

## Introduction

IN THE SUMMER OF 1939, FATHER CHARLES EDWARD COUGHLIN, famed “Radio Priest” of Detroit, Michigan, called for the creation of a Christian Front. He hoped the group would act as a counterpoise to the Popular Front, adopted by the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935 and ostensibly aimed at reconciling revolutionary objectives with a commitment to democracy. As far as Coughlin was concerned, this was merely sleight of hand—a “nefarious . . . endeavor to Sovietize America” wearing “the false mask of liberalism.” In his broadcasts and his publications, Coughlin pushed his millions of followers to reject atheistic Communism in the name of Christ and country, and he saw a Christian Front as the key means of resistance.<sup>1</sup>

Coughlin is familiar to readers of US history, especially those who have hoped to understand the influence of the far right on modern American politics. Less well known are the men and women who fought to make the dream of a Christian Front a reality. This book tells their story. They were American Catholics, led by now-forgotten lay acolytes like John F. Cassidy of New York and Francis P. Moran of Boston. The people who formed the Christian Front saw themselves as the advance guard in a holy war against Communists and Jews—groups whom they perceived as one and the same, under the rubric of what scholars have called Judeo-Bolshevism. This is also a story of how Catholics came to embrace anti-Semitic violence as theologically permissible. Along the way, the work of the Christian Front became

embroiled with that of President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the top brass of the Third Reich. There were terrorist plots in New York and Nazi spies in Boston. And there were priests. At its heart, the story of the Christian Front is one of priests who drew upon some of the most vibrant theological movements of the Catholic Church and used them to justify evil.<sup>2</sup>

Priests provided political cover, theological leadership, and ecclesiastic approval for the far-right Christian Front movement. Although the front was a lay organization, priest advisers enabled its growth and prosperity, whether by promoting the front's mission or by defending its members against their critics. When fronters got into trouble with the law, priests were there to rationalize and downplay their actions. Coughlin, the most famous priest of the 1930s, was the spiritual leader of the front, but he did not work alone. Fathers Edward Lodge Curran of Brooklyn and Edward F. Brophy of Queens both dedicated their energies to building up the Christian Front in New York and Boston from 1938 to 1945. The Jesuit Michael Ahern of Boston played a key role in preserving the front when it was under threat.

The details of the Christian Front receive little attention from historians. Its origins and genuinely Catholic philosophy have gone unexplored, as has the role of the Boston front during World War II, when Francis Moran knowingly served as a Nazi agent whose purpose was to propagandize on behalf of American neutrality—a task he took up in the name of Christ and the Church, not in the name of Hitler or the German *volk*. Even the front's most notorious moment occupies hardly more than a footnote in the larger histories of the American right and the American Catholic Church: the 1940 sedition trial of John Cassidy and a small group of his New York fronters, who attempted to incite a revolution. Their goal was to install in the United States a temporary dictatorship that would eliminate Communists and Jews.

But the Christian Front was well known in the United States in its own time. The news coverage was voluminous, and the radio broadcasts were constant. Front rallies routinely attracted thousands of attendees. Governors, mayors, and police commissioners both loathed and courted the front. Joseph Goebbels, the commander-in-chief of Nazi propaganda, toasted Moran. British intelligence worked hard to take the front down; there is reason to believe Soviet spies also tried. A raft of US law enforcement and intelligence joined in the effort. The FBI's Christian Front file amounts to 2,500 pages, equaling its file on Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Lead-

ership Conference. By sheer quantity of paper, the Christian Front investigation was one of the three largest the bureau ever undertook.

In 1940, when fronters were on trial, US Catholic leadership swept the organization's deeds under the rug. But not only their deeds: what mattered above all to the front's clerical protectors was that the defendants' views never be associated with sincere Catholicism. Remarkably, prosecutors participated in this project, demanding that the front's revolutionary action had nothing to do with religion. Yet everything the front did, in New York and Boston, had everything to do with religion. The front propounded the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism because its pious working-class membership, radicalized by priests and charismatic laypeople, understood Communism to be a Jewish-led plot against Christianity. Fronters believed firmly in the deicide, the idea that Jews had killed Christ, and their leaders moved them from this age-old position toward a distinctly modern and violent blend of anti-Semitism and anti-Communism.

