Seraw

**M**ulugeta Seraw's murder took most of the city by surprise. However, the national political climate combined with regional economic turmoil created the ideal context for the rise of extremism in Portland. Nationally, the right wing was leading a backlash against the civil rights gains won during the 1960s. Affirmative action policies were under fierce attack. On the grassroots level, the Christian conservative movement was rapidly growing, attracting followers with their "family values" platform. The anti-abortion group, Operation Rescue, launched a national campaign of civil disobedience aimed at shutting down health clinics that offered abortion services. During this time, the Pacific Northwest was experiencing additional turmoil both culturally and economically. In the early 1980s, the timber industry collapsed. The leading timber producing state at that time, Oregon experienced double digit unemployment. The demise of the timber industry was due in part to over-harvesting and automation. This meant that many of the timber

jobs that disappeared were not going to return. Oregon had to economically transform itself. The environmental movement played an active role in that transformation, as groups pushed for protection of the state's remaining old growth forests. An economic gulf opened up between the lagging timber industry in the rural parts of the state and the recovering urban areas that soon translated into a cultural divide, pitting loggers against protectionists.

Portland was also influenced by the national organizing drives of the religious right. Like many other cities across the nation, Portland was home to an active pro-life protest movement. While many pro-lifers used peaceful tactics such as prayer vigils and petitions, the national movement was beginning to rely more heavily on direct action, sometimes violent direct action: preventing prospective patients from obtaining abortions through clinic blockades, sidewalk "counseling," and even bomb threats and arson. By the late 1980s, Portland was home to one of the most radical anti-abortion groups in the nation. Portland's Advocates for Life, founded in 1986, had the dubious distinction of being the only pro-life organization to endorse the murder of abortion doctors.

Advocates for Life was the primary organizer of most of the anti-abortion protests in Portland. In 1990, eight of their members sat in jail for months for refusing to abide by a judge's injunction against clinic blockades. The "Lovejoy Eight" catalyzed Portland's pro-life movement. While they were imprisoned, clinic blockades grew in number, frequency, and intensity. Bomb threats, death threats, and arson attempts became commonplace at Portland area women's health clinics, although these crimes were never attributed to Advocates for Life. When an abortion doctor was murdered in Pensacola, Florida, Advocates for Life issued a pamphlet called "A Time to Kill," which attempted to justify the act. A Grants Pass resident, Shelly Shannon, who had participated in Advocates for Life actions, was arrested in the mid 1990s for trying to shoot a doctor in Kansas and for setting fire to six women's health clinics. Advocates for Life drew national headlines when they created and distributed wanted posters with the pictures and home addresses of Portland doctors who performed abortions.

The anti-abortion movement wasn't the only extremist group using violence to advance its goals. During the 1980s, white supremacist groups called for the establishment of an all-white "homeland" in the Pacific Northwest. Richard Butler, the

*Despite its liberal veneer, Portland has a long history of racism and intolerance.*

founder of the neo-Nazi Christian Identity movement, set-up a compound for his followers in his hometown of Hayden Lake, Idaho during the 1970s. The Hayden Lake compound served as a training ground for white supremacists organizers. Butler's Aryan Nation gatherings drew Ku Klux Klan members, neo-Nazi skinheads, and activists with Christian Patriot organizations. These assorted extremists were united by their racist ideologies and their willingness to use violence and terrorism to advance their goals. In the early 1980s, the Pacific Northwest was the site of a series of acts of domestic terrorism carried out by a white supremacist group known as The Order.

More common than underground cells like The Order were loosely organized neo-Nazi skinhead groups. During the 1980s, the skinhead movement exploded in cities like Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco. The skinhead subculture originated in England and was initially a multiracial phenomenon. Skinheads shaved their heads, dressed in combat boots and flight jackets, and listened to ska or punk music. A sub-group of British skinheads became involved with neo-Nazi politics. When the fashion moved across the Atlantic, young racists and neo-Nazis embraced the look. For many skinheads, the look was just a cultural statement, but a significant group saw themselves as the shock troops of the far-right political movement. Organizers with neo-Nazi and other extremist groups like American Front and WAR (White Aryan Resistance) recruited skinheads to participate in targeted acts of violence against people of color, immigrants, gays and lesbians, and anti-racist youth. In the mid 1980s, the Portland underground music scene was terrorized by skinheads, who then began engaging in increasingly violent attacks against gays and blacks, punctuated by the murder of Mulugeta Seraw.

