

CHAPTER 3

Terror in the Name of Christ

THE HEYDAY OF THE CHRISTIAN FRONT IN NEW YORK WOULD prove brief. The group began consolidating under Cassidy's leadership in fall 1938 and took off as a recruiting juggernaut in spring and summer 1939. Its paramilitary training then began in earnest. But by the winter of 1940, its most aggressive members were under federal indictment on charges of seditious conspiracy and weapons theft. The prosecution became a matter of great intrigue, with the mainstream press, Catholic publications, and undercover journalists providing intensive coverage. Then, after the trial ended in July, the front was barely heard from again.

For those who bother to remember the front, this is the arc of its existence. Although the trial was a disaster for the government, securing not a single conviction, it was clear that the front was under FBI surveillance, making further paramilitary activities impossible. Thereafter the Christian Front receded into the dim corners of history. While figures like Father Coughlin continue to engage the interest of scholars and a public seeking to understand the development of the US Christian right and of far-right politics globally, the front itself was too ephemeral to find purchase in any wider narrative.

Yet this simple story of a rapid rise and equally rapid fall is lacking for all sorts of reasons. Most basically, as a matter of brute historical fact, the front did not disappear. After the trial, the front remained a part of community life in Brooklyn, albeit there is no evidence of additional conspiracies or large-scale violence. But the front would go on to become a major player in Boston,

as discussed in later chapters. The persistence of the front was enabled by the failure of the trial but not only by that. The front also received protection from the highest reaches of the US Catholic hierarchy, which sought both to downplay the group's violence and anti-Semitism and to distinguish the indicted men from the Church and its teachings. This is the genesis of another mistaken narrative: historians acknowledge that the government bungled the case but have not ascertained the role of the Church in safeguarding the defendants. Even as priests threw their influence behind the front, and even as the front's public meetings welcomed crowds of thousands for Christian revivals and lessons in Catholic theology, the Church was successful in convincing the public that Cassidy's fight had nothing to do with religion. The Church, along with defense lawyers, also excised anti-Semitism from the front's mission. The men on trial were to be understood only as patriotic anti-Communists. Remarkably, even the prosecution spread this message, doing its part to ensure that devotional matters had no presence in the trial and that the defendants appeared as sympathetically as possible.

Indeed, it was not only anti-Semitism, Catholic theology, and the involvement of Catholic priests that were erased from the trial. The front's lawyers and public-relations managers, including its clerical apologists, also deemphasized the group's revolutionary intentions. As we will see, in late 1939 the Christian Front became committed to the overthrow of the US government. Their strategy was to bomb Communist and Jewish institutions in order to incite an uprising among these groups, which were, according to the Judeo-Bolshevist idea, one and the same. Then the conspirators would lead the National Guard in suppressing the rebellion and install themselves as the heroic leaders of an America renewed. But neither the public nor, frankly, prosecutors could wrap their heads around the idea that seventeen men could take over the United States. The notion was so laughable that the sedition charge was hard to take seriously, and the jury agreed. Thus, far from bringing the Christian Front to an end, the trial absolved the group and absolved the Church that had inspired, empowered, and protected it. After a few months of rapt attention, America forgot all about the Christian Front.

A Revolutionary Front

The first Christian Front firearms training session took place as early as July 1939, at a property owned by a friend of Cassidy's near Hazleton,

Pennsylvania. Cassidy and several others would “hold rifle practice for several hours, sometimes standing up, sometimes lying down.” They shot on Sunday morning, too, after members of the group had gone “into Hazleton [for] Catholic church.”¹

It was only a few weeks after this initial foray into paramilitary training that the front tried to graduate from rifles to machine guns. In August Claus Ernecke first approached Sergeant Henry Fischer, and when that failed turned to a second machine gunner. Denis Healy was as an engineer on the New York Central Railroad and another Browning operator in New York’s National Guard. He accepted Ernecke’s entreaty and then went straight to the FBI. Immediately, FBI Assistant Director Edward Tamm and Special Agent in Charge for New York City P. E. Foxworth enlisted Healy to infiltrate the Christian Front. Agent Peter Wacks would directly supervise Healy’s spy mission.

Healy’s early reports portray a deeply religious organization committed to violence against Jews and Communists, but not yet to revolution. At Healy’s first Christian Front meeting, a mysterious soldier of fortune named William Bishop “discussed the principles of the Talmud” for an hour and a half and explained why Jews had always been “subjected to bitter criticism.” Thereafter the group took “instructions on military tactics.” Finally the meeting turned to planning. Macklin Boettger, one of the New York Christian Front’s top organizers, proposed bombing the offices of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and the Communist newspaper the *Daily Worker*. “Boettger suggested to [Healy] that he should obtain a supply of dynamite from the warehouse of the New York Central Railroad.” Boettger’s idea was that “the dynamite could be thrown through an open window in the plant of the *Daily Worker*” while frontiers acting as lookouts would help the bombers make their getaway in a waiting car. Boettger also recommended having “an individual dressed in the uniform of a New York City policeman . . . direct traffic at the nearest intersection in order to aid their escape.”²

A greenhorn informant procuring dynamite was too much for Agent Wacks to allow, so he told Healy “to inform Boettger that he couldn’t secure the material.” But Boettger’s enthusiasm was undampened. He “replied that he did not need dynamite to do the job, but could use black powder and a lead pipe if necessary.” When some Christian Front members expressed alarm, Boettger scolded them. “The police couldn’t prove anything unless they caught him actually ‘throwing the Goddam pipe.’” The worry was not that the front might kill people, but that its members would be caught in the act.³

Boettger directed what was known variously as the Sports Club, Country Gentlemen, or Action Committee—a layer of camouflage for the increasing militarization of the movement. In July 1939 Father Coughlin described the Sports Club as “an athletic division headed by a competent director” and as a “gun club.” It was perfectly acceptable that the Sports Club be a matter of public knowledge, but its mission was another story. “It was desired to keep the activities of the Sports Club very secretive,” Healy told his FBI handlers. “The primary purpose of the Sports Clubs and the Country Gentlemen,” Healy reported, “is to train men with executive ability, who in turn will be able to direct the affairs of the Christian Front not only from a political point of view, but from a military angle as well.”⁴