The paramilitarism for which the New York fronters were indicted reflected more than a simple excess of zeal. So did the explosion in Boston, in 1943, of police-abetted anti-Semitic street gangs inspired by the front. The front and its followers were acting on their true conviction. At the foundation of this conviction lay what I call theological anti-Communism, a novel doctrine blessed by the highest reaches of the Vatican, albeit the hierarchy never used this term. The Vatican approved the idea that Christians everywhere were linked spiritually and indeed physically in a single body engaged in a divinely ordained conflict with Communism. And because fronters understood Communism to be a Jewish plot, they extended the Vatican's blessing to incorporate anti-Semitism, sacralizing their war on Jews.

This was not a war for capitalism. Fronters were not laissez-faire libertarians but rather populists with many socialistic preferences. They agitated for fairness under a system they called Christian economics, which meant business opportunities for everyday Christians, welfare for Christians in need, and redistribution from Jews to Christians. They were often anti-union, but because unions were perceived as infected by Communism. Some American far-rightists were "pro-business," but the front often took aim at corporate barons. Coughlin despised Roosevelt and the New Deal but also championed Social Security.

The fronters were also not engaged in a war for America, although their avowed patriotism was not false, either. To the extent that they saw the

United States as an expression of Christian values, they were passionate Americans. They were also covetous of their constitutional rights, especially the right of free speech, which they mistook as a guarantee against not only government censorship but also private sanction. Yet the frontiers had little interest in democracy and no loyalty to the United States as such—only to their vision of the United States as a Christian nation.

From its first days to its last, the front served one master: religious faith. Its leaders preached hate, praised and worked for Hitler, and engaged in violence because they understood these actions as fulfilling the requirements of Catholic dogma.

### Forgetting the Front

With rare exceptions, students of American politics and religion have ignored the Christian Front. Historian Rick Perlstein has argued that organizations like the front tend to go missing from accounts of the twentieth century because they reflect the “political surrealism of the paranoid fringe.” In other words, the likes of the front were so ridiculous, irrational, and utopian—and so far from the centers of influence—that they were presumed irrelevant in the broad sweep of history. *Nazis of Copley Square*, a reference to the Boston neighborhood where Moran had his headquarters, bears out Perlstein’s insight. The seditious plot of which the New York front was accused was so absurd that hardly anyone could believe Cassidy was serious, even when the evidence was plain to see. The frontiers had collected rifles and probably also two military-grade machine guns. They had built pipe bombs and assembled plans to deploy their ordnance. But fewer than twenty men were active in the scheme, and twenty men cannot overthrow the US government.<sup>3</sup>

But, as Perlstein also has argued, “the ‘far right’ was never that far from the American mainstream.” Our story bears out this insight as well. The front’s narrowly targeted economic populism looks similar to that which Donald Trump promoted during his 2016 election campaign. The front possessed settled ideas on issues such as free speech, isolationism, globalism, pronatalism, and religious liberty—constants of American politics. The front was also a dominant force in mainstream institutions: in New York and Boston, the police were rife with frontiers and front sympathizers. Both Moran and Cassidy, alongside some journalists who investigated them, knew the front could count on the police. Cassidy and the New Yorkers also made inroads in the National

Guard. And if the front itself never achieved the scale that Coughlin hoped for—he anticipated millions of members, coast to coast—the Radio Priest himself spread the front’s message far and wide. He was one of the most popular broadcasters of his day, and his newspaper, *Social Justice*, was widely read.

The front also was considerably more tied into establishment politics and media than one might expect of the paranoid fringe. Moran was chummy with James Michael Curley, who served multiple terms as a US congressman, mayor of Boston, and governor of Massachusetts. At one point House Speaker John W. McCormick, a US representative from Boston, protected Moran from possible incarceration under wartime custodial detention laws. Cassidy was a press darling who could get a quote in the *New York Times* seemingly whenever he felt like it. When Cassidy was on trial, top-ranking members of the US Catholic hierarchy petitioned the Justice Department and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover on his behalf. *Time* magazine ran interference for Cassidy during the trial.