Some members of extremist groups shied away from the violence the skinheads embraced. The OCA, seemingly distant from mainstream attitudes, worked through the electoral system to promote its agenda. The OCA was founded in 1986 by former workers from fundamentalist preacher Joe Lutz's Senatorial campaign. Although Lutz failed to unseat Senator Bob Packwood in the primary, he nevertheless gained a substantial portion of Republican votes. The OCA built upon the electoral base they established during the Lutz campaign to launch a series of initiatives aimed at overturning civil rights and undercutting government programs. The OCA won an early and surprising victory when Measure 8 passed in 1988.

Measure 8, the anti-gay and lesbian rights initiative, was the first and would be the final statewide victory for the OCA. The OCA went on to push for more restrictive anti-gay legislation in Measure 9, which voters rejected in 1992. The OCA had hoped to build upon their earlier Measure 8 victory and their recent passage of a local anti-gay measure in the city of Springfield. The Springfield measure would eventually be declared unconstitutional.

Anti-gay ballot measures soon became commonplace across the nation. Despite the Christian Coalition's entrance into electoral politics nationally, the OCA was a homegrown organization that relied upon the statewide initiative process to promote its goals. The Christian Coalition did not even establish a presence in Oregon until 1992, the peak year of OCA membership.

### **Confronting the Politics of Hate in Portland**

In November of 1998, Portland's gay and lesbian community was shocked by the passage of Measure 8. The measure had been trailing in the polls, and no one expected it to pass. Gay and lesbian activists expressed their outrage by taking to the streets, blocking rush hour traffic on the Burnside Bridge. Within weeks, the gay and lesbian community organized a local chapter of ACT-UP, a national group that used direct action and confrontational tactics to draw attention to the AIDS crisis. A series of militant demonstrations followed. The community's initial shock was channeled into a campaign of visibility and resistance. Prior to the passage of Measure 8, the community had always responded when the far-right attacked, but they never initiated any actions against the anti-gay activists without provocation. A few months before the passage of Measure 8, extremists forced Tri-Met to remove public service ads sponsored by the Cascade AIDS project from buses and MAX trains. After the removal of the ads, the gay and lesbian community protested, but to no avail. Once Measure 8 passed, gay and lesbian activists no longer waited for extremists to attack. Activists began targeting the local institutions that sponsored anti-gay proposals. In 1991, members of ACT-UP and its spin-off group, Queer Nation, staged a silent protest during Sunday services at the Portland Foursquare church where OCA held its meetings. Gay and lesbian activists disrupted OCA rallies and successfully campaigned to get anti-gay petitioners removed from local Fred Meyers.



Signs similar to this one across the street from the Kenton Theater in north Portland popped up around the town during World War II. OrHi CN 0034



Randy Blazak

### Connoisseur of Hate

Professor Randy Blazak of the Portland State University Sociology Department is an expert on hate groups nationally and in the Pacific Northwest and especially youth in hate groups and hate groups in prison. He is the author of a soon-to-be released book entitled *Hate Offenders*. *Metroscape*® asked him to expand on some of the issues raised in Dr. Serbulo's article. Dr. Blazak's responses have been edited for brevity and clarity.

*This article focuses on hate groups of the right. Are there groups of the left?*

The FBI in defining terrorist groups lumps together groups like those associated with Timothy McVeigh [the Oklahoma City Bomber of 1995]

and the Earth Liberation Front. The left wing groups tend to hate institutions like governments and corporations, while the right hates individuals who aren't like them. There is some overlap between these groups, for instance on the war in Iraq, but the right believes it it's a war to defend Israel and a global cabal of Jews. Right wing hate groups sometimes support Palestinian terror groups because they are united by anti-Semitism. And both are compelled by their sense of moral duty.

*Has the worldwide web empowered these people?*

Sure. Now there is a constant Klan rally on the web, whereas people used to be reticent about physically attending a rally. There is support for the formation of a Northwest Aryan Homeland that is discussed online. There is a constitution for it, a flag, a name... it's sometimes called Cascadia.