A military requires discipline, but the men of the Christian Front could be a rough bunch. “The meeting wound up in four separate fistfights,” an anonymous reporter wrote of a September 20, 1939, Christian Front meeting in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Cries of “Jew dogs—we’ll wipe up the streets with you” and “wait till Hitler comes here” filled the air. Cat-calls alluded to FDR as “Rabbi Rosenfeld.” Such sentiments were of course encouraged by the front, but Cassidy could not be satisfied with mere brawlers, so he and fellow front leaders developed methods for recruiting men with military backgrounds and for instilling order. The application forms he drew up had sections for “military record” and “rank,” so that he and Boettger could pick the members best suited for paramilitary service. The front also arranged for a kind of uniform. As Albert Parry, writing for the liberal newsletter the *Hour*, reported. “Military caps with the letters CF on one side and the sign of the cross on the other were sold to members.” Aside from imparting a whiff of military discipline, the hats served a public-relations purpose. Ever careful to project itself as a defensive organization with nothing to hide, the front marketed the hats as a means of identification. The caps would also ensure that fronters were recognizable to authorities “in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities” when the Communist revolution broke out.⁵

Cassidy also developed a Christian Front salute, of which he was clearly proud. Like the front itself, the salute seamlessly combined political and religious symbolism. “The right hand is extended as in the Nazi salute,” Cassidy explained to reporters, “but whereas the Nazis extend the whole hand, Christian Fronters extend only the index and middle fingers,” which “represented Christ and country.” The gesture resembled the “V for victory” sign that would become popular after America entered the war, but with a twist:

the third and middle fingers were clamped down by the thumb. “The bent third and little fingers represent Communism and atheism,” suppressed under the thumb “of Christian Front principles.”⁶

On October 21 Healy saw firsthand how the Christian Front paramilitary functioned in practice. The FBI informant joined Cassidy and eight others in Narrowsburg, New York, where they honed their marksmanship and drilled maneuvers. Outfitted with 30-06 Springfield and Lee-Enfield rifles, the group “engaged in firearms practice, shooting at silhouette targets at a distance of approximately 100 yards.” As Agent Wacks noted in his report, the training in “military tactics” also “consisted of military rushes of fifteen to twenty yards at which time the men would fall to a prone position and fire their rifles.” The frontiers were undeterred by “a very heavy rainstorm which made the ground very wet and soggy,” indicating “the zeal and enthusiasm which the group possess.” Bishop reinforced the point in an undated letter to Cassidy from a firing range near Rowlesburg, West Virginia. “It’s raining today,” Bishop wrote, “but the Browning Light Machine guns are rattling on the side of the mountain range. Rain can’t stop us.”⁷

While members of the Sports Clubs trained for offensive maneuvers and pondered the destructive potential of pipe bombs, they remained invested in religious piety and Mystical Body theology. These constituted both the public face shrouding secret paramilitary efforts and the motivation underlying those efforts. A report from the December 19 Christian Front meeting held on East 138th Street noted that the gathering “started off with the Lord’s Prayer, and some religious stuff enunciated by David Ahearne, of the de La Salle Brothers,” a mainstream Catholic education organization that continues to operate the world over. Then “the people crossed themselves.” Arthur Derounian, the investigative journalist who observed the meeting, wrote that the discussion was “immersed in ecclesiastical dopage.” Brother Ahearne, who “swears by everything the church stands for,” conflated America and the cross. “Inside his coat he had a special pocket for a large cross,” Derounian reported, “he lifted the cross as [a hypnotist] would a watch.” Ahearne “kept pointing it toward the flag reciting, ‘For God and for Country.’” He made clear that “he would be willing to die” for those ends, “as all those present should” be willing. Findings from the Jewish War Veterans suggest this event was fairly typical. The veterans noticed a pattern: during street meetings of the Christian Front, which featured public exhortations to violence, no priests appeared alongside the speakers; when indoor meetings were held “practically all of the speakers

appear . . . on the same platform with priests . . . so . . . the audiences believe they have the sanction of the hierarchy.”⁸

At this point, December 1939, Cassidy and his men were beginning to think of themselves as religious revolutionaries. Historians debate such claims, asking whether Fascism could ever be a revolutionary movement, given its constitutive opposition to a political left self-described as revolutionary. By contrast the Italian Fascist theorist Giovanni Gentile took revolutionary aims seriously, and lately some scholars have characterized Fascism as a “revolutionary fusion of deviant Marxism and radical nationalism.” David Schoenbaum views the Nazis as authors of “a social revolution,” transferring wealth and power from Weimar elites—in particular, Jewish civil servants—to middle-class German Christians.⁹ Members of the Christian Front had more or less the same perspective as other right-wing revolutionaries seeking “liberation” from Jews and Communists. “When we overthrow the government,” Bishop explained in November 1939, “we will take all the gold that is in the Federal Reserve Banks . . . controlled and operated by twelve Jew banks, and redistribute it among the people.”¹⁰

The immediate cause of the front’s lurch toward anti-government violence was President Roosevelt’s successful effort to repeal the Neutrality Act of 1937. On November 4, 1939, Roosevelt and his congressional backers prevailed over isolationist opponents and lifted the arms embargo on belligerents in the war in Europe. Until this point, the United States could not supply weapons and other military equipment either to Germany or any of the states fighting it and its allies. But Roosevelt’s novel program, known as cash and carry, enabled American firms to do just that. Technically, the new law allowed US businesses to sell to any of the parties at war, but the terms of the legislation meant that, effectively, only Britain and France, which had not yet fallen to the Germans, would benefit. The move incensed Cassidy and Bishop, who were outwardly, and genuinely, isolationist while also being privately pro-Nazi. They also saw Roosevelt’s effort not only as a move toward war but also, correctly, as a lifeline to Great Britain. The US government was now supporting the enemies of Fascism, which the front considered a valuable bulwark against Communism. Even worse, Washington was throwing its weight behind the British, a repellant act in Irish-American circles. Revulsion toward Great Britain was a key part of the front’s recruitment toolkit, as I discuss in later chapters.¹¹

Reflecting on the repeal of the Neutrality Act, Cassidy “stated that he personally believes someone should ‘knock off’ about a dozen of the Congressmen”

who voted for repeal “just to show them that the Christian Front means business.” If Congress did not “take a different attitude and adopt different policies . . . the United States undoubtedly would have a revolution,” Cassidy asserted. Bishop argued that frontiers “might as well be killed over here carrying on a program of sabotage” rather “than going to some foreign country and fighting a war . . . promoted by the Jewish bankers in the United States.” Claus Ernecke was panicked by all the revolutionary talk. “If the God damn FBI ever hears of it, they will have us all in jail and we would be of no use to the movement . . . because men behind bars cannot blow up railroad bridges.” The FBI did hear of it, of course. Each of these statements is from a December 1, 1939, report compiled by Agent Wacks from Healy’s observations.¹²

