This paper uses McCarthy and Zald’s (1977) resource mobilization perspective to explain the rise and fall of Aryan Nations (AN), an Idaho-based, white separatist organization that disintegrated upon the death of its founder, Richard Butler. Primary data were collected through 1) participant-observation at the group’s annual World Congress and Aryan Youth Assembly, 1991 through 2004, and 2) interviews with former members about AN’s social organization during its peak years in the early eighties. AN’s Congress and Youth Assembly are analyzed as frame alignment strategies (Snow et al. 1986), using Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model. The data suggest that AN’s initial success can be attributed to internal organizational strengths and a benign external environment. However, an exodus of core members in the mid-eighties, triggered by adverse external developments, severely weakened the organization. Disintegration accelerated during the nineties, making it increasingly difficult for the group to mobilize the internal resources necessary for its frame alignment efforts to be effective. Although AN’s demise has been attributed to a lawsuit that bankrupted the organization, the data reveal that AN had been on the verge of collapse for many years before the suit was filed.

On September 7, 2000, an Idaho jury awarded $6.3 million to Victoria Keenan and her son, Jason, who had been chased, shot at, and roughed up by Aryan Nations (AN) security guards in a 1998 incident near AN property. The verdict was widely hailed as the death knell for AN, one of North America’s oldest and most prominent white separatist organizations. AN’s founder, Pastor Richard Butler, had been holding “white power” gatherings on his 20-acre

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1 The term “white supremacy” was not used by AN members. Besides “white separatist,” the preferred terms were “white power,” “racialist,” and “white nationalist.”
compound near Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, since the 1970s. His Aryan World Congress (AWC), a celebration of Aryan solidarity held every year in July, was the longest-running event of its kind in the white separatist movement (WSM). A similar rally, the Aryan Youth Assembly (AYA), took place each year in April.

The organization responsible for bringing down AN was the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), headed by civil rights attorney Morris Dees. In a civil suit on behalf of the Keenans, Dees argued that Butler was responsible for the actions of his security guards, even though the incident happened outside the compound without Butler's knowledge. The multi-million dollar judgment forced Butler into bankruptcy, and by the end of 2001, he had lost virtually everything he owned. The SPLC lawsuit delivered a devastating blow, but I will argue that AN was a dying organization long before the lawsuit. My conclusion is based on an ethnographic study that began in 1991 and continued through Butler's death in 2004.

To explain AN's rise and fall, I will use a simple resource mobilization framework (McCarthy and Zald 1977). This perspective focuses on the ability of a social movement organization (SMO) to achieve its goals. Success or failure depends on the interplay between external and internal factors. External considerations include public opinion, potential benefactors, political allies, counter-movements, the media, law enforcement agencies, economic conditions, and the larger movement to which the SMO belongs. Together they constitute the environment within which the SMO operates. Internal factors include the talents, skills, and commitment of individual members, as well as the competence of the leadership, and the cultural and structural characteristics of the SMO itself.

AN lends itself to a resource mobilization analysis because it possessed specific, achievable objectives. Butler had utopian dreams, but also more immediate goals. In the utopian category was his plan for all-white National Socialist state in the Pacific Northwest. Only slightly less unrealistic was his goal of unifying "the movement," which was so fractured by ideological splits, divergent lifestyles, and incessant infighting that it was hardly a movement at all (Gardell 2003:67-136). However, AN's immediate goals lay within the realm of possibility. First, Butler wanted AN to grow, especially in northern Idaho. Second, he hoped to build bridges among factions in the movement by finding common ground and opening lines of communication. Third, he wanted AN to become the flagship organization of the movement. If Butler made significant headway on the first two objectives, then it was hardly unrealistic to imagine AN becoming a major player in the WSM.

Butler's primary means for accomplishing these goals were the AWC and AYA. These events were exercises in frame alignment (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1991), designed to bring white racists together under the banner of racial preservation. As Snow et al. (1986) point out, successful frame
alignment requires more than resonance between the message and the attitudes of potential supporters. It also requires management of “framing hazards” or “vulnerabilities” (Goffman 1974:439-95), such as the failure of the group to live up to its ideals, that must be managed for frame alignment to be convincing.

At AN events, the major hazard-management problem was putting on a good show. To win and sustain support, AN needed to project an image of competence, dedication, and inspired leadership—i.e., to present itself as a group to which one would feel proud to belong. Hence, Congress and the AYA were not just exercises in frame alignment, but also impression management (Goffman 1959), which can be particularly hazardous when the front-stage performance is contradicted by the backstage reality. As Goffman points out (1959:77-105), effective “teamwork” is required, and this is where frame alignment and resource mobilization come together. For frame alignment to be effective as a goal-attainment strategy, the SMO must be a well-organized team with competent leadership.

By the 1990s, AN was no longer putting on a good show. Instead, the AWC and AYA were becoming embarrassing displays of incompetence. I will argue that AN’s frame alignment problems were symptomatic of deeper organizational weaknesses, some of which had existed since AN was founded. In response to a drastic change in AN’s external environment in the mid-1980s, these problems metastasized during the nineties, crippling AN’s ability to engage in effective collective action and ultimately dooming the organization.

**STUDYING ARYAN NATIONS**

I first visited AN on a class field trip in June, 1991. Besides meeting with the local human rights organization—the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations—my students and I spent two days at the AN compound, located about 175 miles from my home in Missoula, Montana. We toured the grounds and listened to speeches, but mostly we talked with Butler and about 10 of his followers. They were surprised and disarmed by the fact that we were genuinely interested in hearing their side of the story, and Butler invited us back for the AWC.

The ease with which we were accepted, and the members’ desire to impress us, led me to believe that AN was ripe for an ethnographic study. However, I knew enough about AN to realize that a thorough ethnography would require more time and emotional energy than I was willing to give. But AN was so intriguing that I didn’t want to drop the idea altogether. My solution was to remain semi-involved through more field trips, impromptu visits,
informal interviews, and observations of other white separatist groups, but most importantly by attending AN's annual events. Between 1991 and 2004, I attended the AWC every year except 2001, as well as every AYA from 1992 through 1996, after which the youth event was discontinued.

Perhaps more than anything else, it was my students who facilitated my acceptance. Students accompanied me on every trip to AN but one, and a few attended several events. As I soon discovered, anyone who did not belong to a group was likely to be suspected of being an infiltrator, so having students with me helped legitimize my presence. More importantly, my students gave me credibility as an impartial observer by being respectful, nonjudgmental, and willing to listen. They also helped bridge the generation gap, a significant plus because AN was trying to attract racist skinheads who usually were at least 30 years younger than I.

But how much could we really observe? Not only were we outsiders and potential critics, but the AWC and AYA were special events that everyone knew were intentionally staged. However, they were not staged for us, but for their Aryan "kindred," and the poor stage management that we observed exposed a surprising amount of backstage information that discredited AN's collective presentation of self.

After completing the first draft of this paper, which focused solely on what I observed in the nineties, it became clear that I needed more information about the inner workings of AN during its formative years. Although most of the early members had moved away or died, I was able to conduct three tape-recorded interviews, totaling 5 hours, with a former member of the original core group who is respected in the WSM for his honesty and frankness. James (a pseudonym) worked on the compound regularly for several years in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to these interviews, James wrote a lengthy commentary on my first draft, and provided the names of AN's central and peripheral members. Other sources include two members who had been mainstays of the organization from the late seventies until they moved away in the nineties, and two less-central core members, who were interviewed by one of my students shortly after they defected in 1992.

\footnote{e.g., the Army of Israel, World Church of the Creator, America's Promise, Laporte Church of Christ, American Front, and Elohim City (Shook, Delano, and Balch 1999).}

\footnote{Butler canceled the 2002 AWC to attend a rally in Pennsylvania.}

\footnote{Safety was not a concern on the compound. Not only did we have Butler's approval and protection, but violence and aggressive actions toward anyone were not tolerated on church property. However, we were present during two episodes of violence at motel and apartment parties where skinheads and alcohol were involved. There were no injuries to students or legal repercussions.}
EARLY HISTORY OF ARYAN NATIONS

The highlights of AN’s early history are documented in numerous popular and academic books on the WSM (Aho 1990; Barker 1993; Coates 1987; Flynn and Gerhardt 1989; Kaplan 2000; Ridgeway 1990). Besides providing a chronology of major events, these accounts reveal why AN came to be feared as a dangerous “hate group.”

