

HATE SPURRED WAVE OF MIDWEST BANK HEISTS FBI CRACKS 'ARMY' ADVOCATING RACISM AND VIOLENCE



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The man in the ski mask glares into the camera. He casually brandishes a gun, then a machete, then a grenade. He laughs, flashes wads of cash -- and talks of an Aryan revolution.

Three cohorts in camouflage, armed with semiautomatics, join him on the homemade video. One plunks down a money-filled plastic pumpkin in front of the masked man, who congratulates the group on a job well done.

But the message -- an anti-Semitic, racist rant advocating violence -- is chillingly real. "Our basic goal," rasps the hooded figure who identifies himself as Commander Pedro, "is to set up an Aryan republic. . . . Don't mistake us for cultists. We, ladies and gentlemen, are YOUR neighbors." The group had a name: The Aryan Republican Army. The government claims it had a mission: to rob banks to finance its goals and help bankroll like-minded extremist groups. For two years, the brash band of gun-and-bomb-toting robbers zigzagged across America's heartland, authorities say, hitting bank after bank, wearing costumes and masks, taunting federal agents. They wore FBI hats, used retired agents' names to buy cars and mocked their pursuers in cartoons and letters to newspapers, almost daring officials to catch them. Ultimately, they did. Last year, four men were arrested in connection with 22 bank robberies in seven Midwest states, netting a reported \$250,000 and nearly matching Jesse James' string of bank, stage coach and train heists. 'Commander Pedro' faces trial On Wednesday, 38-year-old reputed gang leader Peter K. Langan, also known as "Commander Pedro," goes on trial on charges of robbing two Ohio banks in what prosecutors claim was supposed to be a means to an end -- the overthrow of the government. The trial comes two months after a fellow gang member was convicted of bank robbery in Iowa. A star witness there -- he'll also testify in Ohio -- was a

former Aryan Republican Army soldier now cooperating with the government. The fourth man committed suicide after pleading guilty. It is easy to dismiss these guys as zany felons given to political lunacy -- easy, but wrong, says Chip Berlet of Political Research Associates in Cambridge, Mass., a group that monitors right-wing extremists. "Throughout this movement, there has been macho bravado and sophomoric, fraternity party-like stunts," he said. "At the same time, they have bombs and automatic weapons. It's a frightening combination." In the beginning, it was just a curious string of bank robberies. About one a month in a Midwestern state. In Iowa. Wisconsin. Missouri. Ohio. Nebraska. Kansas. Kentucky. A pattern began emerging. The robbers, at times dressed like construction workers, zipped in and out of the banks within five minutes. No one was injured. The robbers had a whimsical side, too. In a December heist, one suspect wore a Santa Claus suit, shouted "Ho, ho, ho" to customers and left a bomb tucked in a Santa hat. In a March robbery, an 8- to 9-inch, gold-color pipe bomb was put in an Easter basket. Ring leaves political messages It was their political message, though, that intrigued authorities. The robbers stuffed a copy of the Declaration of Independence in the ashtray of one getaway car. And in 1995, they bought a getaway car in the name of a retired FBI agent who had worked white supremacist cases. They abandoned it, leaving on the front seat an article about Timothy McVeigh, charged in the Oklahoma City federal building bombing. Piece by piece -- the anti-government rhetoric, explosives, imitating the feds -- the puzzle began to take shape for FBI Special Agent Jim Nelson in St. Louis. It also was clear to Nelson, who has since retired from the FBI, that the bank robbers had political motivations: "There's plenty of reason to believe they were very serious about their anarchist views," he said. So he went public with his speculation. And there was a response -- from the robbers. Several Midwest newspapers received letters nominating Nelson for an award for "honesty and demonstrating patriotism." The self-proclaimed "Mid-Western Bank Bandits" said they were "proud to appoint Jim Nelson as our new spokesman for 1996." "They knew I had hit the nail on the head," Nelson recalled. If Peter Langan and Richard Lee Guthrie Jr. were, as the government suggests, architects of the Aryan Republican Army, it was the culmination of a friendship that began when they rode bikes together as kids in a Washington, D.C., suburb. In 1992, when robbers knocked off a Pizza Hut in Lavonia, Ga., Guthrie and Langan were suspects. Langan was arrested in Cincinnati and escorted back to Georgia by Franklin County Sheriff Hugh Roach. Roach recalls conversations in which Langan told him he was an Aryan Nations supporter and "said he wanted to tie up the court system so it couldn't operate." In 1993, the Secret Service wanted to find Guthrie; it was investigating allegations he had made threats against George Bush when he was president. Langan agreed that if he was released, he would help the government track down his old friend. He didn't.

