

How the FBI smashed white supremacist group The Order

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(CNN) "White supremacist": It's a label that's come to dominate our conversations in the wake of deadly violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, but it's also one that has a deeply rooted history in the United States.

As the FBI would tell you, the effort to disrupt violent hate groups and combat the threat of homegrown terrorism has been going on for decades. In fact, one of the Bureau's most remarkable investigations revolves around a white supremacist group that existed more than 30 years ago. It was known as "The Order."

In order to dismantle it, the FBI had to rely on a skilled undercover agent to methodically gather intel against the group. In new interviews with CNN's series "Declassified," the agents involved describe what it took to see The Order fall.

Going undercover

It was the early 1980s, and white supremacist leaders were beginning to lure followers from multiple extremist groups with the intention of recruiting them to stage revolts against the US government, which they believed to be under heavy Jewish influence.

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To build a case, the FBI sent a single agent to a small city in northern Idaho called Coeur D'Alene. It was home to the racist religious group The Aryan Nations. The Northwest Pacific region was also home to a group called The Order, which at the time was a lesser known religious and political terrorist organization.

To infiltrate this world, the FBI tapped Special Agent Wayne Manis. He'd been working undercover for the Bureau since 1967, and had gained experience investigating hate groups like the New Left in Chicago and the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama. He knew how to deal with radical idealism, and was familiar with their methods to organize into larger ranks.

Gathering intelligence

But before Manis and his FBI colleagues could launch a full federal investigation in Idaho, agents had to demonstrate to the US attorney general the presence of a real threat to the United States and its interests. For agents like Manis, this meant most days were spent gathering intelligence to prove that threat.



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Working alone, Manis spent months sifting through records trying to connect the dots between several crimes in Coeur D'Alene. After meeting with local law enforcement, Manis was able to narrow the scope of his investigation.

"We pinpointed about five or six different crimes and probably 30 or 40 different people. That was sort of the beginning of the playbook," Manis recalled.

Further investigation proved the network was larger than originally suspected. The Order was led by Robert Mathews, a known white supremacist in his early 30s with ties to anti-Semitic groups.

The Order founder Robert Mathews in a 1983 file photo
Agents described Mathews as charismatic. "He had been involved in the right-wing movement, especially the National Alliance for years," retired FBI Supervisory Senior Resident Agent Tom McDaniel told CNN's "Declassified."

Tracking the crimes

At first, when Manis arrived in Idaho, he was not aware of The Order or Mathews, but after following months of research Manis would discover the new subject of his investigation and begin to put the crimes together.

To fund operations, The Order robbed several banks and attacked armored trucks.



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After accumulating more than \$3.5 million, the group was well situated to move forward with their mission, which at that point remained a mystery to the FBI.

The Order's first attacks targeted a synagogue in Boise. No one was reported hurt. Two months later, the group murdered Jewish radio host Alan Berg outside of his Denver home, the FBI said.

Manis now had enough information to get approval from the Department of Justice. "I commenced my investigation in about March of 1984, and finally in July I got the authorization

to do a full-scale domestic security investigation of the terrorist organization called The Order," Manis recalled.

Eventually, according to the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, the FBI was able to tie The Order to an eye-opening series of crimes, including:

September 1983 -- counterfeiting

December 1983 -- bank robbery

January 1984 -- bank robbery

- **March 1984 -- armored car robbery**

April 1984 -- armored car robbery

April 1984 -- synagogue bombing

- **June 1984 -- murder of radio host Alan Berg**

- **July 1984 -- armored car robbery**

Finding 'The Turner Diaries'

With the backing of the DOJ, the FBI sent a large team of agents to help Manis, who began to catch up with Mathews and other members of The Order.

They traced motels where suspects had stayed. They tracked the phone calls they made and vehicles they used.



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Manis and his team successfully placed an informant inside The Order who led them to Mathews and "The Turner Diaries," a work of fiction by neo-Nazi leader William Luther Pierce written under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald.

The story depicts the violent overthrow of the US government and the extermination of all non-white enemies.

Mathews, a follower of Pierce, took the name of his group from the book and used it to guide his decisions as the group leader.

"They were following 'Turner Diaries' like a map," ex-FBI agent McDaniel recalled. "It's a scary thought because the principal character in 'The Turner Diaries' blew up FBI headquarters."

In the novel, a resistance movement sparked by white nationalists gains control of the government and furthers their mission to attack and disenfranchise non-whites.

Equipped with the plot Mathews was following, agents tracked his movements more closely.

"Through some informants ... we were able to locate the whereabouts of Bob Mathews and six members of The Order at his hideout on Whidbey Island on the Puget Sound in Washington," Manis said.

Agents closed in on the hideout in December of 1984. Mathews was holed up in a house.

"We did everything we could to get him out of there," Manis said. When the FBI moved in, Mathews began shooting, and the FBI returned gunfire. "While all this was going on, the house caught fire. The fire was from a flare that was in the bottom of the house," Manis said. "The shooting continued all night. It was a war zone."

"At daylight I walked up to the cabin and I found Bob's body lying in the rubble," Manis said.

Mathews had died in the burning house, and six other members of The Order were arrested at the scene, Manis said.

In the following weeks, additional agents were sent into the field to find other members of The Order.

As the FBI started making arrests, some suspects would offer valuable information that led to the capture of other members.

"We really broke the back of The Order at that point," said retired FBI Supervisory Special Agent Donald Wofford, who also worked the case.

A two-month trial resulted in several convictions on racketeering charges. Ten members of The Order were sent to prison to serve substantial sentences, Wofford said.

The fight continues

"The Turner Diaries" would remain popular among white supremacists and continue to inspire domestic terrorism, according to authorities.

A decade after the fall of The Order, Pierce's novel would serve as a blueprint for one of the deadliest domestic terrorist attacks in American history.

On April 19, 1995, Timothy J. McVeigh, an anti-government terrorist, detonated a truck filled with explosives outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. McVeigh's attack left more than 500 people injured and killed 168, including 19 children.

"He'd read 'The Turner Diaries' and he picked up where The Order left off," Manis said.

More than 20 years after the tragedy at Oklahoma City, the former agents say the Justice Department still finds it necessary to go undercover to gather intelligence on violent white supremacist groups and other domestic terrorist threats.

On August 12, the racially charged protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, which led to the death of 32-year-old counterprotester Heather Heyer -- provided a disturbing reminder that racial

intolerance still fuels deadly violence.

"The belief system is still here," Manis said. "It's still with us."