Alongside political historians, theologians and historians of religion also have underestimated the Christian Front. These scholars have failed to parse the theological claims of the front and of Christian extremists generally. The thinking seems to be that we can either take claims of religious motivation at face value or simply discount such claims as false and then look no further—that nothing is gained in knowing the details. It is especially easy to embrace such incuriosity when it comes to the front. In its most public moment, during the federal trial in New York, both the Catholic hierarchy and the US government agreed that the front was not a religious organization. Thus the tendency with respect to the Christian Front has been to view the organization as one of an endless range of American anti-Communist groups, albeit a group that disingenuously claimed the mantle of Christianity. In fact the front’s Christianity was not disingenuous, and the exact nature of its Christianity is essential to understanding its mission and the choices its leaders made. If historians wish to shed light on the American religious right, they will have to become exegetes.

Taking the Christianity of the Christian Front seriously demands that we step outside the grand narrative of American Catholic history. This is the narrative of assimilation: of a constant process of Roman Catholic incorporation into the American democratic project. Broadly, this narrative sees American Catholics transforming from a small, persecuted minority in the eighteenth century into a politically empowered bloc by the late nineteenth century, and

by the mid-twentieth century entering the halls of power in Washington. Catholics beat back the discrimination of the Know-Nothings and the KKK and, during World War I, fought bravely on the battlefield, proving their patriotism and their loyalty. Under President Roosevelt, Catholics occupied cabinet-level appointments and other high administrative positions. From there came the ascendance of the Kennedys, a slew of Supreme Court justices, and another Catholic president, Joe Biden.

These civic notables are merely the most visible expression of a less celebrated, but perhaps more important, trend. Catholics have successfully pursued what every immigrant group seeks: standing as ordinary citizens. Delighting in motherhood and apple pie, Catholics fully embraced not just the American creed but also the American state. As Steve Rosswurm put it in *The FBI and the Catholic Church, 1935–1962*, a book that does not address the Christian Front, there solidified at mid-century a “friendly convergence of values between the US government, the FBI, and American Catholics.” One needs no theological analysis to understand this historical trajectory of uninterrupted Americanization.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, along the way, the Christian Front, a group of ardent Catholics influenced by priests, attempted to overthrow the US government. St. Thomas Aquinas described sedition as “a special sin, having something in common with war and strife.”<sup>5</sup> But here was Cassidy, the leader of the seditionists, clasping his Rosary beads while being hauled off to his jail cell. The Christian Front smashes the simplistic Americanist historical narrative and challenges us to think more deeply about what exactly constitutes Catholic values as they relate to the political sphere. In this book we will take up that challenge, for the actions of the Christian Front were every bit a result of their values, and their values were Catholic through and through.

### A Matter of Faith

The rejection of Aquinas and of American law speaks to the importance of theology in understanding what the Christian Front did. Catholicism changed during the twentieth century, as Catholics, guided by their Church, learned to pledge their loyalty to each other even when doing so collided with their obligations to their political communities.

Two authentic Roman Catholic values that dominated Catholic life from the 1920s to 1950s played key roles in catalyzing the Christian Front. One was

the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ; the other was the doctrine of Catholic Action. Combined with the anti-Semitism latent in the story of the deicide, these were the intellectual taproots of the Christian Front and major sources of its popular appeal. Most US Catholics would have been exposed to these concepts through sermons, the Catholic press, parish life, and social activism. Mystical Body theology and Catholic Action drove the missionary outlook of lay and ordained Catholics alike. These values were loadbearing pillars of Catholic practice in the mid-twentieth century, so that even the front's Catholic critics—and there were many—could not contest the organization's sources in their shared faith.