The revolution was to start with a bombing campaign. On December 6 Boettger, Bishop, and two other frontiers, John Viebrock and National Guard Captain John T. Prout, Jr., met at Denis Healy’s house for a conversation “as to the proper method of preparing or manufacturing bombs.” Bishop brought four tin cans to the meeting “for demonstration purposes.” He explained that “the smaller of the two cans should be inserted into the larger can” and cement poured between the two cans. “This type of bomb,” he stated, “although it did not possess killing power, could do great damage to property.” Bishop had tested his homemade bombs, exploding one under a billboard. “It blew the billboard to pieces,” he recalled gleefully. When Boettger suggested using brass pipes instead of cement-lined cans, Bishop objected. “That is just what we do not want . . . something that will fly to pieces at the time of the explosion.” What Bishop wanted was “just enough to smash a window out, and if possible set the thing on fire.” That is because the bombing campaign was not intended to destroy a target but rather to terrorize Communists and Jews, inciting them to revolution. Cassidy, Bishop, and other planners hoped the bombings would provide a trigger for a “temporary dictatorship” of the United States under a military officer amenable to the Christian Front.¹³

One week after the meeting, Healy went to Boettger’s home in Brooklyn to inspect the front’s ordnance. Healy was shown precisely which cans would be placed inside the cement-lined bombs. The interior fitting was made of “ordinary Campbell’s soup cans reinforced on both ends with pieces of steel and filled with black powder to which was attached a fuse.” Bishop also showed Healy 7,000 rounds of loose 30-06 rifle ammunition along with “several fully loaded machine gun belts.” Bishop further indicated that the bombs “would

be used sometime subsequent to the first of the year.” The pace of action had ramped up immensely.¹⁴

By the first week of January 1940, Viebrock, who now was claiming to be codirector of the Christian Front along with Cassidy, overruled both Bishop’s and Boettger’s objections to the use of pipe bombs. The FBI’s sources immediately informed Hoover, who on January 4 was advised that Bishop had just returned from a trip to West Virginia “with some caps and dynamite fuses.”¹⁵ On January 10, with eight other frontiers attending, Viebrock provided a spine-chilling course on how to make a pipe bomb. His expertise was evident in the detailed notes Healy compiled.

Viebrock stated that, in order to make a bomb out of a piece of pipe, he would take a length of pipe approximately one foot long and screw a cap on one end, that, after attaching to the end of the pipe, he would fill it with powder; that he would allow a space of approximately one inch on the open end of the pipe, at which he would insert a piece of cardboard the same size as the inside of the pipe and press it down against the powder already inserted in the pipe. He would then attach a cap to the other end of the pipe and force a tin cylinder through a hole in that cap down into the pipe until it punctured the cardboard covering the powder; that he would then insert a fuse through the tin cylinder until the fuse had gone into contact with the powder in the pipe; that he would press the edges of the tin together, so that the fuse would not fall out.

Viebrock thought “this type of bomb would probably be one of the most dangerous bombs that he could manufacture,” although he could make it still more deadly “by cutting a ring around the pipe at small intervals with a plumber’s cutter.” This would cause “bits of the pipe to fly under the force of the explosion in all directions.” Viebrock was proud of the idea, which “was patterned after the hand grenade used in Army warfare.”¹⁶

Gone were the previous month’s discussions about “killing power” and the ethical distinctions between the destruction of people and the destruction of property. Just two days later, on January 12, the FBI secretly recorded Viebrock telling an unnamed source that the front would have more drills in Hazleton on January 20, and this time “twenty bombs would be available for firearms training.” In addition, Viebrock deposited fuses with the unnamed source. Simultaneously the Sports Club “designated its youngest member to case the *Daily Worker*.”

At this point, the FBI had heard enough. Given the heightened firearm and bomb-making activity, E. J. Connelley, assistant director of the FBI's New York office, "thought the US Attorney should be contacted" immediately "in connection with warrants." Connelley believed that if Cassidy and Bishop ran another paramilitary training session, they could explode and expend most of their bombs and ammunition, leaving less evidence for the government to build a case. Hoover greenlighted the warrants that very day, as did the Justice Department's Alexander Holtzaff, a special assistant to the US attorney general.¹⁷

Judge Grover Moscovitz of the Eastern District of New York issued arrest warrants for Cassidy and sixteen others on January 13. "G-Men swooped down," the United Press reported, and seized "arms, ammunition and bombs." The FBI found fifteen partially made bombs, eighteen canisters of cordite powder, assorted rifles, and 750 rounds of Browning light machine gun ammunition. Agents also confiscated four mortar detonator cartridges and seven "cans of cordite powder for firing three-inch [Mark I] Stokes trench mortars." Later FBI scientists realized that the mortar ammunition was not cordite but rather the nitrostarch compound designed by the Army Chemical Warfare Division. This was the same explosive the US Army used in hand grenades.¹⁸

The arrests took place overnight. When booked, Bishop was wearing a "crucifix blessed by Father Coughlin" and a medal of St. Rita, patron saint of impossible causes. Bishop claimed to be a Protestant. For his part, Cassidy arrived at the jail with a rifle bullet in his shirt pocket. When asked why he had it, he responded that "he carried [it] as a symbol." Languishing in his cell at the Federal House of Detention on West 11th Street, Cassidy told a reporter he was "not guilty of anything but Christian-American self-defense." Speaking to another reporter, he explained, "All I can say is—Long live Christ the King!—Down with Communism!—Be sure and put that in."¹⁹

Cassidy's retort to the justice system was steeped in the transnational language of Christian anti-Communism, the gist of Mystical Body theology as it was practiced in the 1930s and 1940s. "Long live Christ the King" were the exact words shouted by Father Miguel Agustín Pro, the Mexican Jesuit executed by firing squad at the hands of the collectivist government of Plutarco Elías Calles in 1927. Mexican Catholics chanted the same words during their public protests against the government throughout the Cristero War of 1926–1929. The phrase became a rallying cry for US Catholic anti-Communists in the 1930s and into the Cold War. The crypt of Father Coughlin's Shrine of

the Little Flower in Royal Oak, Michigan, was and remains dedicated to Father Pro.

Sedition, Insanity, or Patriotism?

