

Arsonists set fire to the hallways outside American Experiment, UMLC, and TakeCharge causing extensive damage to the building and UMLC interior offices.

FREEDOM



Arson

American Experiment continues to defend conservative principles with fearless tenacity.

BY JENNA STOCKER

In the early morning hours of Sunday, Jan. 28, conservatism was attacked. Criminals broke into the building that housed American Experiment offices and those of two other conservative organizations — Upper Midwest Law Center and Kendall and Sheila Qualls’ TakeCharge — and set fire to the corridors and inside the offices, causing extensive damage. The fire is being investigated as a deliberate act of arson by the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office, and the Hennepin County Fire Investigation team. Thankfully, mostly due to the time the arson took place, the building was unoccupied in the overnight hours, there were no injuries, and no one was physically hurt.

But the message was clear: the perpetrators sought to intimidate organizations and silence ideas with which they disagree. If this was politically motivated — and by all accounts, it appears to be — this violent act speaks far more about the intolerance, absolutism, and radical ideology of the “other side” than it does about what they think they are achieving. That is, they believe violence in service to silencing different viewpoints is a justifiable means for a political end.

Not so Minnesota Nice

Ask most people outside of Minnesota what they think of our state, and you might hear a few common and vague refrains about the bitter cold, the 1996

film “*Fargo*,” or the musicians Prince or Bob Dylan. Ask Minnesotans what comes to mind, and the answers expand to topics that bring more chest-puffing, such as the world-renowned Mayo Clinic, the State Fair, and hotdishes. And Minnesota Nice.



The state isn’t simply a geographic area, nor is it defined by the myriad of cultures from corners of the world that settled among the Scandinavian and German roots, creating a brackish culture that ebbs and flows with time. Minnesota is a state of mind and for much of its history has had the reputation of — and has taken pride in — its sunny disposition and humble heartiness.

Of course, we are not insulated from the fits and starts of the times, especially during the tumultuous late 1960s and

1970s, when the country was in the grip of cultural anxiety, youth revolts, and the throes of the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, political unrest sometimes comes with violence or the threat of it.

During the “Long Hot Summers” between 1964 and 1968, riots exploded in urban centers nationwide. In his book, *Potential and Paradox: A Gateway to Minnesota’s Past*, author and history professor at Saint Paul College Kurt Korten Hof writes:

Beginning in the Watts area of Los Angeles in 1965 — when a 13-day riot left 34 dead, 900 injured and 4,000 in jail — these summer clashes spread across the nation.

Plymouth Avenue in Minneapolis was the scene of such destruction in August 1966 and again in July 1967 as black youths shattered storefronts, burned buildings, and firebombed businesses along the avenue.

Just as the Civil Rights Movement was oscillating between the peaceful protests, sit-ins, and marches led by Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. and the violent escalation of Black Power, free speech and anti-war youth demonstrations converged along a similar course. At the University of California, Berkeley in 1964, the modern Free Speech Movement was born, eventually making its way to the University of Minnesota, along with the anti-Vietnam War sentiment.

Numerous anti-war demonstrations and marches occurred at and around the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus, the Federal Building

in St. Paul, and the Honeywell offices at 4th Avenue South in Minneapolis. (Honeywell was a target for their role in manufacturing cluster bombs used by U.S. forces during the war.) The protest groups included students but were also organized by radical groups such as the Young Socialist Alliance, who described themselves as Trotskyists, and the Students for a Democratic Society, who were aligned with the Worker-Student Alliance and whose members were self-declared Maoists.

Although “Make Peace, Not War” was a well-worn slogan of the era, the anti-war movement was far from the dove-love hippie image during the Summer of Love. In fact, these were the most violent, disruptive movements spanning the country and testing the limits of law and order and social cohesion. Barricades — and boundaries — were overturned, adding to the chaotic lawlessness that rendered the America of just a decade before unrecognizable.

Selective Service offices across Minnesota were broken into and vandalized, the most notorious of which happened on July 10, 1970, as the members of the Minnesota Eight (as they would come to be called) carried out plans to raid draft board offices in Little Falls, Winona, and Alexandria. FBI agents who had been tipped off were waiting for the perpetrators. According to the Minnesota Historical Society:

The men were charged with the federal crime of interference with the Selective Service. They and their lawyers made the trials, like the raids, political acts aimed at informing and persuading the public of the evils of the war in Vietnam.

Campus chaos

For fringe groups of (mostly) young men and women, the peaceful exercise of their First Amendment right of free speech wasn't enough. They were frustrated and impatient with the slow pace of progress of their cause and disillusioned by movement leaders who worked within the bounds of law and order to achieve their goals. At his trial, Bill Tilton — one

of the Minnesota Eight — called the presiding judge “a good German” who was “helping fascism come into this country.”

The months of April and May of 1972 were fraught with violence. According to the St. Louis Park Historical Society, there were numerous marches on campus at the University of Minnesota marked by property vandalism, threats of violence, riots, and police and National Guard troop interventions. Demonstrators occupied the ROTC Armory and threatened to physically “shut it down.” A “Day of Reflection” rally was held on April 25 on the steps of Northrop Auditorium featuring professor Mulford Q. Sibley, who urged the students to take militant actions.

On May 10, a “crowd headed to the Air Force Recruiting Station in Dinkytown, but the officers had moved out. The crowd, which had grown to about 3,000, headed to the University Armory but failed in the attempt to occupy the building. Instead, they smashed windows and used a wrought iron fence that was torn from the front of the building to block traffic on University Avenue.” By the end of that day, Gov. Wendell Anderson called in 150 National Guardsmen, finally securing the Recruiting Station and Armory.