The full name of Butler’s organization was the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, Aryan Nations. The first part of the name reflected Butler’s belief that Jesus Christ was not a Jew, whereas AN, the “political arm” of the church, took its name from the white nations of Europe and North America. The church belonged to the Christian Identity movement, which claims that white people are the true Israelites (Aho 1990; Barkun 1997; Dobratz 2001; Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997; Gardell 2003; Kaplan 1997, 2000). Although Christian Identity is a loose, fractious movement with no unified doctrine, its adherents believe that whites descend from the Lost Tribes of Israel, who supposedly migrated to Europe and the British Isles. The Jews, they believe, are the children of Satan, intent on world domination through the subversion of white Christian civilization. Nonwhites, sometimes called the “mud races,” are simply pawns in the Jewish plot.

The origin of the Jews is a bone of contention in the Identity movement (Barkun 1997; Gardell 2003; Weiland 2000; Weisman 1998). One camp claims the Jews descend from Israelites who committed the sin of miscegenation by intermarrying with “pre-Adamic” nonwhite races. The other believes the Jews are literally the progeny of Eve’s seduction by Satan. The second viewpoint is called the “seedline” doctrine. The name refers to the biologically distinct lineages of Adam and Satan—the Aryan race and the Jews.

Born in 1918, Butler embraced seedline Identity in the 1960s while working as an aeronautical engineer for Lockheed in southern California. His mentor was Dr. Wesley Swift, a leading seedline preacher who founded the Church of Jesus Christ Christian in the late forties. Butler tried to take over the church after Swift died in 1970, but he was unable to hold the congregation together. In 1973, drawn by Idaho’s rural setting and nearly all-white population, Butler moved to the Coeur d’Alene area where he started his own branch of the church.

Idaho also promised a safe haven in the coming Apocalypse. Butler preached a brand of catastrophic millennialism (Kaplan 1997; Wessinger 2000) that called upon true Christians to prepare for an apocalyptic race war, after which Aryan men and women would establish a racially-pure National Socialist state governed by Biblical laws (Aryan Nations n.d.).

Although Butler spoke of a “world without Jews,” his more immediate goal was the creation of an all-white Aryan homeland in the Pacific Northwest. He argued that each race had a “territorial imperative,” meaning it needed its
own territory to sustain its racial purity, and hence its identity, culture, and
religion. He believed that if enough like-minded whites moved to northern
Idaho, they could gradually gain political power, starting locally and expanding
outward until they controlled Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Montana, and
Wyoming. This agenda came to be known as the “10 percent solution” because
5 of the 50 states would fall under Aryan control.

In 1978, Butler added Aryan Nations to the name of his church,
reflecting his desire to unite all white people under a single banner, regardless of
their religious beliefs. He churned out literature, started a prison ministry, and
ran ads in right-wing magazines touting the attractions of the inland Northwest.
Butler also organized meetings with other Identity leaders to promote his
separatist agenda, including a conference in Hays, Kansas, in which he took the
bold step of inviting representatives of the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups,
who ordinarily did not mix with Identity people. In 1980, Butler hosted his first
World Congress, hoping to provide a setting where white separatists could set
aside their sectarian differences and work together for racial preservation. By
the early eighties, Butler claimed 300 followers locally and 6,000 nationwide
(Flynn and Gerhardt 1989: 55).

Meanwhile, local residents were becoming concerned about the influx
of right-wing extremists. Swastikas and the words “Jew swine” were
spray-painted on a restaurant owned by a Jewish resident; African-Americans
began receiving hate mail; mixed-race children were threatened; and “Running
Nigger” targets, depicting the silhouette of a black man superimposed on a
bull’s-eye, were posted in nearby towns. The offender turned out to be Keith
Gilbert, a former AN member who had served 5 years for possession of 1,500
pounds of dynamite, with which he allegedly had planned to assassinate Martin
Luther King, Jr. (Aho 1990; Barker 1993; Flynn and Gerhardt 1989). In
response, a small group of local citizens formed the Kootenai County Task
Force on Human Relations to counter AN activities, and in 1983, Idaho adopted
a law making racial harassment a felony.

Ironically, the first outbreak of actual violence occurred in 1981 when
someone bombed Butler’s church. The perpetrator was never identified, but
Butler vowed it would never happen again. Soon his 20 acres began to resemble
a true compound, with the addition of armed guards and a 29-foot watch tower.

The AWC quickly became the most important white separatist event in
the country, attracting as many as 500 participants and a lineup of movement
luminaries. Among them were Texas Klan leader Louis Beam, who in 1981

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5 All attendance figures are rough estimates. Before 1986, figures
come from secondary sources that do not describe how the numbers were
derived. Estimates for 1986 through 1990 come from headcounts and
registration figures reported by Rick Cooper of the National Socialist Vanguard.
Estimates for 1991 through 2004 are based on either my count of adults at
had organized violent protests against Vietnamese fishermen in Galveston Bay; Pastor Bob Miles of Michigan, recently released from prison after serving 6 years for bombing school buses used to transport African-American children to white schools; and J.B. Stoner, Georgia leader of the National States Rights Party, who subsequently would serve time for his role in the 1958 bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama.

The mood at Congress darkened in 1983. Gordon Kahl, a North Dakota tax protestor and Identity believer, had just been killed in a shootout with federal agents (Corcoran 1990). The anger was palpable, and the speakers issued impassioned calls for action. But for many participants, including a newcomer named Robert Mathews, the inflammatory talk was just empty rhetoric.

In September, 1983, Mathews formed a secret terrorist cell called The Order to foment revolution and provide funds for white separatist organizations (Barker 1993; Flynn and Gerhardt 1989). Although he recruited several members through AN, Mathews did not tell Butler of his plans because he thought Butler was too cautious. In less than a year, The Order, known to its members as the Bruders Schweigen (Silent Brotherhood), carried out one of the biggest crime sprees in American history. Mathews died in a fiery shoot-out with the FBI late in 1984, and by 1986 all his followers had been arrested and convicted.

Although Butler claimed his mail doubled because of The Order, his problems increased as well. To lower his profile, he canceled the 1985 AWC, but AN members continued to bring bad publicity. In March of that year, AN’s former head of security, Elden “Bud” Cutler, was charged with hiring an undercover agent to kill Thomas Martinez, an Order member who had turned state’s evidence. The following year five AN members formed the Bruders Schweigen Strike Force II, which was responsible for four bombings in nearby Coeur d’Alene, including one that blew up part of the home of local human rights activist Bill Wassmuth (Barker 1993).

This succession of problems so soon after The Order, especially the bombing of Wassmuth’s home, revitalized local opposition. In 1987, the Idaho legislature passed two bills aimed at controlling AN activities, one allowing the victims of malicious harassment to sue their harassers, and the other prohibiting paramilitary training. Butler had resumed the AWC in 1986, but attendance had fallen to about 300, and it dropped again in 1987 to roughly 250. Many stayed away because of the law enforcement attention now focused on the compound.6

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6 For an insider’s view of the AWC from 1986 through the 1990s, see Cooper 1986-2000. Descriptions of the AYA, can be found in Cooper 1989-1996.
Butler's difficulties peaked on April 21, 1987, when he was indicted for conspiracy to overthrow the federal government (Barker 1993; Kaplan 2000; Seymour 1991). Among the alleged co-conspirators were Robert Miles and Louis Beam, several members of The Order, and James Ellison, leader of an Arkansas-based Identity church called the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord. Although government attorneys believed they had an ironclad case, all defendants were acquitted on April 7, 1988. At the subsequent AWC, Butler celebrated his victory over the "judicial" system by announcing his latest plan—a "Skinhead Solution Seminar" to be held in April, 1989, on the weekend closest to Hitler's birthday. Butler's goal was to attract a new generation of racists to the movement. For the next three years, the new youth conference, soon to be called the AYA, drew about 115 people annually, while attendance at Congress ranged between 250 and 275. Then, in 1991, my students and I arrived on the scene.

**INSIDE THE COMPOUND**

I must confess to being disappointed on my first trip to AN. Except for a tiny, unmanned guard house bearing a "Whites Only" sign, AN easily could have been mistaken for an ordinary rural, working-class church. Located in a clearing surrounded by tall pines, the church was a small metal-roofed building with faded brown siding and a steeple over the entryway. At first glance, the watchtower behind the church resembled an enclosed water tank, of the sort once common on family farms. The few other buildings were equally unimpressive. The chapel could seat about 80 people comfortably. Behind the pulpit, a stained-glass window depicting the AN emblem was flanked by two wooden crosses, and the dais included a piano where on Sundays Butler's wife, Betty, played familiar hymns, such as "Amazing Grace" and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." In later visits, a swastika clock and bust of Hitler were added.

More revealing was Aryan Hall, the meeting room adjoining the chapel, where the flags of European nations, including Nazi Germany, hung from the walls. Posters depicting Storm Troopers mingled with paintings representing AN's vision of the future: the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Aryan warriors battling ape-like mud people, and a blond-headed youth, sword in hand, standing triumphantly over the corpse of a Jewish dragon while rays of light beamed down from Heaven. Tables were stacked with literature waiting to be mailed, including a stack destined for South Africa.