*What is the future of hate in the region?*

When the economy is down, hate group activity goes up. Some people begin looking for people to blame for their losses in the American Dream.

Hate group activity is largely driven by white working class males. They are looking for scapegoats [such as]... immigrants, a black president. When George Bush makes mistakes, it's because he's stupid, not because he's white. When Obama does something these people don't like, it [will] be because he's black.

If the economy improves it'll be harder for these groups to get an audience. Then the possibility of violence goes up; they feel the mainstream doesn't get it—Timothy McVeigh is a good example of how that works.

A big trend is toward what is known as "leaderless resistance." The web allows larger, amorphous groups with no structure to flourish. They're harder to defeat because you can't target the leadership. McVeigh and Terry Nichols were a group of two. The American National Socialist Workers Party is a local group made up of one person. Another trend is the growth of prison gangs. The European Kindred is one in the Oregon prison system. Oregon already has the highest incarceration rate per capita in the country. With the passage of Measure 57, the numbers in hate groups will grow and they'll return to society with these racist views.



Volksfront, a neo-Nazi group, emerged in Portland in 1994. Courtesy of the Coalition for Human Dignity.

signaled the beginning of the end for the OCA. Although the organization continued to sponsor initiatives during the 1990s, it was no longer considered a potential force in Oregon politics.

### **Battling Boneheads and Bigots**

The murder of Mulugeta Seraw took Portland by surprise, despite months of steadily escalating skinhead attacks throughout the city. Politicians condemned the crime. The police, who had ignored the escalation, dedicated substantial resources towards fighting skinhead violence. Portlanders rallied, marched, and formed the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission to monitor hate crimes in the city. The organization soon split after MHRC refused to support an effort to send Portlanders to march against the Aryan Nations gathering in Hayden Lake, Idaho. A new, more activist group was formed. The Coalition for Human Dignity (CHD) not only wanted to monitor hate groups, but also to actively organize to combat them.

The CHD attracted young people from Portland's punk rock scene who had witnessed skinhead intimidation firsthand. In 1990, these young punks became affiliated with a national organization called Anti-Racist Action (ARA). Anti-Racist Action believed in using violence when necessary to drive skinheads out of the community. ARA members collected intelligence on skinheads, organized neighbors and co-workers to get them evicted from their apartments or fired from their jobs, spray-painted neo-Nazi's homes, and fought back when skinheads attacked. Anti-racist skinheads, known as SHARPS (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), were especially eager to fight their racist counterparts. SHARPS not only opposed the racist ideologies of skinheads, but they also wanted to reclaim the anti-racist origins of the skinhead movement. SHARPS were particularly hated by neo-Nazi skinheads and were often targets of their violence. During the early 1990s, skinheads and their newly organized opponents waged war in the streets of Portland. In response, the police listed both the SHARPS and skinheads as gangs and prosecuted them equally.

In 1991, Morris Dees, a lawyer for the Southern Poverty Law Center, filed a civil lawsuit against Tom Metzger, the southern California-based founder of White Aryan Resistance, a neo-Nazi skinhead group that some of the murderers of Mulugeta Seraw belonged to. The trial was held in Portland as skinheads and anti-racists from

around the country flocked to the city. Tensions ran high and skirmishes broke out. Metzger was eventually found guilty in the trial that marked the height of the war between the skinheads and anti-racists. After the verdict, many neo-Nazi groups left the city. Hate crimes continued and occasional confrontations broke out, but Portland was no longer viewed as friendly territory for white supremacists.

### **Protecting a Women's Right to Choose: Courts and the Clinics**

After Advocates for Life began its 1988 civil disobedience campaign, local women's health care providers sought court injunctions to prevent protesters from blocking patient access to clinics. However, the Lovejoy Eight demonstrated that anti-abortion protesters would not passively abide by court orders. The Lovejoy Eight spent months in jail while their case moved through the courts, catalyzing the pro-life movement. Eventually the defendants were forced to pay fines, and subsequent rulings strengthened court injunctions. Despite these legal victories, women's clinics continued to be targeted by an increasingly emboldened pro-life movement.