The US justice system came at Cassidy and his men full bore, with two extremely serious charges. The first was an indictment for conspiracy to “overthrow, put down, and destroy by force the Government of the United States”—a conviction could have meant many years behind bars. Such a charge would be difficult to prove, though, so prosecutors might have paired it with an additional indictment that would virtually guarantee a guilty finding on at least one count. The obvious choice was weapons possession, but Hoover suggested the more legally potent—and less easily proven—charge of weapons theft. At his press conference announcing the arrests, Hoover asserted that “elaborate plans had been made” by the Christian Front “for the theft of armament for revolutionary use from National Guard arsenals.” Behind the scenes, President Roosevelt appeared equally convinced. In the cover note on a memo to his new attorney general, Robert Jackson, Roosevelt listed several topics he wanted the Justice Department to prioritize. One of these was “Cassidy & Co. Tried to Penetrate the US Armed Forces.” The government set bail at \$50,000 (just shy of \$1 million in 2020 dollars) for each alleged conspirator, another sign of prosecutors’ belief in the gravity of the case.²⁰

From the moment of his arrest, Cassidy pushed two themes in his defense. First, he argued that the Christian Front was never so great a threat as prosecutors claimed. He hewed to this position for the rest of his days, mocking the FBI in a 1995 interview for its handling of his supposedly harmless band. “They had a truck full of special agents with machine guns pointing at us,” Cassidy scoffed to the *New York Times* fifty-five years after his arrest. Second, he claimed that the Christian Front was nothing more than a group of patriotic citizens concerned about Communism, which placed them among the majority of Americans. He denied revolutionary intentions and left the group’s anti-Semitism unaddressed. At no point after his arrest did Cassidy publicly connect his anti-Communism to the Judeo-Bolshevist conspiracy theory. Both defenses would gain the tacit support of the Catholic hierarchy.²¹

From the perspective of the historian with access to the FBI’s records and the full range of reporting on the Christian Front, these defenses seem faulty to say the least. But in 1940 Americans were disposed to Cassidy’s position.

Two days after the arrests, the United Press followed up with a front-page story reporting that “public opinion was inclined to dismiss as fantastic the alleged plot.” Caught off guard, Hoover famously and hyperbolically argued at a press conference that “it took only twenty-three men to overthrow Russia.” He told reporters that, “among its early acts of terrorism, the Christian Front planned to bring about the complete eradication of all Jews, seize all railroads, public utilities, power and water plants, and all other forms of communication and transportation.”²² Hoover was simply repeating for the public what his informants were reporting, including Bishop’s own statements. Yet the plot officials were describing was too much for the public to take seriously. By April United Press was reporting on the Christian Front’s “playful plot.”²³

If Americans could not believe the front actually intended to carry out revolutionary violence or had the capacity to do so, this was in part because Catholic leaders used their considerable influence to de-emphasize the sedition charge. About two weeks after the arrests, Morris Ernst, a respected liberal lawyer and close friend of President Roosevelt’s, arranged for “some of the Catholic Hierarchy” to meet with O. John Rogge, an assistant attorney general and head of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. The main purpose of the gathering was “discussing the Christian Front case.” It was extraordinary for a federal prosecutor to consult with parties having a vested interest in the outcome of an ongoing case. On top of that, it seems the Catholic hierarchs prepared a letter for Roosevelt, which they hoped Ernst would transmit on their behalf. There is no evidence that the letter ever reached Roosevelt, but the archived draft makes clear the clergy’s position that the detainees had done essentially nothing wrong. Arguing that Cassidy and his followers were “earnest Americans misled by demagogic appeals to race hatred” and men who “harbored no seditious sentiments toward our country,” the clergy asked Roosevelt to extend “every possible consideration to the members of the Christian Front.” The letter makes no mention of who misled these earnest Americans, which is to say that the Church did not admit that its own doctrines and priests were in any way responsible. The Church leaders did not suggest that Cassidy and his crew were entirely blameless but asked “that justice may be tempered with mercy” and that the men “may be allowed to return to their respective homes and occupations.”²⁴

Meanwhile Monsignor Maurice Sheehy of the Catholic University of America, a regular correspondent with President Roosevelt, wrote directly to Hoover. The monsignor portrayed the Christian Front as an anomaly in

American history, a deviation from the constant trajectory of American Catholic patriotism. “The Christian Front,” Sheehy wrote, “is, as I see it, about fifty per cent anti-Semitism, thirty per cent anti-Rooseveltism, and twenty per cent infantile exhibitionism.” Sheehy was keen to underscore that the Christian Front was in no sense a product of Roman Catholicism itself. Ever protective of his church, Sheehy was at a loss to explain how a bout of “infantile exhibitionism” could generate such paramilitarism.²⁵

Catholic media spread much the same message, both distancing the men from the Church and suggesting that they were merely crackpots, as hapless as they were deluded. *America*, the widely read Jesuit magazine, characterized the detainees as “a few psychopathic cases who need straight-jackets,” “nerve-ridden enthusiasts made violent by dark brooding,” and “dupes.” In other words, not only were the alleged plotters obviously incapable of carrying out the plan the government described, but they also represented no one besides themselves. The magazine did not attempt to describe who exactly had duped these fools: the likes of Coughlin, Brophy, and Curran—all respected, if not uncontroversial, priests steeped in mainstream Catholic theology. The liberal New York Catholic journal *Commonweal* was unusual in blaming Coughlin’s “powerful propaganda” and even went so far as to call out Catholics generally. But the publication described the plotters as “hypnotized men,” suggesting they bore little moral responsibility, if any. *Time* referenced the *Commonweal* editorial but kept only the hypnotized men, erasing the journal’s courageous stand against the sources of extremism within the Church itself. Politicians also played their part. “I don’t think the United States Government is in much danger from eighteen [*sic*] guys like these,” New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia scoffed.²⁶

We should be careful not to presume that the elite Catholic defense of the suspects reflected sympathy with their views and actions—whether their actual views and actions or those imputed by the men’s backers. After all, neither bishops nor magazine writers argued the wisdom of collecting guns and bombs for a war with Communists, much less for revolutionary violence. Rather, many Catholics turned to the crackpot theory because it was essential that the plotters be dissociated from the larger community of believers, subject as it was to constant suspicion. In the 1930s Catholics were finally integrating into American society at a rapid pace, but even as Roosevelt stocked his cabinet with Catholics, distrust remained. For instance, between 1915 to 1930, the Ku Klux Klan—then an organization enjoying widespread

credibility—routinely accused Catholics of subversiveness. This despite the hard work Catholics had done in reconciling their religion with democracy and the American experiment. Now the same Catholics who had proven their patriotism by serving in the Great War were beset by a group of Christ-loving coreligionists charged with sedition. Catholics did whitewash the Christian Front plot, but as a function of fear more than support.