The organization turned out to be much smaller than I expected. When Butler claimed 6,000 followers, he was talking about his mailing list, not dues-paying members. In 1992, the Public Affairs Coordinator told us that AN had only 756 actual members, few of whom lived in Idaho. Including Butler and his wife, only 5 people lived on the compound. Of the 25 who attended the Sunday service, nearly everyone was middle-aged and out of shape, bearing little resemblance to the warriors portrayed in Aryan Hall. A few men wore the
AN uniform—a light blue shirt, navy slacks, black clip-on tie, and AN insignia—but no guards stood watch and nobody carried a gun. The aging guard dog preferred chasing pine cones to patrolling the perimeter, which was marked off by a rusty, three-stand barbed-wire fence. AN looked much the same on subsequent visits, whether I called ahead or not.

But like a peacock fanning its plumage, AN still had the capacity to dazzle, primarily through its World Congress. “Going to Congress” was a big event for most participants, and to be effective, the AWC needed to live up to the expectations of its audience. Since the AYA followed the same format as Congress, I will describe the two together.

**CONGRESS AND THE YOUTH ASSEMBLY**

The AWC and AYA were essentially consciousness-raising events intended to create and sustain a collective Aryan identity, transcending barriers of class, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and factional allegiance. Butler would have agreed with Gardell (2003:71-72), who claims that white racists “are not in agreement on even the fundamentals: who they are, what they are doing, where they are going, or how they possibly are going to get there.” AN events were designed to address these issues.

Both the AWC and AYA were weekend affairs. Most people arrived Friday afternoon, but the crowd would continue to grow through Saturday. Signs by the entrance announced the event, while across the road, plainclothes law enforcement officers sat in unmarked vehicles, recording license plate numbers and photographing cars entering and leaving, when possible getting close-ups of the occupants. Occasionally there were protestors—shouting, chanting, making obscene gestures—but they never ventured beyond the front gate.

At the guard house, participants were greeted by armed security personnel who checked names on the registration list and collected the $35 fee from anyone not pre-registered. Drivers were directed to the parking area past a sign reading, “Welcome Kinsmen.” Most vehicles were older models, and out-of-state plates outnumbered Idaho tags by a wide margin. Every region of the U.S. was represented, as well as some Canadian provinces. Participants either camped on the grounds or stayed in nearby motels.

The formerly drab grounds now resembled “the compound” portrayed in the media. A 20-foot swastika banner hung from the catwalk of the guard tower, and Nazi, Confederate, and Aryan Nations flags waved from tall white poles in the lawn. More flags surrounded the speaking platform, and placards on the lawn proclaimed Butler’s goal of Aryan solidarity: “My Race is My Religion,” “White Pride World Wide.” Early arrivals browsed at book and souvenir tables or chatted among themselves, while tinny recordings of German marching songs blared from loudspeakers and officious security guards roamed about with walkie-talkies.
Participants included the four main factions of the WPM—Christian Identity, Ku Klux Klan, National Socialist, and Skinhead—as well as racists who were unaligned but who still identified with the movement. Among the skinheads were Odinists who rejected Christianity for the gods and goddesses of Norse mythology (Dobratz 2001; Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997; Gardell 2003; Kaplan 1997). Men generally outnumbered women 5 to 1, and women without male escorts were virtually unheard of. All ages were represented, and families with small children were common. Most participants had blue-collar jobs, and their conversations were laced with populist concerns: immigration, multiculturalism, affirmative action, corporate greed, and government indifference to their plight.

Following a Friday afternoon press conference, reporters were escorted to the gate and the formal program began. Activities included speeches, athletic competitions, survival workshops, and self-defense demonstrations, as well as performances at the AYA by white power bands, such as Bound for Glory and Odin’s Law. Occasionally participants also distributed literature in the area, or staged parades and rallies in Coeur d’Alene. “Fellowship” times were scheduled for socializing.

Butler’s keynote address, basically the same every year, laid out the master frame for the weekend: Aryans are the true sons and daughters of Adam. They are kindred souls, united by the sacred bond of blood, and the wellspring of all civilization. But now the white race is threatened with extinction by race mixing, immigration, and the cesspool of multiculturalism, all of which are being orchestrated behind the scenes by the Jews, the epitome of evil. Because whites have been brainwashed to accept the false doctrine of racial equality, and to feel guilty about their heritage, they have lost their identity as a people. To prevent the genocide of the white race, Aryans must reawaken their racial consciousness, join together as one people, and steel themselves for the ultimate battle to save the race.

Other speeches typically stuck close to the unity-building theme of racial preservation. Identity speakers generally avoided doctrinal issues and quoted from the Bible only to support the master frame. What prevailed was a kind of Aryan civil religion (Bellah 1970) in which religious imagery was used in a nonsectarian way to provide divine sanction for the common enterprise.

Most speakers stayed away from religion altogether, preferring to amplify secular beliefs and concerns, on which virtually everyone could agree—e.g., the achievements of Western civilization, the degeneracy of the mud races, subversion by the “Jews media,” the duplicity of the “feral government,” and the need to save the white race. Speakers often quoted the “14 Words,” coined by imprisoned Order member David Lane, himself an Odinist: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children” (Kaplan 2000:167-169).

Occasionally speakers made explicit attempts to build bridges between the conflicting frames of the factions in the audience. For instance, two
speeches in 1996 tried to link Odinism with Christian Identity—one through the “common denominator” of “nature’s laws,” and the other through an exegesis of the Biblical roots of Norse mythology (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997:145-46; Gardell 2003:220-21). Some speakers tried to bridge ideological gaps by re-framing them as irrelevant (“First we have to defeat the Jew, then God can decide whose religion is right”), while still others ignored the divisions altogether, except to applaud the diversity of those in attendance.

The framing that occurred in the speeches continued informally around picnic tables and campfires. Here ideology took on substance as participants exchanged their personal experiences. Out-group themes predominated, especially stories of injustice against the white working class, such as jobs lost to affirmative action hires, families driven out of their neighborhoods by nonwhite gangs, and innocent men entrapped by “the Feds.” More philosophical discussions focused on matters related to white identity, especially what it means to be white and what constitutes “the movement.”

Externally the faces of the enemy were embodied by the police at the gate and the angry protestors who showed up at AN rallies and parades in Coeur d’Alene. Some of the most powerful bridge-building occurred when Nazis, Odinists, Christians, and atheists stood together against protestors, not as members of this faction or that, but as united “Aryan warriors.” These confrontations heightened the significance of the “Welcome Kinsmen” sign upon returning to the compound. The compound provided a “free space” (Evans and Boyte 1986), a safe haven from a hostile world where participants could relax around their “own kind,” knowing that the person babysitting their children or helping to fix their car shared the same background assumptions about reality that they did.

The highlight of the weekend occurred Saturday night when a cross was burned at Congress, or a swastika at the AYA, in a ritual reaffirmation of Aryan identity. “Cross lightings” tended to be more dramatic because they were led by Klansmen in full regalia. Participants gathered in a circle around the cross, torches were lit, and the Klansman in charge explained the origins and symbolism of the ritual: to let the light of Christ (and hence the Aryan race) shine before the world. Then the torches were touched to the cross. With the flames illuminating the circle against the darkness, Butler offered a prayer for white victory that would be followed by stiff-armed salutes from the crowd and choruses of “Sieg Heil!,” “Hail Victory!,” “White Power!,” and “Hail Pastor Butler!”

On Sunday morning, Butler conducted a service in the chapel, followed by a ceremony called “Soldier’s Ransom.” Men, and occasionally women, came forward one at a time, raised a broadsword to the AN emblem, and pledged their “sacred honor to Yahweh,” after which Butler anointed them with oil. Lunch followed, but by then people were leaving for home, presumably with renewed determination to fight for the preservation of the race. Although the pledge was
a symbolic gesture, Butler hoped it would be reflected in subsequent actions on behalf of the movement, and AN in particular.

THE GAP BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY

At first glance, it might appear that AN events had all the right ingredients for building solidarity in the WSM and attracting supporters to its own ranks. Most participants already agreed with AN on major issues, and factionalism was strongly discouraged. The master frame identified common problems, attributed blame, and demonized enemies, while instilling hope and calling for action (Snow et al. 1986). AN events also had a strong social component. The compound provided an encapsulated environment conducive to building the social bonds necessary for a successful movement (Gamson 1992; Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Kanter 1972; Stark and Finke 2000). Ritual was used to dramatize the sacredness of their collective identity, and cross lightings in particular could generate powerful emotions.