I discuss Mystical Body theology in more detail later in the text, but its central tenet is that everyone baptized as a Christian shares the same physio-spiritual being. The whole of Christianity is said to constitute a divine body, with Christ the head. The effect of this theology during the period of its influence was centrifugal, pressing far-flung Catholics into a felt communion with each other and with Christians of other denominations, as long as those denominations practiced baptism. In practical terms, this made for a new-found sense of solidarity among Catholics. If Christians were hurting elsewhere, Catholics were enjoined to feel their brothers' and sisters' pain.

And pain they felt. Beginning in the 1920s, Christians became the targets of systematic political persecution by leftist regimes. The first of these struggles was in Russia, in the wake of the October Revolution of 1919, when the outcast dissident Vladimir Lenin returned to lead the Bolsheviks into power. What followed was a bloody civil war pitting the Red Army against the White Russians, who fought for the restoration of the tsar. Horrifying stories routinely reached the ears of European and American Christians: Russian Orthodox priests were being tortured and killed by Bolsheviks unless they recanted their Christian faith and adopted the new state line.

For leaders of the emerging American Christian right, the Russian Civil War was a holy war. Major Protestant right wingers such as Elizabeth Dilling of the Mothers' Movement, George Deatherage of the American Nationalist Confederation, and William Dudley Pelley of the Silver Shirts visited Russia during the civil war. In the 1930s they flitted on the edges of the Christian Front movement, sometimes lending public support, sometimes providing encouragement behind the scenes. More importantly, they emerged from their experience of the Russian conflict with a new Christian theology of war. Bolshevism had become an enemy to Christians everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

Catholics, too, felt the fires of holy war in Russia. Coughlin frequently noted the depredations committed by the Soviets against the Mystical Body, claiming that Lenin and his successors were responsible for murdering millions of Christians in the name of Bolshevism. Indeed, not just Bolshevism but Judeo-Bolshevism. Every member of the Christian Front saw the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism as true. The Judeo-Bolshevist idea alleged that, because (secular) Jews held so many positions in Lenin's original soviets, it was axiomatic that Leninist Communism was a product of global Judaism—which was already suspicious, owing to the deicide. For those on the far right, Lenin, who had some Jewish ancestry, had militarized the benign economic ruminations of Marx, also a Jew, for the purpose of installing an atheistic absolutism. Jews had killed the earthly body of Christ before. Now, under the guise of Bolshevism, Jews were persisting in that most horrifying sin by killing Christ's Mystical Body as well.

In Coughlin's view, the holy war reached new heights in Spain, where in the mid-1930s a left-wing government associated with the Popular Front persecuted Catholics. Coughlin and many other Catholics lined up behind the opposed forces of General Francisco Franco. Franco's Catholic supporters abroad acknowledged his own atrocities but viewed them as justified in defense of the Mystical Body. Among these foreign Francoists was Arnold Lunn, a British Catholic convert and evangelist who originated the idea of a Christian Front to protect Christians from their Communist enemies. Lunn recruited elite Catholics to argue his case to the Vatican. Soon enough Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli—the Vatican's secretary of state, soon to become Pope Pius XII—was endorsing the idea of a Christian Front.

Lunn and Pacelli did not promote the Judeo-Bolshevist myth, but, in the American context, Judeo-Bolshevism became intertwined with a specifically Christian anti-Communism. The 1930s saw a flowering of American ecumenism as right-wing Protestants and Catholics joined hands in opposition to Judeo-Bolshevism and the defense of Christians. Given that Catholic doctrine at this time officially embraced the deicide, it was all too easy for Fathers Coughlin, Curran, and Brophy to nurture a Christian Front committed above all to eradicating the Judeo-Bolshevist enemy.

