

“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.

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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