Yet participation at the AWC plunged during the nineties, and the AYA was discontinued in 1996. AN events certainly had their high moments, when the collective adrenaline sent shivers up my spine, but the organization was incapable of producing that energy on a regular basis, or of sustaining it when it happened. More often, the enthusiasm was dulled by lackluster performances or outright bungling that was both embarrassing and disillusioning. AN simply did not live up to its image, whether defined by the media or by AN itself. In his opening speech to my students on our 1991 field trip, the Public Affairs Coordinator described AN as the “elite of the right wing,” and the literature we were given conveyed the impression that AN was a large, well-organized political movement. But the reality did not match the rhetoric.

On paper, Butler appeared to run a tight ship. Every participant was given a list of rules (e.g., no guns, alcohol, drugs, littering, or dirty language), and AN’s security force was empowered to expel violators. However, the guards often wore dirty uniforms with shirttails hanging out, and sometimes had not bothered to shave or comb their hair. Occasionally they were late for morning duty because they had been drinking the night before. Skinheads frequently smuggled alcohol onto the grounds, and the security guards, many of whom were skinheads themselves, usually looked the other way. The skinheads were particularly fond of four-letter words, and skinhead women often wore provocative attire in church.

Only a few times after 1991 was the compound fully decked out with all the flags and banners described above. Sometimes the grounds were littered with Styrofoam cups, pop cans, napkins, and cigarette butts, prompting Louis Beam to open one speech with an indictment of “white trash” in the movement. The toilet in the church backed up during every event, and the ever-overflowing waste cans in the bathrooms were rarely emptied. Staff quarters were cramped, and some were heaped with trash, unwashed dishes, and dirty clothes.
Although every AWC and AYA had a printed program, some speakers invariably failed to show up, and events rarely started on time—the record being lunch at the 1996 AYA which was one and one half hours late. Many events were canceled altogether, leaving an inordinate amount of unstructured time for “fellowship,” during which most people hung out at their own camps with nothing to do. The speakers included occasional firebrands, but most were uninspiring, especially Butler. His press conference remarks about “ethnic cleansing” and “nonwhite scum” made good copy, but his speeches frequently put listeners to sleep, once as many as 13 in an audience of approximately 35.

Embarrassing glitches marred nearly every event, often at what should have been solemn ritual moments. During a flag-raising ceremony, for example, one of the three participants got confused during an about-face. Throughout the speech that followed, he stood with his back to the flags, unsure if he should turn around, while the skinheads in the crowd smirked and rolled their eyes. Another flag-raising featured a triple-gun salute to Aryan martyrs, but the ceremony had to be delayed because one of the riflemen had no gun. After several minutes another weapon was located, but a second delay followed as the formerly empty-handed rifleman was reprimanded for aiming his weapon at the church’s stained glass window. Still another flag-raising had to be canceled altogether because the security guards had forgotten to lower the flags the night before.

Occasionally, even cross and swastika lightings were marred by bad planning or poor execution. The most notable glitch occurred at the 1994 AYA. Before the cross could be lit, an argument broke out between a drunken skinhead and Butler’s Chief of Staff. A shoving match ensued, and shouts of “Fuck you!” were exchanged. When security guards finally intervened, the Chief of Staff’s young daughter called out, “Pee on him, Dad,” giving rise to jokes about the sort of discipline her father used at home.

Impromptu events were botched as well. At the 1996 Congress, a group of skinheads decided to stage a march in Coeur d’Alene, but afterwards the police prevented them from leaving because their van had expired plates and no registration. A caravan was sent to pick them up, but the lead car took a back road to town and got lost, leading us on a serpentine course through the suburbs before the driver gave up and got directions from a Hispanic gas station attendant. When the caravan finally reached its destination, two uniformed AN officers were arguing noisily about who was in charge, while spectators looked on and a reporter took pictures.

The tiff not only belied the pretense of military discipline, but it stimulated malicious gossip back at the compound, where I was told that one of the antagonists was “into little girls.” AN events were hotbeds of gossip (Gardell 2003:71). During our first Congress, the Public Affairs Coordinator spent a night in our motel room telling funny stories at the expense of his fellow staff members. While he was more candid than most, others followed suit at
every subsequent event, and the storytellers included both AN members and
general participants. Common topics included allegations of Jewish ancestry,
sexual deviance, alcohol and drug abuse, incompetence, dishonesty, and
disloyalty—particularly being an informer. Most often the targets were
members of rival groups or factions, but in-group gossip was also common.

In short, AN events may have been good frame alignment strategies,
but from a dramaturgical perspective, the script lost its punch because the cast,
crew, and director could not deliver a convincing performance. My students
coined the term “Aryan ingenuity” as a synonym for ineptitude, and recent
accounts by other outside observers are at least as unflattering as mine (Gardell
2003:129; Mitchell 2002:163-182). However, not everyone shared our negative
assessment of AN events. When one of my students asked a skinhead girl to
describe her ideal world, the girl swept her arm around the compound and
replied brightly: “You’re looking at it. I can’t imagine anything as beautiful as
this” (Crane 1993). It is impossible to estimate how many participants were as
unimpressed as we were, but from the snickering and head-shaking we
observed, and the disparaging remarks we heard, it quickly became clear that
dissatisfaction was widespread. My primary source, James, remarked that he
was “ashamed” of what AN had become. To understand how far AN had fallen,
we need to take a closer look at the group during its formative years.

THE GLORY YEARS – 1978-1983

The stories told by AN’s early members suggest three things. First,
AN’s early success can be attributed to internal organizational strengths and a
relatively favorable external environment. Second, despite its success, AN was
a fragile organization because of inherent structural weaknesses. Third, those
weaknesses morphed into serious problems when the external environment
suddenly turned for the worse because of The Order.

INTERNAL FACTORS

The early members agreed that AN had “a different spirit” before The
Order—a seriousness of purpose that had evaporated years before my first visit.
They described a higher level of optimism, dedication, and comradery than what
I observed in the nineties. Even granting some romanticizing of the past,
Butler’s original organization appears to have been a close-knit community that
fostered a collective identity and feelings of personal pride.

The core members of AN were the parishioners of Butler’s church.
The nucleus consisted of former members of Swift’s congregation who had
followed Butler to Idaho. They had been joined by Identity believers already
living in the area, and still others were attracted by the media attention that
Butler received following the founding of AN. Many of the originals left after
1978 because they disliked the new militancy, but the dropouts were more than
replaced by an influx of new members, nearly all of whom shared Butler’s Identity beliefs.

Not counting children, the regular attenders in the early eighties included at least 50 adults and older teenagers, mainly from 16 families living in the surrounding area. Most were in their 40s and 50s, and many were elderly. Less regular but still attending frequently were another 30 to 40, also mainly in family groups. Attendance at Sunday services varied from roughly 30 in winter to as many as 80 in summer, including out-of-town guests staying on the church grounds. Men outnumbered women, but only slightly.

Though AN has been described as communal during this period (Kaplan 2000: 6), its members lived in separate, self-supporting nuclear family households, as they did in the nineties. Only two members besides Butler and his wife were considered permanent residents on the church grounds. Except for the church secretary, who worked full-time, all members relied on outside income to support themselves, mainly from blue-collar jobs. James characterized the congregation as “normal people in normal, everyday situations.”

The primary bond among the core members was belief in the seedline theory preached by Swift. This is not to say that members followed a strict party line, because disagreements over doctrinal points were common, but the seedline theory was bedrock. Despite AN’s ecumenical goal, Butler made it clear that his Aryan utopia would be a theocracy governed by Biblical laws, and members of his congregation shared that ideal.

The church was the focal point of community life. Besides Sunday services, church activities included regular Bible studies and holiday celebrations, and church facilities were used for all AN events. The regular attenders were bound together by a dense network of friendships and family ties that were reflected in frequent family get-togethers, casual socializing, and collective projects. The church was the social hub where talk about Scripture and Bible history lubricated relationships.

Butler was called Pastor Butler, or just Pastor. To his followers he was an impassioned but ordinary man, sometimes inspiring but not charismatic. Already retired, Butler turned 60 the year he founded AN. Former members characterized him as a reluctant leader who started AN only when it became clear that no one else was doing anything to unify the movement. Butler may have lacked charisma, but he exercised powerful authority by virtue of his example. To his congregation he was a man of principle and integrity who lived what he preached and had no interest in personal fame or fortune. Butler had invested his life savings in AN, and he worked tirelessly to make it grow. Never divorced, he had been married to the same woman since 1944, an important point in Identity circles. His sincerity and dedication were considered beyond reproach, and these qualities gave him credibility in a movement known for its
inflated egos, con artists, turncoats, philanderers, and closet homosexuals (Cooper 2000).