For their part, historians have looked at the Christian Front case from a number of angles. Scholars have always been skeptical of the front's capacity to carry through with their plans. Some historians have viewed the roundup of the fronters as evidence that President Roosevelt was using a politicized FBI to eliminate opposition. Donald Warren, who has written the most scientific study of Father Coughlin, describes a quite sinister plot to “start an uprising that would destroy Jewish-owned newspapers and stores and blow up bridges, utilities, docks, and railroad stations in the New York City area.”²⁷

But for Cassidy and his followers, this was only half of the plan. In order to understand Cassidy's motivations accurately, we must place ourselves within the realm of what historian Rick Perlstein has called the “political surrealism of the paranoid fringe.” Cassidy genuinely saw international Communism as an existential threat to Roman Catholicism. Both the news of the day and the timeless doctrine were seemingly unequivocal on this point. So Cassidy devised a two-part strategy combining assaults intended to inspire a Jewish and Communist uprising, followed by a Christian front-led counterattack.²⁸

Warren correctly describes the first half of the plan, which was a kind of false-flag operation. Cassidy aimed to use small cordite bombs to inflict property damage at the New York Customs House, utilities throughout the city, and Jewish-owned businesses. The simultaneous bombings would provoke terror, with the bonus of victimizing Jews. Christian Front operatives throughout New York City would then spread the word that the bombings were the work of the Communist Party of the United States, sowing a revolutionary fever among Communists. The second half of the plan saw the Christian Front directing a counterattack. As John Viebrock put it, according to FBI records, “Instead of waiting for the Communists to start a revolution, and then stepping in to quell it,” the fronters “would incite the Jewish and Communist elements to revolution and then step in and take over.”²⁹ The theory was that, with bombs exploding all over New York City, New York Governor Herbert Lehman would call out the National Guard to put down the Communist insurrection. It was William Bishop's role to turn the National Guard

into an organization that would “become so permeated with the ideals of the Christian Front that . . . in case of emergency,” they would “take orders from . . . the Christian Front, rather than the officers of the National Guard.”³⁰

This explains the closeness between the front and the guard as Cassidy recruited operatives and set them to training. It is no accident that three of the men arrested were active-duty Guardsmen of the New York 165th Infantry Regiment. These included Captain Prout, who was removed from duty upon arrest and whose name would be attached to the 1940 court case, *USA v. John Prout, Jr., et al.* An additional four of the alleged plotters had been members of the Guard “at some time.”³¹ The front’s Sports Club spent months developing combat skills that would enable them to fight alongside the guard specifically. If all went according to plan, the front and the guard would be in lockstep against the godless Communists.

The idea of working with the National Guard came naturally to Cassidy, who, in his heart of hearts, was less a revolutionary than a counterrevolutionary—at least as he saw the matter. He had long believed that there was “an imminent danger of a revolution in the United States . . . having studied revolutions in other countries . . . where police departments, arsenals, utilities, and transportation” were the first targets of Communist forces. Cassidy “felt that he, as a patriotic citizen, should do something about it, and not wait until it started.” This calculus complicated the prosecution because, as the unemployed Brooklyn lawyer argued, “he did not intend to commit any overt act” but rather to “start thinking about it, and try to get . . . all men possible on their toes to start a counter-revolution.” By law, sedition required an overt act.

Cassidy was also suggesting that Christian Front could not have been seditious because its aim was to safeguard America, which the group saw as a Christian nation. Cassidy believed that while others, including too many Christians, were ignoring Communists—and, worse still, protecting Communists by protecting Jews—the members of the Christian Front were uniquely willing to put their lives on the line at a moment of national peril. The front may have used revolutionary means, including violence and the imposition of a temporary dictatorship. But its goal was to then reestablish American democracy, understood as Christian in character and free of Jewish and Communist influence.

When Cassidy explained his plan to Walter Ogden, who had been the Christian Front’s first secretary, Ogden “thought that his idea was crazy.”³² Ogden was right; there was no way realistically that the plan would work. But

historians have unfortunately taken the improbability of Cassidy's effort as an excuse to downplay and ignore the front. Yes, Cassidy's group was the paranoid fringe. But, as Perlstein argues, that is precisely where we must look to understand the development of far-right politics that have had substantial impact on American life. The fringe, after all, may also be the avant-garde—the leading edge of a mass movement.

The Prosecution Unravels

When the government put forward the weapons-theft charge, prosecutors already knew that their case was on shaky ground. The source of the bad news was one Herbert Cox, of Wilmington, Delaware. While reading his hometown newspaper, Cox saw a photo of the weapons cache the FBI had seized from the Christian Front. "One thing about it struck me very forcibly," Cox wrote to Hoover on January 15, 1940. All of the guns in the photo were of a type that could be readily "obtained through the office of the Director of Civilian Marksmanship of the US War Department, via the NRA."³³ Perhaps surprisingly, Hoover read the unsolicited letter from an unknown private citizen. The FBI director came away stunned. He wrote a pro forma acknowledgment to Cox and asked Deputy Director Tamm to look into the matter.

It turned out that Cox was spot on. Since 1903, an obscure section of the US Army Code allowed civilian members of the National Rifle Association to purchase military-grade weaponry and ammunition directly from the War Department. "It appears," Tamm wrote matter-of-factly to Hoover, "that a civilian through this organization may purchase not only rifles, but accessories and appendages . . . as well as ammunition, ammunition components, and military targets." An NRA member need only send their membership card to the War Department, along with an order slip and a small payment, and a Lee-Enfield rifle would be sent for pickup to the National Guard armory nearest the applicant. For an additional \$1.35 fee, the armory could ship the rifle directly to the buyer's home. Tamm concluded that an Enfield rifle could "be purchased through this medium for \$7.50," about \$135 in 2020 dollars.³⁴

Cordite, too, could be had this way, and Bishop and Cassidy knew it—even if Hoover and Tamm did not. The front had used the NRA rule to acquire their rifles, ammunition, and cordite legally. Bishop had also made use of squib fuses, designed for fireworks, which he bought at a hardware store in

West Virginia. The government still put forward the weapons charge, but it was clear at the time that the sedition charge would have to carry the day.

