

Creepy "FReepers" target activists

THE Cayuga Coalition for Peace meeting had just got under way at an Auburn, New York church earlier this month when a tall, stocky, dour, middle-aged man quietly entered the building. Refusing to join the meeting at a large table in the center of the room, he instead settled into a chair off to the side, took out a pad, and began scribbling notes. Coalition members would later learn he was labeling them as "commy#1", "commy#2" and so on, recording everything they said and did. They found his notes on the web.

Auburn is a small post-industrial city nestled in the heart of New York's Finger Lakes region. It is home to New York's oldest continually operating prison, a maximum security facility that has anchored the city's economy since 1816. A Wal-Mart now thrives just east of a downtown littered with empty buildings. There are a few well paying industrial and prison jobs left in town, but most new jobs are in the low wage service sector. Like many upstate New York cities, Auburn now seems mired in an air of depression.

Beneath the surface, however, lies a colorful history. Auburn once served as a major station on the underground railroad, and was home to Harriet Tubman. In the late 1700s, General Sullivan's army swept through the area in a genocidal wave, wiping out entire Cayuga villages. In the 1800s, the region hosted a plethora of utopian communities. In the early 1900s, the women's suffrage movement took root in neighboring Seneca Falls. America's largest Women's Peace Encampment was there in the 1980s across the road

CREEPY FREEPERS TARGET ACTIVISTS / 2

from a now defunct Army base. Given its history of genocide, war, peace, promise, dreams and disappointment, it should come as no surprise that this decaying backwater would now host a thriving and growing peace movement – one that recently brought an anti-war resolution to the city government and the county legislature.

And it should also come as no surprise that this peace movement would wind up in the crosshairs of a new pro-war movement intent on frightening, harassing and disrupting grassroots anti-war activism.

The stalker eavesdropping on the Cayuga Coalition for Peace turned out to be a postal worker from nearby Port Byron. Within moments he managed to adequately disrupt the coalition's meeting, making himself the center of attention as a mix of angry and frightened attendees debated about how to handle the interloper. Lost was any discussion of the impending war and the upcoming votes on the pending anti-war resolutions.

With the minister asking him to leave the church, the mailman opted to use an old anti-war protest tactic, committing civil disobedience by refusing to move. He later described the coalition members and minister as "godless heathens," who by opposing the war had declared "treason," thus forfeiting all of their property rights. The minister called the police and the meeting ended in chaos – reconvening later in a private home.

The mailman turned out to be part of a national movement associated with the Fresno, California based "Free Republic" organization. Free Republic, with chapters scattered around the United States, operates primarily as a clearinghouse for individuals involved in protests and direct action against the anti-war, feminist, gay rights, pro-choice and environmental movements. They call these actions, "FReeps," and their targets, "America-hating leftist weasels."

Peaceful protests

The vast majority of actions in their current campaign, "Operation Infinite FReep," are peaceful protests by citizens exercising their constitutional rights – usually in the form of small counter-demonstrations at peace rallies. In this sense, the organization and its FReepers represent a rather benign part of this nation's political tapestry. Americans have a right to protest, no matter how repugnant their particular cause.

The Port Byron mailman, however, represents the dark dirty underbelly of the FReeping movement – a movement dedicated not to the free expression of ideas, but to harassing others who are trying to exercise their constitutional rights. These are the creepy FReepers, and they might be coming to a church basement near you.

After leaving the Auburn meeting, the FReeper rushed home to post a report of his escapades on the Free Republic site. His post was detailed, with various quotes attributed

CREEPY FREEPERS TARGET ACTIVISTS / 3

to characters such as "Mr. Peace Minister," "commy [sic] woman #5," and a police officer he identified as his "1st cousin," who thought he was "acting strange."

The post kicked off a lively on-line discussion, with FReepers from around the US chiming in to congratulate their new comrade on a successful FReep, and to offer ideas for future actions against the Auburn activists, such as using a hidden tape recorder instead of a note pad, and bringing reinforcements before encountering the "godless [church] commies" again.