Though its uniforms, titles, and formal platform suggested otherwise, AN was essentially an informal organization. Butler had final authority over every decision, but he relied on advice from an informal circle of “elders,” as well as suggestions from rank-and-file members. Formal roles in the bureaucratic sense did not exist, and members assumed roles such as Security Chief on an as-needed basis. Aside from the secretary’s job, all work was done by unpaid volunteers, and most projects began with their ideas. Men banded together to make money by logging or doing trail maintenance; mothers pooled resources to home-school the younger children at the church; and others put in long hours working on AN’s burgeoning in-house publishing operation. One of AN’s best-known projects, its prison ministry, was started and run by one middle-aged woman.

Members were expected to abstain from drugs, alcohol, swearing, and extra-marital sex, and to resolve disagreements through discussion and prayer. Criminal behavior was not tolerated, and even crimes that some might have thought justifiable (e.g., vandalizing a porn shop) could lead to expulsion because they caused trouble with local law enforcement and bad feelings with the neighbors. Nonconformity was rare, but when it occurred, it was handled in an informal, conciliatory fashion by one or more of the elders. If that failed, the offender would be asked to leave.

Unlike so many other white separatist SMOs (Kaplan 2000), the original AN was a true community. Its members were bound together by shared beliefs, a respected leader, a dense network of social relationships, and a code of conduct backed by effective social control. They also were accustomed to working together on collective projects. As a result, the AWC was, by all accounts, more impressive than anything I observed in the nineties. Attendance jumped from just over 200 in 1982 to as many as 500 in 1983, and AN’s national membership grew apace. By 1984, nearly all the leading figures in the WSM had spoken at the AWC, and AN had become a rising star in the movement.

As a frame alignment strategy, the AWC was successful because AN possessed the qualities that Goffman (1959: 208-237) says are necessary for a team to deliver a competent performance: loyalty, dedication, and circumspection. Compared to events in the nineties, the AWC was better organized, security was tighter, rules were enforced, ceremonies were rehearsed, and events came off as planned, producing a collective energy that the participants found exciting. More importantly, the effectiveness of the performance convinced participants that AN was a competent organization worth supporting.

However, AN was not without its problems, starting with Butler himself. Though greatly admired, he was not considered a good leader. His
personal idiosyncrasies were crucial because AN was an autocracy “a one-man show,” as two early members put it. Everyone acknowledged that AN was Butler’s organization and granted him the last word on every decision. But Butler also had a *laissez faire* style that was especially frustrating to those who wanted direction. For example, he was not particularly interested in providing religious instruction, so parishioners had to organize their own Bible studies, and he was vague about what members should be doing to advance AN’s political goals. “We always got the idea,” said James, “that he simply expected that everyone would fall into place and march in step, by some natural ‘group osmosis’ or individual spiritual enlightenment.”

When Butler did exert control, he often undercut the authority of loyal followers or gave authority to people who did not have the backing of the community. James described one of the more upsetting incidents:

> I recall preparing for one early Congress, where the assigned M.C., who never did anything around the church other than talk, was given authority over those of us who were working hard to prepare for everything. The fellow wanted the flag raising and honor guard done this way and that, but had neither been involved in preparations for that, nor anything else. Pastor sided with him despite objections from the entire group. It was not a happy meeting. This was not the rule, but a pattern that became more regular over time.

Butler was known for his generosity, but members agreed that he was too kind-hearted for his own good. According to James: “He pissed off some good people with self-initiative in the process of coddling those who were never going to amount to more than part-timers.” Guests who stayed on the compound for extended periods were expected to contribute in some way, but Butler tolerated more slack than most members thought was appropriate. Some of those taken under Butler’s wing, such as Keith Gilbert, caused trouble with the law, bringing bad publicity. However, Butler usually had to be prodded to expel troublemakers.

AN’s problems were aggravated by Butler’s advancing age. Butler turned 60 the year he founded AN, and few expected him to live another 10 years, let alone 26. Yet he showed no interest in grooming a successor or creating a formal structure to carry on after his death, as if here too “group osmosis” would save the day. However, as James explained in his written comments on my paper, he and others were not so sanguine: “All agreed that Betty Butler would probably sell the church and shut things down. ... We all understood that Pastor Butler had no true ‘Second.’ ... We all understood even back then that when Pastor Butler passed on, so would AN.”

For a group that claimed to be laying the foundation for a new society, AN had virtually no plans for building a lasting community, such as buying
more property or acquiring businesses to bring in money and provide jobs for members. Instead, it focused on short-term projects such as the AWC. Butler may have had a close-knit community behind him, but his energy was flagging, and his weak but autocratic leadership dampened his followers' enthusiasm. Many newcomers, most notably Bob Mathews, soon left out of frustration with Butler. Thus, even at its peak, AN’s strengths were offset by serious internal weaknesses.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Despite the problems, AN was blessed by a fairly benign environment. According to Stark (1987), a moderate degree of tension with the external environment contributes to the success of new religious movements. Too much tension invites repression, but too little causes the movement to lose focus, and members fall away. If so, Butler picked a good setting for AN. Media coverage was generally unfavorable, but even the worst publicity sparked surges in calls and letters requesting information, and Butler faced little organized opposition. On the whole, AN’s neighbors were tolerant, and some developed friendships with members. The Kootenai County Sheriff’s Office became increasingly concerned after the 1981 bombing (Barker 1993), but harassment was uncommon, and James claimed that local law-enforcement had an unwritten “hands off” policy, as long as AN members stayed out of trouble. Informers and infiltrators were considered occupational hazards, but not serious problems (though ex-members attribute Security Chief Bud Cutler’s imprisonment to an agent provocateur).

The bombing of the church was the most dramatic sign of opposition. Members had reason to believe it was planned by a well-known figure in the Jewish Defense League, and it served as stark confirmation that their enemies would stop at nothing to destroy them. Security was tightened, members pulled together to rebuild the church, and relationships grew stronger as their collective identity as embattled defenders of Truth suddenly came into focus.

Less helpful for Butler was the sluggish local economy. Prospective recruits hesitated to move to rural Idaho where jobs were scarce and the pay low. Many new arrivals left when they could not find work, and those who stayed struggled to make ends meet. AN had already drained Butler’s savings, and his followers had little money to give for the cause. Like virtually all white power groups, AN was financially strapped, and the sorry state of the movement’s finances was a major reason why Bob Mathews started The Order.

The Order proved to be catastrophic for AN. Besides causing a barrage of negative media attention, it provoked a repressive response from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies that culminated in the 1988 sedition trial. Undercover agents now became a serious concern, and the costs of being associated with AN suddenly went up. Attendance at the AWC plummeted, and other white separatist leaders distanced themselves from Butler. AN had
become a “hot potato” in the movement. Worst of all, the increased scrutiny drove away most of Butler’s core group. By 1991, nearly everyone who belonged to AN before The Order had stopped participating or moved away. AN continued to attract people to Idaho, and a new inner circle formed around Butler, but it lacked the size, cohesiveness, and competence of the original. Although AN managed to recover somewhat by reaching out to skinheads through the AYA, the glory days were over.

ARYAN NATIONS IN THE NINETIES

By the time I arrived in 1991, AN was in a precarious position. Externally, opposition had hardened and law enforcement pressures had intensified. Internally, the organization was starting to come apart at the seams.

EXTERNAL OPPOSITION

The publicity caused by The Order transformed AN into one of the nation’s most notorious hate groups, and that reputation persisted through the nineties. Books, articles, and television documentaries invariably linked AN with The Order, and typically described its headquarters as a fortified compound, an image much loved by the media. “Hate” was now considered a serious social problem, and multiculturalism had become part of the national agenda. In the Coeur d’Alene area, AN faced mounting opposition from human rights activists, business leaders, politicians, and the general public. When AN marchers paraded through the city or rallied in the park, they invariably were outnumbered by angry protestors.

AN continued to benefit from some of this opposition because the hostility reaffirmed members’ belief that the “Jew World Order” really was out to get them. Media stories provoked requests for literature, and the protestors who showed up at AN events inevitably pumped energy into the group, unifying participants in a way that the fieriest speakers could not. Ironically, the most negative consequence of the bad press was to attract an influx of young, undisciplined skinheads who were drawn by what James called “the Viking thing,” i.e., the thrill of battle.

Law-enforcement activities were AN’s most serious external problem. Just getting to AN events now could be difficult. On every visit we heard stories of harassment by local officers, usually being pulled over for minor traffic infractions.

7 In academic studies of the WSM it has become de rigueur for authors to proclaim their opposition to the movement. The study of white separatism has become one of the few areas in social science in which it is acceptable to express open contempt for one’s subjects (e.g., Blee 2002). Lest my attempt at objectivity be mistaken for sympathy, please note that I do not share AN’s racial, religious, or political beliefs.
offenses or vehicle problems, and then being detained for record checks. More serious for Butler and his staff were the frequent investigations, arrests, and court appearances that consumed time, resources, and manpower.