Yet Hoover and Tamm appear to have known that the sedition charge also was unlikely to prevail in court. At 4:05 A.M. on January 14, while the arrests were underway, Clyde Tolson, the FBI's assistant director, telephoned Tamm and related something he, Tolson, had heard from Hoover. While the Christian Front investigation was unfolding, the director had reminisced about an obscure 1920 case involving "the Elareta Society of Buffalo, New York," in which a court held that the seditious conspiracy statute "did not apply because there was no overt act." This case evidently reminded Hoover of the front's, a bad sign for the government's position.³⁵

To fit Cassidy's actions to the seditious conspiracy charge, the prosecution would have to twist the facts of the case. In a January 17, 1940, memo, FBI agents did just that, arguing that the paramilitary sections of the Christian Front had "devoted themselves to intensive firearms training and the study of military tactics . . . to be used . . . in an attempt to overthrow the existing Government." Unfortunately the government's own witness, Denis Healy, undercut this assessment in the press, laying out for reporters in exact detail the strategy of false-flag bombings, incitement, and defensive counterattack. "The ultimate objective was to incite the Jews to riot and then revolution, and then have a counter revolution," he explained. At the trial, Cassidy and the others would be able to deny truthfully much of what the prosecution would throw at them.³⁶

As if these evidentiary and charging problems were not enough, prosecutors arguably brought more difficulties on themselves by indicting the wrong people. Harold Kennedy, the US attorney for Brooklyn, insisted on prosecuting all seventeen of the arrested Christian Front members on the seditious conspiracy charge. But a source in the Justice Department told journalist Gardner Jackson that department lawyers thought that charge "applied only to four or five," of the defendants and that "several of the men should not have been indicted" at all. Jackson's contact also did not view any of Kennedy's assistant US attorneys as "particularly competent" and questioned their "ability to pick a proper jury." The Associated Press reported that government prosecutors "would seek to obtain an all-Protestant jury," meaning that there would be no Jewish people passing judgment on the frontiers. As it turns out, the jury was not entirely Protestant, but nor did it include any Jewish New Yorkers.³⁷

A jury comprising exclusively Brooklyn residents was impaneled on April 4, 1940, and the trial proceeded for almost three months. On the stand Cassidy disputed the premise of the indictment, claiming that the Christian Front never intended to overthrow the government. It was Communists who wished to overthrow the government, and it was the front that sought to protect the government from the Communists. Cassidy claimed he knew nothing about bomb-making, blaming any such activities on William Bishop. Denis Healy, the informant and the government's star witness, collapsed on the witness stand after four days of testimony and had to be rushed to a doctor. While in the witness box, Healy admitted that he and his wife had invited fronters into their home and plied them with alcohol while asking them about their plans for revolution. The credibility of any revolutionary talk was badly marred by the compromised state of the speakers. Perhaps even worse, in the course of the trial it became clear that the FBI had paid large sums of money to Healy, who had requested compensation on the grounds that he would "incur considerable expense in his endeavors to assist the Bureau." This secret payment scheme undercut Wacks's testimony to the effect that Healy was simply a citizen doing his patriotic duty. On top of all this, due to the NRA rule, no charges were filed concerning the rifles and ammunition. And the Browning light machine guns, alluded to in letters and interviews, were nowhere to be found, further undermining the allegation that the fronters had stolen weapons owned by the US armed forces.³⁸

The jury deliberated for six days. "Mrs. Helen Titus, foreperson of the jurors, said that all eleven members of the jury were in favor of acquittal for all after the first day," but one member held out.³⁹ Ultimately, on June 24, nine of the defendants were acquitted and charges were dropped against five more, although the possibility of a retrial remained in their cases. This came after two defendants had their charges dismissed entirely. That makes sixteen of seventeen not guilty. The seventeenth defendant did not live to see the verdict. Less than ten days into the trial, Claus Ernecke, who had tried to recruit a machine gun instructor, was found hanging dead in the cellar of an apartment building two blocks from his home. Quoting "medical authorities," the *New York Times* reported that "Ernecke must have been very anxious to die, as he had to lift his feet from the floor and hold them up after he fastened the noose around a steam pipe and put his neck in it." Ernecke's lawyer claimed that his client had been kidnapped and murdered on the way to the courthouse. There was no investigation.⁴⁰

“There was great joy when the decisions were announced,” according to an unidentified observer from the Communist Party of the United States, who was present for the reading of the verdict. “Much kissing and backslapping and handshaking among the spectators and defendants.” US Attorney Kennedy “congratulated Cassidy and said, ‘You got a fair shake of the dice, didn’t you?’” Hoover seethed. Cassidy asked for his guns back.⁴¹ On the night of June 28, 1940, Cassidy and Father Brophy took to the stage at Prospect Hall in Brooklyn to celebrate the triumph. Brophy, ecstatic, congratulated Cassidy and the rest of the “Brooklyn boys.” Then, after a dramatic pause, Brophy made an announcement: “There is one matter connected to the jury in this case that hasn’t been disclosed up to this moment, but I think it’s safe to tell you now. I refer to Mrs. Helen Titus, foreman of the jury. You may be interested to know that she is my first cousin.” As it turns out, Titus also was related by marriage to Leo Healy (no relation to FBI informant Denis Healy), the attorney who represented the defendants.⁴²

Losing Their Religion

The inclusion at trial of a conflicted juror was not the only ethically questionable dimension of the proceedings against the Christian Front plotters. The case of *USA v. Prout* also witnessed a curious effort by both the prosecution and the defense to eliminate from the courtroom any discussion of religion. This effort involved clear coordination between defense lawyers and high-ranking members of the Catholic clergy as well as possible collusion between clergy and the prosecutor. It seems that both lawyers in the case, prosecutor Kennedy and Leo Healy on behalf of the accused, were arguing for the defense—the defense of the Catholic Church. For the front, secularizing the trial was good strategy, but for the prosecution, doing so made little sense. The result was smoother sailing for the defense and the solidification in the public mind that the Church and its teachings had nothing to do with the terrorist activities of which the defendants were accused.

