

WORLD

## Sovereign citizens – a 21st Century counter culture



— These vehicles, bearing no registered license plates, are part of a Columbus, Ohio, private postmaster service provided by James T. McBride, who believes the U.S. has no authority over citizens. Jay LaPrete / AP

Aug. 12, 2010, 2:06 PM AEST / Source: The Associated Press

**By Andrew Welsh-Huggins**

They call themselves sovereign citizens, U.S. residents who declare themselves above state and federal laws. Many don't register children's births, carry driver's licenses or recognize the court system.

Some peddle schemes that use fictional legal loopholes to eliminate debt and avoid foreclosures.

A few such believers are violent: Two police officers in Arkansas died in a shootout in May after stopping an Ohio sovereign citizen and his son.

As many as 300,000 people identify as sovereign citizens, the Southern Poverty Law Center found in a study to be published Thursday that was obtained by The Associated Press. Hate group monitors say their numbers have increased thanks to the recession, the foreclosure crisis, the growth of the Internet and the election of Barack Obama in 2008.



— In this June 24, 2010 photo, James T. McBride discusses his governmental beliefs during an interview in Columbus, Ohio. As a member of the Sovereign Citizens movement, McBride contends the U.S. government has not had authority over citizens for more than a century. (AP Photo/Jay LaPrete) Jay LaPrete / FR52593 AP



Adherents expect the current American system of government to end one way or another.

“I’m the Patrick Henry of the 21st century. I’m here to regain our freedom,” James McBride said in a jailhouse interview. “I’m going to, or die trying.”

### **'Straw man' belief**

At the heart of their belief system: The government creates a secret identity for each citizen at birth, a “straw man,” that controls an account at the U.S. Treasury used as collateral for foreign debt. File enough documents at the right offices and the money in those accounts can be used to pay off debt or make purchases worth thousands of dollars.

The movement is based on a form of “legal fundamentalism,” said Michael Barkun, a retired Syracuse University political science professor who researches anti-government and hate groups.



— In this July 2, 2010 photo, a store front housing a business operated by James T. McBride, a member of the Sovereign Citizens movement, is shown in a shopping plaza in Columbus, Ohio. McBride runs a business from this location providing information about his anti-government views in exchange for donations. (AP Photo/Jay LaPrete) Jay LaPrete / FR52593 AP

“These people really seem to feel that filing certain kinds of legal papers that are connected to their theories will somehow also magically have the power to alter relationships and grant things that otherwise would be unobtainable,” he said.

Experts say sovereign citizens are the latest manifestation of anti-government activists going back to the Posse Comitatus movement of the 1970s, which recognized only local governments and no law enforcement official with more jurisdiction than a sheriff. In the 1980s, government protesters exploited the farm crisis by selling fraudulent debt relief programs.

“In good times they focus on tax cheating, in bad times they focus on getting out of debt,” said JJ MacNab, an expert on tax and financial schemes and author of the SPLC report.

Martin Smith of Carthage, Mo., lost \$8,000 to a father-and-son company in Columbus called Liberty Resources that pitched a method to eliminate credit card debt based on a theory that national banks aren’t authorized to issue credit.

“We just became convinced that each of the parts of the puzzle that Liberty Resources ... was telling us existed would work,” said Smith, 48, a civil engineer in Carthage, Mo.

Dan Wickline and his son, Chad, pleaded guilty in 2008 to conspiracy to commit money laundering and are serving federal prison sentences.

In April, a group called the Guardians of the Free Republics sent letters to governors demanding they leave office or be removed. The group’s website calls for the restoration of lawful government and an end to tax forms, vehicle registrations and marriage licenses. An e-mail to the group was not returned.

Jim Jarvis is Ohio coordinator for the Restore America Plan, which shares similar beliefs with the Guardians group. He maintains the country has lacked a legitimate government since Congress failed to adjourn properly in 1861.

## Recommended

---



WORLD

**Edward Snowden and his wife seek to be Russian-U.S. dual nationals**

---

WORLD

**1 dead, several injured in suspected Vienna terror attack; shooter dead, others possibly at large**

The people who are crazy, he says, are those who won't do the research to find out what's really going on in the country.

### **100,000 hard-core believers?**

The sovereign citizen movement has grown to about 100,000 hard-core believers, the SPLC report estimates, and 200,000 people trying out the theories by "resisting everything from speeding tickets to drug charges."

The report cites IRS figures that estimated as many as 250,000 tax protesters in the mid-1990s, though not all of those were part of the sovereign citizen movement. The 300,000 figure is the first calculation of the movement's numbers separate from tax protesters.

In May, Jerry Kane, who pitched so-called redemption schemes for reducing debt, died in a shootout with West Memphis, Ark., police after authorities said his 16-year-old son, Joe, fatally shot two officers during a traffic stop.

Kane's Florida widow, Donna Lee Wray, denies her husband and stepson were sovereign citizens. She maintains a website that asserts they weren't involved in the officers' deaths.

In a 2003 document Jerry Kane filed in a county recorder's office in Ohio, he said he was not a "Fourteen Amendment Citizen." Many sovereign citizens believe the 14th Amendment created a new class of citizens, people who had no constitutional rights but were instead slaves to the government, according to Mark Pitcavage, investigative researcher for the Anti-Defamation League.

McBride, the jailed sovereign citizen, came across anti-government beliefs while in federal prison in Michigan on a 1992 cocaine importing conviction.

Over the years he developed his own tenets, including a revised history of the United States that says the country was secretly organized as a general post office in 1789.

He dismisses any accusation that the programs he pitched were fraud, arguing he's not subject to the laws of the U.S., which he calls a corporation along the lines of a car company.

"General Motor's laws don't affect me because I'm not an employee of them," McBride said. "Same with the state of Ohio and the United States."

Today, McBride is headed back to federal prison after prosecutors said he cashed bogus checks and refused to cooperate with his parole officers following a 2004 bankruptcy fraud conviction.

“I’m never going to have my grandchildren say, ‘Grandpa, why didn’t you do something to protect my rights?’” McBride said.

“They may say, ‘My grandpa died trying to protect my rights.’”

---

Andrew Welsh-Huggins

---

Recommended

by Taboola

---

ERO WARS

Many failed before. Will you complete the trial?

ARESOLE®

Knee Surgeons Are Losing It Over These Breakthrough Knee Sleeves

NVEST GODDESS

At 75, Where Tom Selleck Lives Now Left Us In Tears

TORO

What if you invested \$1K in Netflix a year ago?

---

SPONSORED / HERO WARS

Many failed before. Will you complete the trial?