It is impossible to overemphasize the stakes in the minds of these Catholic leaders. As historian Sandrine Sanos put it, the phantom of Judeo-Bolshevism “infused their apocalyptic vision of a nation and culture being undone.”<sup>7</sup> Cassidy and Moran shared that vision. It hardly needs saying that,

as committed Catholics of their era, they were devoted to the Mystical Body. And as acolytes of Father Coughlin, the consummate hunter of Judeo-Bolshevists, they were certain that defending the Mystical Body against Communism necessitated combatting Jews. Cassidy would attempt to do so directly, through force of arms. “It was not we, the defendants, who were on trial,” Cassidy wrote of the 1940 Christian Front trial. “It was the Mystical Body of Christ.” Cassidy and his supporters “ventured forth into the streets of Brooklyn to defend the Mystical Body of Christ against the Marxian forces there assembled to defeat Her.”<sup>8</sup>

Moran, who was more cerebral than Cassidy and who saw how the government came down on the New York front, took a different approach. For Moran, Mystical Body theology became a justification for cooperating with Nazis. When a Nazi SS officer and consul named Herbert Scholz came to Boston to undertake espionage under the cover of diplomacy, Moran became his agent. An ex-seminarian and talented organizer, Moran would become deeply involved in Nazi propaganda and antiwar efforts, including counter-recruitment, morale sabotage, and German-directed activism on behalf of federal legislation that—unbeknownst to its American sponsors—could have hamstrung the US Army during the war. Moran sought to keep the United States out of what he derided as a Jewish and British war with the Axis or at least to ensure that the United States, if it did participate, did so from a position of disadvantage.

It is not incidental that Moran, Cassidy, Coughlin, Curran, and Brophy—along with many of their enablers in government and the American Catholic hierarchy—were of Irish descent. Their primary motivations were religious, but they also felt powerful animus toward the British owing to centuries of Irish suffering on the orders of the Crown and Parliament. Both Moran and Cassidy, but Moran especially, cultivated a heavily Irish American following. As the center of Irish American life and political power, Boston was fertile ground for cultivating a principled opposition to Britain’s war.

For it cannot be said that Moran lacked principles. He often lied and contradicted himself, but he was consistent in pursuing what he believed were the right ends on behalf of the Mystical Body. Moran opposed Britain’s war because it was a war for the benefit of Jews, the enemy of Christ and the Church. And he worked for Scholz not because he was a committed proponent of Nazi ideas but rather because the Nazis were fighting both Jews and Communists. The Fascist relationship with Christianity was complex, but

Moran, like many other Christians of his time, believed that, between Fascism and Communism, the choice was obvious.

Having said that, as the war dragged on, Moran did become Nazi-like in his views. The early Moran was a savvy anti-Semite, who toed the Coughlinite line: the problem was not necessarily Jews, but rather secular Jews, who were equated with Bolsheviks. What drove Moran toward the Nazis' genocidal position was a combination of Scholz's tutelage and the opposition the Christian Front eventually faced in Boston. Scholz was a flawless Nazi. He almost literally had a doctorate in anti-Semitism, having completed his dissertation under a premier Nazi professor whose goal was the eradication of Jewish influence from German philosophy. Just about every decision Scholz made in his adult life was geared toward advancement in the Nazi Party and service to Hitler's government. At least before the end of the war.

But even more influential in Moran's radicalization was Frances Sweeney. Another Irish Catholic from Boston, Sweeney followed her faith along an anti-Fascist path. For Moran and other Coughlinites, every inch of the Mystical Body was baptized, which meant that solidarity ended with Christians. But Sweeney understood *human* solidarity as an imperative of Catholicism. That vision led her to contest Moran's anti-Semitism by means of a brilliant scheme that exposed his work as a Nazi propagandist—work that continued even after Germany and the United States had declared war on each other.

Yet Sweeney's success was marked by two profound ironies. First, her efforts wound up emboldening Moran. In response to Sweeney's revelations, the Boston Police, acting on the impulse of a publicity-seeking commissioner, illegally shut Moran down, violating his civil rights and forcing him underground. From his place outside the public eye, Moran stewed in his own grievances, further developing his anti-Semitism. Second, Sweeney was also a foreign agent. Her efforts were funded, entirely without her knowledge, by British intelligence. In the lead-up to the war and during it, Boston was overrun with spooks.