An extraordinary, and heretofore unexamined, July 25, 1940, letter from Hoover to Attorney General Robert Jackson partially explained what happened on the side of the prosecution. Hoover told Jackson that he “had just received information from a confidential source” indicating that Kennedy, “as soon as he was advised of the facts in this case,” made an appointment to see Bishop Thomas Molloy of the Diocese of Brooklyn. Molloy was a public

and private supporter of Cassidy's movement, leading historian Leonard Dinnerstein to dub Molloy "the Bishop of the Christian Front." Hoover's confidential source was certain that "Kennedy and Bishop Molloy held a conference in the Bishop's office, at which time the Reverend Edward Lodge Curran was present." The idea that a US attorney would meet with a bishop and priest having well-known connections to the men he was prosecuting was disturbing, to say the least.⁴³

Exactly what transpired at this meeting is unknown, but when the trial began on April 4, Kennedy used his opening statement to set some ground rules that must have been music to Molloy's and Curran's ears. "The Christian Front is not on trial," Kennedy made clear, "neither is race or religion on trial here." Furthermore, "it makes no difference to what race or religion these defendants belong . . . or what race or religion may be brought up in controversy during the trial."⁴⁴ Treating the seventeen Christian Front defendants as though they were driven purely by nonreligious impulses meant Roman Catholicism would be left unsullied. At the same time, there would be no place at the trial for an inquiry into the front itself, its anti-Semitism, or its sources in mainstream Catholic doctrine. Thus the prosecutor effectively opened his trial by sympathizing with the defendants and ensuring that others would, too. Instead of portraying the fronters as revolutionary religious zealots and anti-Semites, Kennedy told the jury that Cassidy and his crew were simply anti-Communists, a position that Americans overwhelmingly associated with patriotism and even civic duty.

For Cassidy and his followers, religion of course made every difference. In their minds, they acted exclusively as their religion compelled them. But Leo Healy, a fine lawyer and former judge, knew not to turn down a prosecutor peddling gifts. Delinking religion from the case reduced the sense that the defendants were fanatics. They were energetic, to be sure, but the jury would never have to hear about the frightful sources of Christian paramilitarism: the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, clerical anti-Semitism, religious anti-Judaism, Mystical Body of Christ theology, Catholic Action, and priestly shadow leadership. Any of these matters might have upset a juror, perhaps especially the esoteric mystery of Catholic doctrine, which had never inspired friendly thoughts among the average American Protestant.

Even before the trial was underway, some observers worried that the government was imposing on the case a secular cast that belied the truth of the defendant's motivations and downplayed the danger of the front. On Feb-

ruary 20 Maurice Rosenblatt, a behind-the-scenes-lobbyist who years later would be instrumental in engineering the censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy, wrote to reporter Gardner Jackson that the Justice Department's Rogge "had no appreciation of the 'local situation'" in Brooklyn—"the political and popular tides in the community." Rosenblatt pointed out that "letters are pouring in to the [Justice] Department from Jews and Catholics," a clear sign that, among the public, "the issue seems to be boiling down to a religious one." If prosecutors thought that they could promote popular harmony by stifling discussion of the front and of the defendants' religious motivations, they were fooling themselves. "It is in the community where these cases are won and lost," Rosenblatt noted.⁴⁵

The courtroom became a kind of hermetic bubble, which even the obvious could not penetrate. "The same gang that crucified Christ are at it again," one hawker of *Social Justice* hollered outside the Federal Building in Brooklyn as the trial started, "they are trying to convict seventeen innocent Christian boys." Whatever Kennedy might have thought, Catholics outside the courtroom saw a crucifixion underway. That much was clear as well to Arthur Derounian, the investigative journalist. As the case went to trial, Derounian was deeply disturbed by prosecutors' bizarre insistence that the Christian Front was not a religious organization. "The fight here is between the Catholic Church and those who are seeking to check the anti-Semitic activities of the Church," Derounian wrote in a February 4 memo. "It'll be a dirty, dirty, dirty, fight."⁴⁶

Had Kennedy consulted Derounian, the prosecutor would perhaps have learned a great deal about what the front really stood for, to say nothing of its inseparability from religion. For four years, Derounian ingratiated himself with Christian Front leadership and attended their meetings under deep cover, sometimes at great peril to himself. He wrote his February 4 memo after joining a meeting of the Christian Front at Prospect Hall in Brooklyn, the epicenter of Cassidy's activity. "The place was jammed," he recorded, "about 65% Irish, and a lot of Protestants too." He estimated that "2,500 men, women, and children packed the hall." They had not come to hear political speeches: "this was in a sense a religious revival meeting," Derounian noted. "It had deeply religious implications." These were the implications of Mystical Body theology, specifically. Derounian remarked that the meeting seemed like "a magnificent demonstration of solidarity and friendliness." A "we are all friends here" attitude prevailed. "Faith—the Catholic faith bound

these people together. A powerful, strong bond.” On top of that, and equally important, “98% of those present were convinced that the seventeen were framed by the Jews, and that the Jews would get theirs in the long run.” As he left Prospect Hall, Derounian could not escape the feeling that the front was engaged in “a religious fight, I tell you—the most vicious and damnable in the world.”⁴⁷

Six weeks later, while the trial was in full swing, Derounian infiltrated another Christian Front meeting—this one held under the name of the Christian Civil Liberties Committee, a pseudonym that likely appeared after the arrests. “Tonight I detected it clearly and unmistakably,” he jotted in his notes. “This is a war *for* Christ.” Derounian was knocked off his heels when none other than Father Edward Brophy appeared on the stage and “read a lengthy prepared sermon to prove that Jews were the killers of Christ.” Brophy read various Bible passages, “tying up the killing at the very end with the effect of a lawyer.” One argument that Brophy aimed to quash was that “Christ was put to death not by the Jews, but by the Romans.” He argued that “during the entire legal process,” surrounding Christ’s Passion, “every detail was in complete and continuous control of the Jews.” These arguments, from Brophy’s recently published book *The Christian Front—Its Justification and Need*, were also the heart of his speech, and the audience was mesmerized. Brophy’s logic seemed true: he contended that, because the Gospels did not cite any Roman law that Christ violated, Romans must not have been responsible for his death. This was a specious claim based on a technicality; the Gospels do not cite Roman law, but other sources do, indicating that Christ was charged under Herodian law with blasphemy against the Temple. But Brophy’s case was good enough for the audience that night, and his book was imbibed as a philosophical apologia for the Christian Front. Derounian left the event taking care to ensure that he was not followed.⁴⁸

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In some ways, Leo Healy’s elision of religion was even more stunning than Harold Kennedy’s. The same February 4 Christian Front meeting that Derounian called a “religious revival” was also a soapbox for Healy: the attorney and former judge who was representing Cassidy and ten other defendants got up on stage and whipped the audience into a frenzy. When Healy invoked Cassidy’s name, the crowd “cheered for a full minute.” In fact “they wept,”

