

## “The Silver Shirts”

*There unquestionably is a concerted move on the part of un-American and radical groups to bring about the overthrow of the United States government. We have endeavored to get to the bottom of all such moves.*

--Congressman Charles Kramer, August 5, 1934.

In the summer of 1934, a Special Committee on Un-American Activities opened hearings in Los Angeles. Chaired by Representative Charles Kramer, the committee was following reports of “alarming proportions” that armed radicals called “Silver Shirts” were drilling in San Diego and preparing for revolution.

The Silver Shirts were part of nationwide movement of anti-Communists led by right-wing activist William Dudley Pelley. Founded as the Silver Legion of America on January 31, 1934, Pelley claimed his group would prepare “a great horde of men nationally to meet the [Communist] crisis intelligently and constructively.”

Pelley greatly admired Adolf Hitler and modeled his Silver Shirts after Nazi storm troopers. His troops were “the cream, the head and the flower of our Protestant Christian manhood,” Pelley proudly claimed. The men were also isolationist, pro-Fascist, and virulently anti-Semitic.



William Dudley Pelley in a Silver Shirt uniform.

Membership in the organization grew rapidly, with perhaps 15,000 national members at its peak. Applicants were required to furnish a photograph and personal information including: “racial extraction,” religion, physical disabilities, military training, and personal finances. Uniforms featured “dark blue corduroys trousers, tie, leggins [sic], and a silver shirt with a scarlet ‘L’ (for loyalty) on the shoulder.”

In San Diego County, Alpine resident Willard W. Kemp led the Silver Shirt Pacific Coast Division. A San Diego post headed by Charles T. Lee met at the Hotel San Diego and in an East San Diego bookstore on University Avenue.

In April 1934, “Captain” Lee was invited to address a group of veterans called the Hammer Club for their weekly luncheon at the U.S. Grant Hotel. Members were promised “an explanation of the ideals and aims of the Silver Shirt Legion.”

Controversy greeted the Hammer Club the very next week when the invited speaker was Rabbi H. Cerf Strauss of Temple Beth Israel. Denouncing the Silver Shirts as “anti-American, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic,” Rabbi Cerf accused Pelley’s organization of fomenting revolutionary activities against the American government.

It was a severe charge but taken seriously by Congressman Charles Kramer's investigators. On August 5, 1934, the Kramer committee stunned the public by announcing that "armed men known as Silver Shirts, with secret auxiliary called Storm Troopers and avowedly organized to change the Government of the United States" were drilling in the San Diego area.

"Poppycock," declared San Diego Police Chief John Peterson. "There have no drills in the city [and] the back country is calm." County Sheriff Ed Cooper seconded Peterson, adding that his men kept a close watch on the organization, which they knew met occasionally at the Willard Kemp ranch east of El Cajon. They never drilled, the lawmen claimed, but a few members did engage in some "inconsequential" target practice.

The charges appeared more credible when the committee released testimony from two "infiltrators." A former U.S. Marine, Virgil Hayes, related a chance meeting near Oceanside in April. Sitting alongside Willard Kemp on a train to San Diego, Hayes mentioned to Kemp that he was in the Marine Corps. "Kemp told me he was the West Coast commander of the Silver Shirts. He asked me if I had access to government guns and ammunition, and when I told him I had, he made the offer."

The offer was \$10 for rifles, \$50 for machine guns and \$20 a case for ammunition. Kemp added that any actions by the Silver Shirts would be countenanced by the San Diego Sheriff's office with the exception of the under-sheriff, Oliver Sexson. The Silver Shirts would be protected, Kemp assured, but "the under-sheriff is a Jew and would be liquidated."

Hayes told Kemp he would get the arms. Instead, he reported the encounter to his superiors, who ordered him to join the Silver Shirts. "I was made an instructor," he told the congressional committee. "I taught them the use of small arms and street fighting." Hayes' pupils were well armed with rifles, pistols, and shotguns, but "mainly Springfield rifles bearing a United States Government mark."

A second marine appearing before Kramer's committee told a more chilling story. Corporal Edward Gray testified that the previous spring the Silver Shirts had planned to "capture" San Diego city hall.

*It was planned for early May, when the Communists were to stage a May Day celebration . . . 200 armed, trained Silver Shirts had orders to converge on the city from the outskirts. They counted on the Communists going in before them and taking the city by storm. Then, in the confusion, the Silver Shirts were to overthrow the Communists, their avowed enemies.*

The Silver Shirts' *putsch* failed when the expected Communist demonstration never appeared.

A few weeks later the Silver Shirts discovered Corporal Gray was a spy. "Storm troops" caught the marine near C Street and Broadway and beat him, sending him to the hospital with a fractured skull.

With the public exposure of their aims and intentions, tolerance for the Silver Shirts faded quickly. The Hotel San Diego refused to allow meetings; other meeting places were closed to the group.

The national leader of the Silver Shirts lasted a while longer. In 1936 William Pelley ran for president, promising to incorporate his soldiers into the federal armed forces and do away with the Justice Department. "I'm calling in every Gentile in these prostrate United States to form with me an overwhelming juggernaut . . . for Christian government." Only the State of Washington permitted Pelley on the ballot; he received 1,598 votes out of nearly 700,000 ballots cast.

In July 1942, Pelley was convicted in federal court on charges of insurrection and sedition. Sentenced to fifteen years, he served ten. He died in obscurity in 1965.



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