The obsessive use of the term, "commie," and various related misspellings, is about as accurate as the term "godless," which FReepers repeatedly use to describe clergy and church-based activists who disagree with their views. To the FReepers, anyone opposed to George W. Bush's policies, whether they are Democrats, Conservatives, Greens or Republicans, is a "commie." Hence, the word takes on a new meaning – having nothing to do with Karl Marx or any related economic theory. It represents, instead, a rather Neanderthal political theory, probably inspired by Bush's "you are either with us or with the terrorists" line. In this case, the Auburn FReeper writes, "Let everyone in our nation stand and be counted. American or communists. No gray areas, no compromise." Such is the depth of political discourse in the "Free Republic."

The blanket use of labels and identifiers such as "commy # 3" to identify human beings serves another purpose – one more ominous than the simple debasing of political discourse. It strips people of their humanity, reducing them to faceless objects or infidels, thus making it easier to dismiss their ideas and to allow violence to be committed against them. This is an aspect of the same murderous fundamentalism that fueled the terrorist attacks against our nation.

"Serious not a nut"

In this light, much of what the Auburn FReeper and his comrades wrote in the hours and days after the Cayuga Peace Coalition meeting is quite disturbing. Egged on by fellow FReepers, the Auburn FReeper posted a late night statement reading, "It is time for confrontation. Treason cannot go unchallenged." Confusing the Cayuga peace activists for the mostly Saudi 9-11 hijackers, he wrote, "They fired the first shot. We will fire the last." Six minutes later he felt compelled to add another post, writing, "Read my previous. I am serious not a nut [sic]."

Whether he is seriously not a nut, or not a serious nut, or whatever he is trying to say, once thing is certain – the Auburn FReeper is not an anomaly in the Free Republic organization. The website is moderated, yet his posts remain on line. And with the exception of one conservative constitutionalist who he dismissed as a "commy" [sic], none

CREEPY FREEPERS TARGET ACTIVISTS / 4

of his correspondents challenged his hate-filled and possibly homicidal bile.

Another thread targeted the Women in Black – the international movement of silent women’s protests against war and human rights violations. There, amidst a plethora of misogynist comments, such as, “Those women disgust me,” and “I hate their hairy legs,” were a few strategies for confronting the non-violent vigils, such as attacking them with giant red, white and blue painted rubber penises. In another thread, a poster suggested riling Kent State anti-war demonstrators with signs reading, “The national guard needs to improve its marksmanship.” In yet another thread, a FReeper posted a bizarre poem, writing that “twisted Lib’rals [sic] must be smacked,” while terming ex-President Bill Clinton and sidekick Al Gore as “Commie-Pinko sons of bitches” and “treas’nous [sic] wretches” who would, “Feel my wrath.” FReeper commentary such as this is normal fare while high school students are detained for wearing “Stop Bush” shirts.

Moderators at Free Republic seem to be defining a carefully crafted political discourse. Anti-black racism is more or less a taboo, as are anti-Jewish remarks, but the site is awash in anti-Arab commentary, such as the boast of a flag vendor who refused to sell American flags to Arab-American children, instead chiding them not to “grow up to be suicide bombers.”

While the individual FReepers may not be a sophisticated bunch, the Free Republic moderators seem quite adept at what they do. They’re careful not to alienate potential support among non-Arab minorities while using anti-Arab hysteria to whip up frenzied opposition to an amorphous movement of “commies.” It’s the precision of the FReeping message that is particularly alarming, as the organization seems to be coalescing a movement of brown shirts, much like Manuel Noriega’s “Dignity Battalions,” to whip George Bush’s opposition into line – in the same way El Salvador and Guatemala’s death squads effectively stifled popular political opposition in those countries for years. Threats of violence among FReepers are also not a problem – as long as they serve to keep the riff raff in line. Hence, it shouldn’t come as any surprise that peace activists featured on the FReeping site have later been the victims of death threats.

In this light, the Auburn FReeper’s online boasts, where he places himself in a National Guard Armory and a VA office, working with on-duty personnel drumming up support for political initiatives to oppose anti-war resolutions, is particularly alarming. He combines contacts with mainstream government officials and representatives from political parties, with a darker terror-based strategy. The Auburn FReeper is not a lone anti-social stalker, but part of a growing national movement – one that hopes to threaten and stifle the political discourse that is a democracy’s life blood. ●