It is entirely understandable that it would be a lay Catholic like Sweeney, rather than an ordained priest, who would become the Christian Front's chief antagonist. Alongside Mystical Body theology, a second principle, Catholic Action, shielded the front from official Church criticism. Catholic Action was described by Pope Pius XI as "participation by the laity in the hierarchical apostolate."<sup>9</sup> Or, as one San Francisco parishioner explained to his coreligionists in 1938, "Catholic Action opens up a new world for the zeal of the

faithful, a new world wherein they can share in the Apostolate of the Church and cooperate with their pastors and priests in spreading the Kingdom of Christ in individual souls, in families and in society.” Cooperation between lay Catholics and their priests, bishops, and nuns united the faithful in shared activity under the aegis of the papacy. Catholic Action could be anything, as long as a priest—or, better still, a bishop—condoned it. From organizing a parish Bible study to creating a parish-linked organization, Catholic Action gave significance to almost any work of Catholic corporate endeavor in 1930s and 1940s America.

As historian William Issel has pointed out, Catholic Action also created a new concept: the “Priesthood of the Layman.” Cassidy and Moran stretched this idea to its limits, as they cast their Christian Front work as Catholic Action. Yet the gambit succeeded. Clerics like the Jesuit editor of *America* magazine claimed, “In its origin, the Christian Front was one of several religious groups dedicated to Catholic Action.” The priestly sanction that the front received from the likes of Coughlin, Curran, Brophy, and Ahern meant that the Church, in a sense, owned everything the front did. Thus when the US government came after Cassidy, many Catholics did not see the feds as putting down an insurrection. Rather, they were disrupting the internal work of the Roman Catholic Church. For his part, Moran was always careful to emphasize that he led a religious organization, not a political one. Doing so assured him the constitutional protections of religious freedom. But this was not just an expedient posture: Moran was a deeply religious person with considerable theological knowledge. He was the ideal representation of the lay priest. He was also thoroughly committed to Catholic Action, as were his followers. The Archdiocese of Boston never put its stamp of approval on the Christian Front, but as far as Moran’s followers knew, their meetings with him were extensions of parish life. Ahern and others felt similarly.<sup>10</sup>

The elimination of the Christian Front from historical memory owes something to the eventual withdrawal of Catholic Action and Mystical Body theology. As prominent as these two principles were in the 1930s and 1940s, virtually no one remembers them today. “Mystical Body of Christ theology was, even beyond the 1920s, roaring,” theologian Timothy R. Gabrielli has written, “but by 1970 . . . it had virtually disappeared from Catholic discourse.” Moral theologian Charles Curran has posited that by the time the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (Vatican II) closed in 1965, the “shift away from the primacy of the hierarchy” had doomed Catholic Action. If lay Catholics

could claim to do the work of the Church without hierarchical approval, there was no longer a place for the clerically linked culture of Catholic Action. Thus the “social glue” that held the Christian Front together, to use Émile Durkheim’s phrase, dissolved. With Catholic Action and Mystical Body theology both distant memories, Catholics today lack the intellectual grounding to make sense of the Christian Front.<sup>11</sup>

A final religious theme that runs through the book concerns an observation about the Christian Front made by the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. In “Catholicism and Anti-Judaism,” an unpublished 1940 manuscript hitherto unknown to historians, Tillich warned against a “type of clerical anti-Semitism [that] uses the methods of Fascism for its purposes.” Tillich noted that “this is the type of Father Coughlin and the ‘Christian Front.’” Tillich worried that the clerical element embedded within the ostensibly lay Christian Front would push American Catholics toward the Fascist anti-Semitism that was taking over Europe. Tillich knew that anti-Judaism had a long-standing place in Catholicism, via the deicide. But anti-Judaism was not the same as Fascist anti-Semitism. Anti-Judaism was a theology, which saw Jews as suspect but redeemable; a Jew could become a Christian and thereby join the Mystical Body. But Fascist anti-Semitism was racial. On this view, Jews were permanently tainted by virtue of some intrinsic quality; nothing could save them. As Tillich saw it, the Christian Front was a vehicle for transitioning Catholic anti-Judaism into racial anti-Semitism, via the conduit of the Judeo-Bolshevist fantasy. The Christian Front’s priests embraced that fantasy, which saw Judeo-Bolshevism as a feature of secular Jews specifically. There was not much distance between this view and a view that Jews were intrinsically and irredeemably enemies of Christianity. The logic is inexorable: if, after stripping away the Jewish faith, one is left with a Jewish enemy, then there is something essential to the person that makes him or her an enemy. Whether the Christian Front would actually lead American Catholics toward racial anti-Semitism had everything to do with the activity of its priests, Tillich thought. In this he was prescient.<sup>12</sup>