By 1989, local women's health care centers were relying upon volunteer "clinic defenders" to escort patients through the protests outside their doors. Clinic defense ensured patient access, but it could not protect clients or volunteers from verbal and occasional physical attacks by pro-life protesters. Even with a dedicated team of clinic defenders, the anti-abortion movement still had the upper hand. Because abortion rights are protected under the law, providers logically looked to the court system to defend them. Although the courts continued to rule in the clinics' favor, the anti-abortion movement stayed one step ahead, issuing new challenges to abortion providers by shifting their tactics. In the early 1990s, clinic blockades were popular. After a federal injunction passed, pro-lifers targeted the homes of abortion providers. By the mid-1990s, extremists within the movement began murdering doctors who performed abortion. Advocates for Life endorsed these actions and produced a series of wanted posters listing the names, home addresses and pictures of Portland area abortion providers. Despite this escalation of tactics, clinic administrators continued to look for protection from the courts, filing a civil suit against Advocates for Life. Unlike the gay and lesbian movement or anti-racist efforts, pro-

*Advocates for Life ... produced a series of wanted posters ... of Portland area abortion providers.*

*Even though the politics of tolerance dominate the contemporary northern Willamette Valley ... the politics of hate could once again flourish here.*

choice activists remained on the defensive against the far-right. It was not until 1998, that a small group of feminists shocked pro-lifers by staging a protest outside a church that sponsored anti-abortion activities. But this remained an isolated incident, and the pro-life movement in Portland would continue to harangue abortion providers until it eventually defeated itself through its own extremism. As Advocates for Life took progressively more radical stances, they began to lose popular support. After the publication of *A Time to Kill*, the group tried to initiate a civil disobedience action a national Right to Life march. Few participants joined them.

### The End?

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, opponents used a variety of tactics to stem the growth of extremism in Portland. Through an organized, highly visible, and very militant response, the OCA and skinhead groups were all but defeated by 1992. Abortion rights activists used different tactics, seeking legal protection and working primarily through the court system. Their response was not very costly to anti-abortion groups like Advocates for Life who had already demonstrated their willingness to flout the legal system. As a result, the anti-abortion movement lasted well into the late 1990s. Its demise was due more to its support of increasingly extremist tactics rather than any organized response by its opponents.

Clearly, militancy was the key to defeating the politics of hate in Portland. However, militancy comes with its own costs. The swift victories of groups like Anti-Racist Action led many activists to abandon the cause while it was still in its infancy. Although many individuals remained dedicated to fighting all forms of racial oppression, the movement never fully matured into a lasting campaign that was capable of addressing the ongoing historical legacies of institutional racism in Portland. A number of community groups continued to struggle against institutional racism in the city, but they were never able to attract the thousands who rallied against Tom Metzger. Ironically, it was this history of intolerance in the region that laid the foundation for the rise of extremists in the 1980s.

In contrast to anti-racist efforts, the gay and lesbian movement adopted a big tent approach. The visibility and activism of groups like Queer Nation, ACT-UP, and, later, the Lesbian Avengers, played an important role in defeating the politics

of homophobic hate. Meanwhile, a highly capable electoral wing of the movement developed during the “No on 9” campaign. Gays and lesbians would go on to press for equal treatment and civil rights using a variety of tactics, from staging rallies to lobbying state and local officials. The 2008 election results are a testament to the success of the gay and lesbian movement’s approach.

Even though the politics of tolerance dominate the contemporary northern Willamette Valley, given the right conditions, the politics of hate could once again flourish here. Until we address the institutional conditions that gave rise to extremism during the 1980s, Portland remains susceptible to homegrown hate. Indeed, despite the electoral gains of Stu Rasmussen and Sam Adams, a woman was recently assaulted in Washington County because of her sexuality. Isolated incidents of racism, such as the noose and effigy that were hung at George Fox University, surfaced during Obama’s presidential campaign. The lessons of the 1980s remain clear. The politics of hate remain a legacy of intolerance that might one day shape our region again. **M**

*Leanne Serbulo recently received a Ph.D. in urban studies from Portland State University. This article is excerpted from a longer study of Pacific Northwest protests during the 1990s. For a detailed list of sources and more in-depth information and analysis see: “Whose Streets? Our Streets! Urban Social Movements and the Transformation of Everyday Life in Pacific Northwest Cities, 1990-1999,” Ph.D. dissertation, Portland State University, 2008 .*