The following day's noon rally featured 25 speakers, including Eugene McCarthy, who at that time was running for president. Later that evening, “about 1,000 protesters marched to Interstate 94 at the University Avenue exit. About 200 people moved into the freeway, blocking lanes in both directions.”

Hiding in plain sight

If the violence of the 1960s and '70s was the most widespread, the political



Former SLA member Sara Jane Olson appears in Sacramento Superior Court in 2002.

radicalization and extreme violence of one Minnesotan might be the most notorious. Sara Jane Olson was born Kathleen Soliah on Jan. 16, 1947 in Fargo, N.D. She was still a child when her family relocated to California and later attended the University of California, Santa Barbara. But that was before she was an active member of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a militant left-wing terrorist organization that was responsible for numerous murders, fatal bombings, armed bank robberies, and the kidnapping of newspaper heiress Patty Hearst in 1974.

Running from the law and her violent past, Soliah settled in St. Paul, changed her name to Sara Jane Olson, married, and had three children. By all appearances, she was the typical progressive urban activist, mild in manner but never meeting a radical,

left-wing cause she couldn't proudly proclaim as her own. She became the avatar for the new “good” moral left. So, it came as quite a shock when this independent bookstore owner who participated in feminist-themed theater



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productions and community organizing was charged with some of the most heinous crimes. Surely, her “good” views and “Minnesota Nice” image outweighed her problematic past. And she had prominent local personalities come to her defense.

According to a 1999 MPR story, DFL state Sen. Sandy Pappas “suggested the charges facing Olson, who worked on Pappas’s 1997 mayoral campaign, did not amount to ‘real crimes.’” Pappas later walked back that statement but still questioned the value of pursuing the charges: “The FBI should be pursuing current crimes and criminals who continue to pose a threat to society.”

A January 2000 *New York Times* story counted among her ardent supporters, “Andy Dawkins, a Democratic state representative who donated money to her bail fund.” Dawkins was quoted by MPR hailing Olson as a “wonderful mom and a wonderful asset to our community and did all sorts of things to help people.”

It’s doubtful such glowing praise would assuage the pain of any of 42-year-old Myrna Lee Opsahl’s four children. Opsahl was at the Crocker National Bank in Carmichael, Calif. on April 21, 1975, to deposit receipts from her church when Olson (then Soliah) and four other members of the SLA, armed with guns, robbed the bank, shooting and killing Opsahl in the process. Olson was also wanted and later charged with possessing explosives with intent to murder. She pleaded guilty to the charge, which stems from allegations that she plotted to bomb Los Angeles police cars in 1975. The bombs never exploded.

Poisonous politics

It is not breaking news that modern politics has permeated much of the culture and forced deep ideological divides and tribes on everything from what car a person drives to the stores they grocery shop at and the music they listen to. Politics, more than religious affiliation or cultural heritage, is most likely to form one’s identity. And the divide has tested the very fabric of American society such as family relations and friendships. In fact, the latest *Thinking Minnesota* Poll reveals that roughly one-third of

Minnesotans have experienced a lost friendship due to political differences. For women over age 55, this number is 40 percent.

And, despite the Minnesota Nice image, a visible, vocal, more dangerous ideological fringe has found, if not a home, a sympathetic ear with the political mainstream. Most Minnesotans had front-row seats to the destruction after George Floyd’s death only a few years ago. Minneapolis and the Twin Cities still have not fully recovered from the psychological shock nor the persistent unease that has prevented the state from moving forward with a cohesiveness and civility common to healthy and growing communities. When civility,

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respect, and law and order are cast aside by our leaders to score political points or to stoke emotional fires, generally, the people follow suit.

When Minnesota voters were asked in our *Thinking Minnesota* Poll what forms of political activism were acceptable, boycotting a company or store and posting comments on social media were the most “acceptable” forms of expressing political disagreements, with 81 and 71 percent, respectively. However, nearly *one-quarter* of respondents believed shutting down roads and highways to protest was an acceptable form of political activism. This is a dangerous and worrying statistic, especially when these thoroughfares are the main roads used

for emergency vehicles. The Twin Cities saw this happen repeatedly in the aftermath of the George Floyd riots and, more recently, by pro-Palestinian protesters who blocked a section of I-94 in Minneapolis on Dec. 11.

As history has shown, these violent acts are designed not simply to make a political point, but to intimidate and silence opposing viewpoints and ideas. When seven percent of Minnesota voters believe it is acceptable to “physically damage properties and buildings of companies you disagree with politically,” there are seven percent of voters who do not believe politically disparate views have any place in society, as our *Thinking Minnesota* Poll shows. Doug Seaton, founder and president of the Upper Midwest Law Center, says, “There is more and more of this... authoritarian style of politics in which the other side is simply treated as irredeemable and not subject to any conversation.”

What happens next? There are two paths: one is to make excuses for violence and accept poisonous discourse as “politics as usual,” while more Minnesotans feel shut out of the political conversation and see more of their views distorted and slandered. Ultimately, they feel they cannot express themselves — whether that is at a school board or city council meeting or displaying a campaign sign or bumper sticker and the state essentially becomes an ideological echo chamber.

Or, we fight back and refuse to be intimidated. American Experiment stands on the front line, taking the slings and arrows from many who would rather see us close our doors for good in their quest for not just a legislative monopoly but an ideological one as well. These moments in Minnesota’s recent history reveal a certain truth: that a decisive faction of political activists will stop at nothing to further their cause. American Experiment president John Hinderaker says, “This firebombing will not slow us down — American Experiment’s work for freedom is not dependent on a bricks-and-mortar location. We represent not just a public policy organization, but the viewpoints of millions of Minnesotans. Silence is not an option.” ★