### Resonances and Futures

Readers will note many echoes from this history in the time elapsed since. One of the major themes of *Nazis of Copley Square* is the surveillance of Americans by their government, a matter of ongoing concern. Five US law

enforcement and intelligence agencies, as many as three foreign intelligence services, and multiple Jewish American organizations kept tabs on the Christian Front. So did a large number of journalists. This was an astonishing outlay of national and international resources—all for the observation of a purported religious organization. The staggering quantity of surveillance resulted in a rich set of sources that provides much for the historian to work with. Yet such detail comes at a cost to the surveillance subject. Some Americans know this firsthand because their political activities were monitored by state agents; their places of work, worship, and meeting were infiltrated; and their communications were tapped. There was an opportunity for the wider public to take stock of such encroachments after the attacks of September 11, 2001, particularly as Americans were made aware of the George W. Bush administration's domestic spying activities. Surveillance targets, often Muslims, disclosed their own experience, and alarmed individuals with security clearances, like the defense contractor Edward Snowden, shared inside information. Yet awareness did not lead to fundamental reform, and public debate on the issue eventually ceased.

Surveillance is a double-edged sword if ever there was one. It can reveal criminality, but it can also undermine people's liberty, and past incidents continue to haunt our politics. Consider that the intense surveillance of Coughlin became a defense of Donald Trump during the 2019 House Judiciary Committee hearings concerning impeachment. Representative Ken Buck of Colorado brought up President Roosevelt's surveillance of Coughlin to suggest that President Trump's attempt to withhold congressionally allocated funds from Ukraine in exchange for a Ukrainian promise to investigate his political opponent, Joe Biden, was not without precedent and therefore was not impeachable. There is something to be said for the comparison: the two presidents did not use precisely the same means, but both sought to undermine their political adversaries by diverting official resources. As becomes clear throughout this book, and as others have noted, President Roosevelt was an avid scrutinizer of his political enemies, who used the official resources of the government to investigate and undermine those who disagreed with his preferred policies, especially when it came to prodding the United States into the war.<sup>13</sup>

My focus is less on the political surveillance of Father Coughlin—amply covered elsewhere—than on the surveillance of Moran. As an operative for Scholz, Moran was an unregistered foreign agent. Like Michael Flynn,

Trump's campaign aide and national security advisor, Moran bumped up against the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which was passed in 1938 with the goal of rooting out American Nazis. Moran definitely broke that law; Flynn was given an opportunity to retroactively comply, after his own breach was revealed. Trump's 2016 campaign manager Paul Manafort was accused of violating FARA and certainly did so, though he accepted a plea bargain that eschewed the charge. The FARA investigations of Flynn, Manafort, and Moran were legitimate, but other surveillance of Moran was not. Some of the scrutiny Moran faced was politically motivated and violated his constitutional rights. Hence J. Edgar Hoover's many outraged missives to the Boston FBI. Hoover sought for years to pin a charge on Moran, but local agents could find nothing other than an American expressing controversial opinions. The FBI director was, to use a contemporary phrase, on a "fishing expedition." This despite the fact that Moran actually had broken laws. The trouble for the FBI was that it never found out about his liaison with Scholz.