Most troublesome of all were the informers and infiltrators. Federal agents were the biggest concern, but human rights organizations used the same tactics, and AN members assumed they routinely shared information. Twice I was present when someone was caught wearing a wire, and informers were a common topic in casual conversations as well as speeches. An FBI informant named Rico Valentino was legendary for sending three AN members to prison in 1990 for planning a series of bombings in Seattle (Cooper 1990ab). The defense claimed entrapment, and Rico came to be seen as the archetypal agent provocateur.

The constant threat of betrayal fostered a culture of mistrust, into which newcomers were socialized. At every AN event suspected informers were pointed out to us, and we were given tips on how to identify them (e.g., someone tries to talk you into committing a crime). Hardly anyone was immune from suspicion, and with good reason: During the 1988 sedition trial, Butler's bodyguard and confidante had been Rico Valentino. The paranoia was infectious. Mitchell (2002: 172) notes that "Find the Cop" was a popular game at the AWC, and my students played their own version, called "Spot the Fed." The fear of trouble kept people away from AN events, and the ever-present danger that your best friend might be a Fed undermined efforts to rebuild the community.

INTERNAL DECAY

AN also faced serious internal problems, some of which were just old problems now getting worse. Though intertwined, they can be divided into several analytic categories.

STRUCTURAL INSTABILITY

AN had never recovered from the loss of its core members. Butler always had leadership troubles, but in the early years his inner circle compensated for his weaknesses. Besides providing a reliable workforce that was big enough to get necessary work done, the core group had been the source of AN's organizational stability. The family atmosphere helped keep the riffraff out, members took it upon themselves to enforce discipline, and most of the time Butler's advisors managed to keep him on track. But few of the original members remained by 1991.

AN had a new core, but it was smaller and less cohesive, consisting mainly of unmarried men with relatively weak interpersonal ties. In-fighting was common. We caught wind of a power struggle at our first Congress. The Public Affairs Coordinator had been stripped of his title and soon was forced out
of AN altogether, supposedly because he smoked marijuana and brought underage girls to the compound. He claimed (with some justification) that the real reason was that he overshadowed AN’s stodgy Chief of Staff.

Staff turnover was a constant problem. Within two years of my first visit, AN’s Chief of Staff, Chief of Security, Public Affairs Coordinator, and Youth Director all left. Four men served as Chief of Staff in the 13 years that I visited, and the uniformed personnel in charge of AN events changed almost entirely every year. The faces who showed up at Sunday services also changed from year to year. The turnover made it hard to form close in-group relationships. Not only did the constant influx of new faces increase the risk of infiltration, but the newcomers were less likely to be Identity, or to be religious at all. For example, of AN’s 3 Youth Directors in the nineties, one was an Odinist and the other two were just learning about Identity. The high turnover hampered AN’s ability to stage events properly. With experienced hands in short supply, glitches were bound to happen.

FAILING LEADERSHIP

Without a stable cadre, Butler not only became the sole source of organizational continuity, but he had to assume responsibilities that formerly would have been left to his lieutenants. Now in his seventies, Butler was fairly energetic for a man of his age, but he often seemed overburdened by the day-to-day tasks of keeping AN afloat. He could be quite lucid, but also forgetful and unfocused, especially after his wife was diagnosed with cancer in 1994. Originally his ideas about Aryan unity and a white homeland had been new and exciting, but by the 1990s they had grown stale. His speeches were essentially the same as those he gave in the eighties. Even in 1983, Butler had been unable to capitalize on the anger caused by the martyrdom of Gordon Kahl, and he was caught equally flat-footed by the Randy Weaver incident in 1992, in which the best he and his followers could do was join the protest below Weaver’s cabin (Walter 1995; Crothers 2003).

Conflicts between Butler and his subordinates were common. A crisis occurred in 1993 when disagreements over security matters prompted the defections of 4 long-time members, including the Chief of Staff and Chief of Security. Another crisis followed in 1996. Butler had formed a new elders council to propose ways of bringing lapsed members back into the fold. The council gave him a list of recommendations that included the expulsion of 2 disagreeable members who were driving others away. To everyone’s dismay, Butler rejected every recommendation, and the bad apples were allowed to stay.

STAFF INCOMPETENCE

Butler clearly needed capable lieutenants to keep AN functioning smoothly, but the men who cycled through AN’s staff positions during the
nineties possessed neither leadership skills nor the confidence of other members. If AN had been a viable organization, competent individuals might have stepped forward to help, but they could see the problems and wanted no part. As a result, less competent people filled the void. Most conspicuous were Butler’s choices for Chief of Staff, his second-in-command. The first staff leader I met was paunchy and stoop-shouldered, and his speeches were even less inspiring than Butler’s. Privately he promoted theories that others thought were ludicrous (most notably a version of the hollow-earth theory contending that Earth’s interior is filled with Jewish gold and inhabited by the ancestors of Bigfoot). His replacement was a Hitler enthusiast whose pompous manner and Hitleresque mustache made him the butt of jokes. The next staff director had to be expelled for drinking and fighting, and the last was arrested for accidentally shooting pepper spray in the Sheriff’s face during an altercation with the previous Chief of Staff.

The only AN staff member who offered any significant programmatic ideas was the Public Affairs Coordinator, who was forced out in 1992. He proposed a frame extension strategy (Snow et al. 1986), in which AN would focus less on racial issues and more on matters of concern to rural, working-class whites in the Northwest, such as gun control, abortion, and environmental regulations. Originally Butler embraced the plan, but he lost interest after the Public Affairs Coordinator defected, and nobody else picked up the ball.

ECONOMIC WOES

AN’s greatest programmatic weakness may have been its failure to develop a reliable economic base. According to insiders, nearly all its funds came from membership fees, donations, and the sale of books, pamphlets, and memorabilia. After an initial $35 fee, an annual membership cost $5 per month. If, as the Public Affairs Coordinator claimed, AN had just 756 dues-paying members in 1992, monthly fees generated only a little more than $45,000. By 1996, I was told that membership had climbed to 1,100, but expenses had increased as well, without a corresponding increase in monthly dues. In 2000, Butler estimated AN’s annual income from membership fees and donations to be only $70,000 to $80,000, and despite a real estate boom in the surrounding area, his property and buildings were assessed at only $203,000.

Butler had invested his life savings into AN, but he was not wealthy, and with rare exceptions neither were his supporters. Largely working-class, their donations usually did not even cover AN’s electricity bills. One result of AN’s poverty was that Butler had almost no money to pay his staff. In 1991, for example, the Public Affairs Coordinator received $25 per month and a camp trailer to sleep in. To make ends meet, staff members often worked full-time jobs in nearby towns, taking time and energy away from AN projects. The
empty coffers also left AN unprepared for financial crises, such as the SPLC lawsuit that lay ahead.

**BOUNDARY PROBLEMS**

AN's disintegration was hastened by the collapse of its boundaries. Butler always had been considered a sucker for a hard-luck story, but without a strong core group to keep his generosity under control, AN became a haven for free-riders and opportunists. Butler's friends bemoaned his penchant for taking in "losers," "derelicts," "misfits," and "sociopaths," allowing them to stay in the church bunkhouse and partake of his "ever-full fridge" for indefinite periods, while asking little in return. As one of his oldest friends told me, Butler's problem was "quality control:" "Even his wife wanted a house cleaning but he was the original Mr. Softy."

As members themselves pointed out, AN events had always attracted a high proportion of crackpots and loose cannons, and even more showed up after The Order. Occasionally such people got turned away at the gate, but security personnel had no effective way of screening out potential troublemakers. Drinking was one of the biggest problems, primarily among the skinheads. It contributed to bad language, rough behavior, and sleeping through church, as well as property destruction in nearby motels. The rest of the year, AN members had to contend with a steady stream of visitors who were allowed to stay on the church grounds. No probationary period or particular commitments were required, just professed support for the cause. Besides free-riders who drained resources, a large proportion of the drop-ins turned out to be unstable hot-heads who had to be ejected.

**SOCIAL CONTROL**

Despite the rise in discipline problems, AN was less capable of handling the trouble. Butler never was good about enforcing the rules, but in the early days his soft-heartedness was not a critical problem. Most members voluntarily played by the rules, and when they did not, the elders exerted control. The elders were family men, and the frequent presence of their wives and children on the compound had a stabilizing effect. The common religion of Christian Identity provided a moral underpinning for conformity. But now volatile skinheads, who did not share Butler's religious beliefs, were frequenting the compound, and those best able to control them were gone.