Dernounian wrote, “when Judge Healy said Cassidy was saying his Rosary when he saw him in the jug.” After “Healy raised his hand in the air, and shouted ‘this is a fight for Christ!’” the hall erupted in “delirious emotionalism,” with Healy continuing, “I don’t have to apologize to anyone for being a Christian!”⁴⁹

This is the same Healy who, about three weeks before the trial began, met with Fathers Curran and Brophy to devise a defense of the frontiers as pro-democracy activists utterly disconnected from theological concerns. It was Curran, himself a lawyer, who developed the strategy, which Healy would employ deftly in the courtroom. The central idea was to divorce the defendants from their commitments to the Judeo-Bolshevist myth. As Curran put it, the defense should argue that there were several “fronts,” some good and some bad. These included Christian, Jewish, liberal, and Soviet or Communist fronts. With great duplicity, Curran proposed that the Christian and Jewish fronts be presented as though in league. Curran encouraged Healy to stress the humanitarian and philanthropic work of B’nai B’rith and the American Jewish Congress, the better to suggest that the Christian Front wanted to work with Jews and to argue that the Jewish and Christian fronts were alike “in the sense of their aims in preserving Democracy.”⁵⁰

The posture was of course a sham. Another attendee at the legal-strategy meeting, Boston Christian Front leader Francis Moran, had spent the previous week pounding home the theory that the American Jewish Congress and B’nai B’rith were Communist organizations. Curran, however, sensed that the prosecution was skittish about portraying the defendants as religious extremists. So he took the opportunity he was given and crafted a defense of patriots committed to democracy, just like the Jewish brothers whom the front in other contexts equated with Communists hellbent on eliminating Christianity from the face of the globe.⁵¹

Healy did a masterful job presenting Curran’s arguments in court. Healy boiled down the defense to a single claim: “Communists wanted to destroy the Christian Front.” Healy argued that there were “three fronts,” operating in the case. The Christian and Jewish fronts both did good works, noble and charitable actions to better the lives of their fellow Americans. As such, both were enemies of the Communist Front, consisting of “the government of Russia in coordination with the Communist Party of New York State.” This was “a very bad front,” Healy said, because it stirred up “bigotry and religious discord.” The Christian Front did not want to overthrow the United States

government. Rather it wanted “to overthrow the Communist Front.” With no mention by the prosecution of Cassidy’s and the Christian Front’s foundational obsession with the Judeo-Bolshevist phantom, the jury was left thinking that the defendants actually believed the words Healy was saying.⁵²

In the end, Maurice Rosenblatt’s skepticism about Assistant Attorney General Rogge’s understanding of the “local situation” proved prescient. If overt anti-Semitism was tough for some Brooklynites to swallow, anti-Communism and appeals to patriotism were considerably easier. As Healy put it squarely to the jury, “The Communists will hail you as heroes if you convict these boys.” None of the Brooklynites on the jury wanted that on their consciences. Brooklyn was the epicenter of “radical anti-Communism” in New York, according to the American Jewish Congress. And the Catholic diocesan paper, the *Brooklyn Tablet*, was considered one of the most pro-Coughlin and red-baiting newspapers in the country. These New Yorkers could not afford to be seen as Communist sympathizers.⁵³

With the possibly witting assistance of the Justice Department, Healy and Father Curran successfully stripped the Christian front of its poisonous ideology while it was on trial. Healy, with Curran’s encouragement, flat-out lied about the beliefs motivating Cassidy and his men, while playing to the fears and prejudices of a jury the prosecution evidently had not bothered to vet. The effects of these lies, as well as the state’s whitewashing efforts, were many and durable. Most immediately, Cassidy and his conspirators went free. They also became heroes in their communities, as well as symbols of Christian martyrdom. Here was a clutch of American patriots, protecting the nation from godless Communists, and their own government wanted them in prison. Cassidy had imbibed the politics of grievance from Father Coughlin, and now he would be a fine symbol of that same grievance.

In the longer term, the erasure of spiritual commitment from the activities of the Christian Front undermined public, journalistic, and scholarly attention to religiously imbued far-right groups. The Christian Front became one of innumerable anti-Communist organizations, a minor example of a much larger tendency overlapping all boundaries of faith. Not only that, but in the verdict of history, the Christian Front was unimportant because it was short-lived. Scholars have argued that “the FBI shut down the Christian Front in 1940” or else “suppressed” the group. Only one scholar, historian Philip Jenkins, has argued that the Christian Front exposes a larger religious impulse in America: a tropism toward terror in the name of Christ. And no one

had to wrestle with the fact that the front's fanaticism was a product not of twisted faith but rather of comportment with the faith as practiced and preached the world over. This is not to say that Catholicism was a violent religion in the 1930s and 1940s but instead that it could be interpreted as demanding violent action without undermining its theology. It was so interpreted—by Cassidy, Curran, Brophy, Coughlin, and others. These lay and clerical leaders drew on popular Catholic ideas, ignored the portions of those ideas they did not care for, and combined the result with theories like Judeo-Bolshevism that had no place in any Christian teaching. When the clerical hierarchy saw what happened, they did not urge Catholics to renounce the violent ideology the Christian Front had discovered in Mystical Body theology and Catholic action. Rather, the Church swept the bad news under the rug.⁵⁴

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If Jenkins has been a lonely voice on the Christian Front's role in America's history of right-wing religious violence, then one other scholar, historian Stephen Norwood, has been the lonely voice on the Christian Front's persistence after the summer of 1940. Norwood has argued that the front was as vibrant as ever in 1943. The brew of clerically and doctrinally supported anti-Semitism and anti-Communism was now being quaffed in Boston.⁵⁵

Boston was perhaps an unlikely place for the resurrection of the Christian Front. In the summer of 1939, when the House Un-American Activities Committee asked George Deatherage, the fascist-leaning founder of the American Nationalist Confederation, if he was making headway in organizing a nationwide right-wing clearinghouse, he mumbled, "Well, with the exception of the New England states, which are so blinking stubborn, we can't do anything with them." As far as the FBI's far-right watchers were concerned, Boston was barely a blip on their radar screen. True, when the FBI interviewed Walter Ogden in October 1939, he revealed that "Cassidy made a trip to Boston where he spoke before a mass meeting of the Christian Front." But when pushed, Ogden could tell the bureau little about the Boston unit of the front. It was headed by a fellow named Moran, but Ogden "didn't know Moran's first name or his occupation."⁵⁶