He returned to Cincinnati, and after a few contacts with the Secret Service, he disappeared. Soon after, the bank robberies began in earnest, though some gang members weren't in on them at the start. Kevin McCarthy, 19, was one recruit -- a former drug abuser and 10th-grade dropout. He was introduced to Langan by a Pennsylvania minister in the Christian Identity movement, which regards Jews as the seed of the devil, blacks and others of color as subhuman and white Christians as God's true chosen people. McCarthy has become a government witness; his testimony has offered an inside view of the Aryan Republican Army's workings. They wore bulletproof vests, carried police radios and used two getaway cars, abandoning one, McCarthy said. Their "pranks" seemed to come from just about everywhere. In August 1994, Roach -- the sheriff who had brought Langan back to Georgia -- received a card postmarked Syracuse, N.Y. The writer said, in part: "Life is so unpredictable. Remember that tyrants never rule forever. And that traitors do eventually end up at the end of a rope." It added that "Pedro sends his regards." It was signed "Rick." At first, Roach was baffled. "I said, 'Where in the hell did this come from?' . . . One of my investigators said, 'You know who this Pedro is? It's Peter Langan.'" Shoot-out nabs 'Pedro' In the end, the Aryan Republican Army was defeated because too many people talked. Authorities say Langan had asked Shawn Kenney, a friend he had met at a Christian Identity meeting if he would like to join the gang. Kenney declined to join, but he eventually led authorities to Guthrie. They captured him in Cincinnati last January. Guthrie, in turn, told police where to find Langan. Three days later, on Jan. 18, 1996, FBI agents and police were waiting on a South Side street in Columbus when a slight, red-haired man bundled in winter clothing, stepped into his white Chevy van. It was Langan. Nearly 50 shots were fired in the ensuing fusillade; 30 riddled the van. Miraculously, Langan made it out with scrapes, small cuts and superficial wounds. A search of Langan's van and house turned up more than 3,400 rounds of ammunition, semiautomatic pistols and rifles, 11 pipe bombs, five hand grenades, FBI hats, police uniforms, false IDs from nearly every state, ski masks, literature from the white supremacist Aryan Nations group and a Bible with foam inside so it could conceal a gun, according to the FBI. There was more. In exchange for a cup of coffee, a cigarette and a call to his sister, Langan told authorities about a storage locker in Shawnee, Kan. There, they found pipe bombs, weapons, circuit boards, a Santa suit, FBI raid jackets and office addresses, and Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton masks. Langan was surprisingly talkative and cheerful. He said he wanted to be known as Commander Pedro. In court papers, he listed his occupation as a "revolutionary." Kevin Durkin, Langan's attorney, said his client did not commit the robberies. He denigrated all talk of racist revolutionaries. McCarthy is expected to plead guilty in Philadelphia next month to conspiracy charges covering six robberies. Guthrie pleaded guilty in July to 19 bank robberies; he

was expected to testify against Langan. But nine days later, he was found hanged in his jail cell with a bedsheet, an apparent suicide at age 38. His death was a setback for those who seek the solution to what is perhaps the greatest mystery left by these peculiar crooks: What happened to the money? McCarthy said he and the others divided the proceeds and used a separate share as living expenses. But Guthrie reportedly said his gang had funneled money to white supremacist groups. Some who watch those groups, such as Michael Reynolds of the Southern Poverty Law Center, remain suspicious.