Speakers at AN events discouraged participants from breaking the law (usually by pointing out that they were no good to the movement in jail), but I never heard of anyone being barred from an event after causing trouble in town. To the contrary, Butler often paid their bail. On other occasions Butler was equally lenient. Once he allowed a troublemaker to remain on the grounds even after the Chief of Security had ordered the man to leave. Word of the incident
spread, and the next day a skinhead on guard duty refused an order from the Security Chief, on the grounds that only Butler could tell him what to do.

The Chief of Security left in disgust, and subsequent security directors were considerably more flexible about the rules. More skinheads (most not even AN members) were appointed as security guards, and since skinheads caused nearly all the trouble, the guards often were friends of the offenders or complicit themselves. The security force received no training, nor was there a handbook to follow. The quality of security depended mainly on who was in charge.

GENERATION AND GENDER GAPS

AN was in demographic trouble too. Its local membership remained largely middle-aged, and now it also was overwhelmingly male. To address the age issue, Butler had started the AYA, but skinheads mixed with Identity believers like oil and water. Publicly, speakers praised the skinheads as the leaders of tomorrow, while privately describing them as “scumheads,” “parasites,” and “walking time bombs.” Most AN members were turned off by skinhead culture, especially the tattoos, heavy drinking, raucous music, and propensity for violence. Butler eventually was persuaded to drop the white power bands from the AYA, even though they were a major attraction.

The skinheads, most of whom had driven great distances to attend, were frequently disappointed by what they found. The leader of a California skinhead group told me that he had arrived expecting a heavily-armed encampment, only to find “a tiny church in the boondocks staffed by a bunch of misfits and tired old men.” Part of the generation gap was religious. The skinheads were far more likely to be Odinists than Identity, and the few attempts at frame bridging that occurred in the speeches appeared to fall flat. Some Odinists complained that AN’s platform called for the abolition of “heathen religions” (Aryan Nations n.d.), which presumably would include theirs. Young men and women alike chafed at AN’s puritanical mores, especially its rejection of alcohol and belief in premarital chastity. One of AN’s former Youth Directors, himself an Odinist, told me that if I were looking for sex, I would have better luck at a Baptist convention.

Besides young men, AN needed young women. Throughout the group’s history, nearly all the women involved in AN had belonged to family units, but by the early 1990s, most of the families had left. Not only did AN lack women that female skinheads could relate to, but even in the patriarchal world of the WSM (Blee 2002), AN struck many skinhead women as anachronistic. As Butler (n.d.: 12-13) wrote in The Aryan Warrior: “The world of contented womanhood is made of family: husband, children, and home. ... It is a far greater love and service to be the mother of healthy Aryan children than to be a clever woman lawyer.” Women were not allowed to hold formal membership in AN, and in the early nineties, they were discouraged from giving the Nazi salute or participating in Soldier’s Ransom. On the rare occasions that
women were invited to speak at AN events, they usually delivered messages from their absent husbands, sons, or brothers rather than speaking for themselves. To the chagrin of many of AN’s older members, skinhead women were considerably more outspoken than typical AN wives and girlfriends, and they preferred being on the front lines with the men to serving “white power potato salad” in the cook shack.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Almost every problem facing AN got worse during the nineties. Externally, local tolerance for Butler and his neo-Nazi compound diminished considerably. Between 1990 and 2000 the population of North Idaho grew by 56 percent, fueling an explosion of rural subdivisions, summer homes, and upscale lakeside resorts. Increasingly, AN came to be seen as an embarrassment, as well as an economic liability.

Opposition hardened in 1998 when human rights activists, politicians, and business leaders joined forces to protest AN’s first parade through Coeur d’Alene. Butler had a permit, but the community was literally (if one includes the SWAT teams) up in arms. A marquee at the beginning of the parade route proclaimed Idaho as “The Human Rights State,” downtown shops closed, and free movies and bowling were offered to lure spectators away from the city center. The sidewalks were packed with spectators and protestors anyway, and hundreds more demonstrated their opposition by attending a human rights rally in nearby Spokane. In the summer of 1999, Butler applied for another parade permit, but city officials routed him to the local dump, relenting only when the American Civil Liberties Union intervened on AN’s behalf (Morlin 1999a). By the time the issue was settled, Congress was over and most participants had departed, leaving only about 20 to march. Meanwhile, community leaders and rights activists looked for ways to close down AN altogether.

Internally, AN was crumbling. Butler turned 80 in 1998, and he looked every bit his age. Betty, his wife of 54 years, had died of cancer in 1995, and her illness had drained him mentally, physically, and financially. To pay her medical bills, he had been forced to log some of his land, while shelving much-needed maintenance work. Butler continued to hold Sunday services and speak at Congress, but he suffered from congestive heart failure and appeared increasingly disorganized. He was forced to rely more than ever on others to get things done, but his staff shrank to a skeleton crew consisting of almost anyone willing to put on a uniform. Though Butler often appeared exasperated by his lieutenants’ bumbling, he deferred to them more and more, changing his mind depending on whoever had his ear at the moment.

Congress dramatized AN’s decline. There were occasional high points, such as the parade in 1998, but they were offset by a general failure of stage management: fewer stars on the program, more no-shows, more events starting late or being canceled, longer and longer fellowship periods, more glitches, less
energy, more litter. The only event that proceeded smoothly from start to finish was the 1997 AWC, but it attracted only 85 people. Although the first cross lighting I observed was less impressive than I had expected (one arm of the cross failed to burn), none that followed came close to matching it as a well-orchestrated sacred ceremony. Drinking increased, more women dressed in suggestive clothing, rules governing picture taking were relaxed, and a growing number of journalists and academic researchers were allowed inside (Bushart et al. 1998; Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997; Gardell 2003), all of which undermined AN’s mystique as an elite organization.

The 1991 Congress proved to be AN’s last big event. Over 250 attended, but the following year attendance plummeted to 120, mainly because of concerns about heightened law enforcement activities caused by the Randy Weaver incident, then unfolding just 60 miles north. Attendance reached an all-time low of 85 in 1997, and only 90 took part in 2000, the last year Congress was held on church grounds. The only anomaly in the trend occurred in 1998 when attendance rebounded to 170. The reason was Butler’s much-publicized plan to march through Coeur d’Alene. Not only was it a first-time event, but many expected it to be Butler’s last hurrah. Meanwhile, AYA attendance dropped from 150 in 1995 to 70 in 1996, and Butler canceled the event the following year.

Sometime in the mid-nineties, Butler finally began to search for a successor. In 1996, my students and I began hearing serious speculation about whom he might appoint. He already had been turned down by Louis Beam and Chris Temple, a National Socialist from Montana, and he approached several others before his longtime friend, Neuman Britton, finally accepted in 1998. But at 72, Britton was an old man himself, and he had no intention of leaving his home in southern California. Those who declined gave a variety of excuses, but privately one told us that AN was a “sinking ship.”

Others characterized AN as a “dinosaur” on the verge of extinction. Many came to question the premise on which AN was based—that a large, highly visible, centralized organization could effect meaningful change in a world determined to crush it. AN’s master frame, the preservation of the white race, continued to resonate in the WSM, but Butler’s dream of a white homeland seemed hopeless, and AN’s high-profile strategy was losing its appeal. Increasingly I heard talk about “leaderless resistance,” an alternative strategy advocated by Louis Beam (1992; Kaplan 2000: 173-186), in which lone wolves and small cohesive cells carry out revolutionary acts independently of each other. One who may have taken the cue was former AN security guard Buford “Neal” Furrow, who in 1999 went on a shooting rampage in California, wounding five people at a Jewish community center, and later killing a nonwhite postal worker (Murr 1999).

Despite the bad press the incident caused, Butler had a far more serious problem on his hands: In January of 1999, the SPLC had filed a civil suit against
AN on behalf of Victoria and Jason Keenan, and the following year attorney Morris Dees asked for $11.26 million in damages (Morlin 2000b).

According to testimony given in court, on the night of July 1, 1998, Mrs. Keenan and her son were driving past the entrance to AN when Jason accidentally dropped his wallet out the car window (Morlin 2000a; Southern Poverty Law Center 2000). As they pulled away after retrieving it, AN security guards heard what sounded like a shot coming from the road. Though it may have been fireworks or a car backfiring, the guards assumed they were being attacked. Jumping into a pickup truck, they chased the Keenans down the road, firing shots and eventually running them into a ditch. Mrs. Keenan claimed one of the men, Security Chief Jesse Warfield, put a gun to her head and tried to drag her from the car by her hair. Just then another car appeared and the guards drove off, but not without a warning from Warfield: “I’ve got your license number and I will remember you. Don’t tell” (Southern Poverty Law Center 2000: 36).