The FBI's history of overreach has become a source of suspicion across the American political spectrum. The bureau's excesses, especially under Hoover, have marred the credibility of federal investigations into political activists, perhaps permanently. Racial justice and worker's rights advocates point to surveillance of civil rights, American Indian, labor, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American activists, among others. Meanwhile conservatives point to surveillance of Coughlin and to the Great Sedition Trial, in which the federal government in the 1940s attempted unsuccessfully to prosecute thirty American right-wingers as Nazi spies but could produce no evidence of crimes. That case plays a bit part in *Nazis of Copley Square*. If contemporary conservatives knew about Moran, they would probably look to his story as well. When former FBI director Robert Mueller undertook his inquiry into Trump's campaign over allegations that his advisors were doing the bidding of Russian agents, it was inevitable that partisans would bring up the FBI's checkered past—regardless of the factual differences between Mueller's investigation and those historical investigations that justifiably anger Americans to this day.<sup>14</sup>

Mueller was also investigating Russian meddling in US political affairs, another parallel with the history related in *Nazis of Copley Square*. The chapters that follow disclose previously undetected Nazi and British intelligence operations run against US citizens on American soil. The consequences, intended and unintended, of these illegal operations were considerable. It is my contention that the British operation led directly to the anti-Semitic vio-

lence that beset the city of Boston in 1943. There is also reason to believe that John Franklin Carter, a member of Roosevelt's inner circle who urged Moran's summary incarceration, was a Soviet spy, who understood that Moran's antiwar activities conflicted with Soviet war interests. Likewise the British knew that Moran's pro-neutrality campaign conflicted with their own war interests. The British prosecuted a massive spy operation in the United States in an effort to sway public opinion concerning the war. There is further reason to believe that these British operations enjoyed Roosevelt's tacit approval, suggesting that the president allowed foreign agents to pursue illegal activities in the United States in order to move the country to his preferred interventionist position. It seems that obtaining political advantage by courting foreign subterfuge is not so unusual as some Americans would like to believe. We need not, as a result of acknowledging this historical truth, force ourselves to condone behavior we consider to be wrong. But we might be humbled and induced to consider what sort of social and legal change might be necessary to ensure a politics that better comports with our values.

Finally, examination of the Christian Front reveals many uncomfortable constants and evolutions in the history of American far-right politics. The political rhetoric of the Christian Front feels remarkably contemporary. Fronters were adept at cloaking their anti-Semitism in a shroud of deniability knit from terms such as "globalism" and "international bankers." They red-baited liberals incessantly, adding pages to a playbook that fell out of favor somewhat after the collapse of the Soviet Union but which has since been restored to popularity. Front spokespersons complained constantly of what has lately been termed "cancelation," an effort on their part to change the subject of debate from their claims to their rights. Indeed, changing the subject may have been their favorite fallacy: they dismissed the suffering of Jews by pointing to the suffering of Christians and avoided discussing Hitler's atrocities by instead emphasizing those of Stalin. And Coughlin and Moran especially were masterful manipulators of human-rights language. At the dawn of the human-rights era, they recognized that they could inoculate themselves from criticism and could win support by claiming to be victims of discrimination. Perhaps more distressingly, their appreciation of human rights was genuine and inspired their economic populism, which might impel us to consider the limits of human-rights ideas. In so many ways, right-wing politics has come back around to the Christian Front style, with economic populism

replacing free-market dogma and the embrace of victimhood status supplanting—or perhaps augmenting—denials of minority persecution.

At the same time, we must avoid generalizing too greatly the rhetoric and ideology of the Christian Front and thereby losing sight of its uniqueness. The Front arose in a particular moment. As the historian Oscar Handlin noted in 1975, “Between 1910 and 1940, anti-Semitism developed to a point at which it threatened to alter the whole character of American society.” During the 1930s “at least four million, and perhaps as many as ten million Americans enlisted in such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, the Silver Shirts, and the Christian Front.” Handlin feared that, unless rigorously examined, such groups would simply be “slotted under a common rubric with other manifestations of hostility, disagreement, or approval.” If that happened, we would “understand little about their appearance, or ultimate disappearance.”<sup>15</sup> I argue that Handlin’s fear came to pass. The front became just another manifestation of some easily refuted tendency toward intolerance. This failure to reckon with what was distinctive about the front has been a boon to those who would perpetuate its mission, which still percolates close to the surface of mainstream America. We are worse off for having forgotten the Christian Front and so stand to gain by placing its remarkable story in full view.