In July, 2000, with the civil trial about to begin, about 90 people gathered for what would be the last AWC held on church grounds. Except for Neuman Britton, now dying of cancer, the program was devoid of popular speakers, and the keynote address was given by an elderly woman visiting AN for the first time. Looking tired and feeble, Butler spoke about his mounting financial troubles, but neither he nor anyone else appealed for money or proposed a fund-raising strategy. On Sunday, Butler even had to be reminded to pass the collection plate. The speeches and table talk suggested business as usual, but the mood was somber.

That night before the cross-lighting, AN’s disorganization suddenly spilled into public view. My students and I were back at our camp when we heard security guards shouting, “Everyone to the chapel! This is not an option!” Within minutes the entire assemblage packed into the church, where we were informed that the registration list, containing everyone’s name, address, and phone number, had been stolen from the guard house. No one would be allowed to leave until the list was found. Cars and tents would be searched, as would every person in the church—men in the chapel, women in Aryan Hall. Butler’s lieutenants argued with each other at the front of the chapel, and men on either side of me speculated about who might have taken the list, with cooler heads predicting it would turn up in the guard house trash can. From inside Aryan Hall I could hear women wailing and sobbing. Then, at the peak of the excitement, someone announced that the list had been found on the floor of the guard house. By the time Butler arrived, the crisis had passed and people were filing out of the church, most without saying a word, though occasional smirks could be seen. In fact, the list had not been found, and later I was told that Butler had concocted the story to quell the hysteria.
DEATH BLOW

Less than two months after the 2000 Congress, the jury in the Keenan case delivered its verdict—a $6.3 million judgment against AN (Morlin 2000c). Unable to afford an appeal, Butler filed for bankruptcy, and early in 2001 his compound was sold at auction. That summer, all the buildings were burned and every trace of AN was removed from the property. Though a small contingent of supporters had shown up for the trial, the only prominent movement leader to attend was Tom Metzger, founder of White Aryan Resistance (WAR), who had lost a similar multimillion dollar suit brought by the SPLC in 1990 (Langer 2003).

However, Butler remained defiant to the end. Until his death in 2004 at age 86, he and a handful of volunteers continued to run AN out of his new residence, a 1,200-square-foot suburban tract house in nearby Hayden, paid for by a follower. Though now requiring oxygen to sleep at night, Butler kept abreast of movement affairs and regularly posted messages on AN’s website. To the dismay of community leaders and human rights activists, he continued to hold parades, and the AWC went on as before, but now in campgrounds and on a much smaller scale.

With supporters from as far away as New Jersey, Alabama, and Texas, the 2003 AWC may have drawn as many as 70 people, making it the biggest Congress held after the trial. Featuring a panoply of uniforms and banners as well as passionate speeches and the lighting of a 10-foot cross, the 2003 AWC was a miniature version of days gone by. Proclaiming AN to be the “elite of the elite,” a Klan leader announced that he and some 200 followers were merging with AN under the name, Aryan Nations Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Most importantly, Butler formally appointed a new successor, 51-year old Ohio state leader Ray Redfeairn. However, Redfeairn died suddenly after the Congress, and once again Butler was left without a successor.

The last Congress occurred in 2004. Only 40 attended, but they included several of Butler’s old friends. Aside from the speeches and the torching of an Israeli flag, the gathering was more like a family reunion than the white power allies I had come to expect. Except perhaps for Butler, who talked about another Congress in 2005, everyone appeared to understand that this year’s gathering would be the last farewell. On Saturday, Butler and his followers paraded through Coeur d’Alene for the last time behind a banner proclaiming “TRUTH FOREVER, SURRENDER NEVER.” Less than two months later, on September 8, Butler died peacefully in his sleep.

Immediately afterwards, remnants of his movement split into two warring camps based in Pennsylvania and Alabama (Moser 2004). In a flurry of Internet exchanges, each side proclaimed itself the rightful heir to the AN name, and engaged in name-calling and character assassination to discredit the opposing camp. Those who preferred to let AN die a quiet death dismissed both
groups as opportunists representing the dregs of the movement. In any case, neither faction showed any interest in keeping AN in Idaho.

ARYAN NATIONS IN RETROSPECT

The resource mobilization perspective provides a useful framework for making sense of AN's rise and fall. Butler created AN to accomplish specific goals, and though it failed to establish a white homeland or unite the WSM, it did achieve short-term successes. Butler created a small but viable community in Idaho, and the AWC quickly became the major white separatist event in North America, bringing together an array of white racial activists who had hardly spoken to each other before.

However, AN's successes were confined to a brief period in the early 1980s. Externally, the organization benefited from a relatively benign environment, and internally, from the existence of a close-knit community of supporters who shared the same religious beliefs and utopian ideals. Their dedication and esprit de corps helped make the AWC a success and convince others to join them. From its inception, however, AN was a fragile organization. Its structure vested all authority in Butler, but he proved to be a weak leader with a penchant for alienating the people he relied on most.

It was a change in AN's external environment that marked the turning point for AN. Not only did the furor over The Order discourage people from attending Congress, but it prompted most of Butler's core group to leave. The Idaho community would never again be as large, as cohesive, nor as stable. Newcomers were more likely to be young single men than members of family units, and the heightened threat of undercover agents made it hard to form close relationships.

Without the stabilizing influence of a solid core, the deficiencies in Butler's leadership started to take a toll, especially his tendency for "taking in strays." Not only were the newcomers less likely to share Butler's religious convictions, but they were more likely to cause trouble. Because the members who were best able to maintain discipline had left, Butler's laissez faire attitude about rule enforcement allowed social control to break down, prompting even more members to leave. As Butler got older, he was less able to play the monolithic role he had created for himself, but he lacked competent lieutenants to keep the ship afloat without his constant oversight.

Membership turnover was constant in the 1990s, making it difficult for AN to mount any form of concerted action. Most conspicuous to my students and me was AN's inability to stage the AWC and AYA without committing embarrassing blunders that discredited the elite image the organization tried to project. As frame alignment strategies, AN events may have been well-conceived, but they were poorly executed. People stopped attending because the benefits of participation no longer justified the costs in time, money, and potential entanglements with the law. Those who took part often did so
only out of respect for Butler. Not only was AN’s reservoir of potential recruits drying up, but the few who remained in the pool lacked the talent to revitalize the organization. By the time Butler started to search for a successor, AN was already so far gone that nobody wanted to touch it. As early as 1993, one of Butler’s longtime supporters captured the feelings of many insiders when he said of AN: “Those people want to overthrow the government, but they couldn’t overthrow a nursing home.”

The Keenan incident illustrates how far AN had fallen by the time of the SLPC lawsuit. Though serving as Chief of Security, Warfield had only recently moved to the compound, and he had received no training upon his arrival. Besides possessing an arrest record for burglary and assault with a deadly weapon, he was known to have an explosive temper, and other members questioned his intelligence. He also was rumored to be a methamphetamine user, and in any case, he and his fellow guards were drunk the night of the attack. If AN had done a better job controlling its boundaries, Warfield would not have been put in charge of security. If internal social control had been effective, the guards would not have broken ranks to chase down the Keenans, nor would they have been drunk in the first place. And if not for AN’s high staff turnover, Butler would not have been forced to dig to the bottom of the barrel for a Security Chief, and he might have had seasoned personnel on hand instead of greenhorns still learning the ropes.

AN insiders blamed the incident on a drug deal gone bad, claiming that the Keenans, far from being innocent victims, had driven to AN to complete a drug transaction with one of the security guards (Cooper 1999). Even if true, the explanation merely provides more evidence of AN’s utter disarray. Butler later told me that he decided against introducing evidence of the Keenan’s alleged drug dealing because he knew it would only make him look worse.

For years AN’s external enemies had been circling like wolves, and the Keenan incident provided the opening they needed to go for the kill. The SPLC, working closely with local human rights activists and enjoying the support of community leaders and the media, seized the opportunity and succeeded in stripping AN of its financial resources and base of operations.

The suit may have been the coup de grace, but AN was already dying. Its Idaho operation probably would not have survived Butler’s death even if the lawsuit had never happened. It is important to recall that even in the mid-nineties, when Butler still had his property, he had trouble finding a competent successor, much less one willing to move to rural Idaho. His territorial imperative had failed to attract the great influx of white nationalists that he hoped for, and AN’s history of informers and legal problems had convinced many that high-profile, anti-government organizations like AN were a thing of the past. Even if a successor had tried to keep the Idaho headquarters functioning, AN had such a tarnished history that it probably would have continued to drift toward the margins of the WSM, and into eventual obscurity.
The suit just hastened the process. Though pretenders in the eastern United States continued to use the AN name (Moser 2004), the actual organization died with its founder. When Richard Butler was laid to rest in 2004, so was his dream of an Aryan homeland in the Pacific Northwest.

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