

Sovereign Citizens: From Education to Encounter

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Introduction

What are Sovereign Citizens?

As a world superpower, the United States of America is the target of many potential threats, both internal and external. Externally, the country's homeland defense agencies battle international terrorist cells and human trafficking. Internally, domestic terrorist and extremist groups give their best attempts at attacking the stability of the government through political manipulation, defiance, and physical violence. One such group (and the one this document focuses on) is the Sovereign Citizen Movement.

Outside of the Intelligence Community (IC) and a handful of local agency intelligence units, knowledge of Sovereign Citizens, their practices, and beliefs are not widely known about. The Federal Bureau of Investigation classifies the Sovereign Citizen Movement as an extremist movement (Domestic Terrorism, 2010), and members of this movement are, by default, domestic terrorists. Specifically, "sovereign citizens are anti-government extremists who believe that even though they physically reside in this country, they are separate or 'sovereign' from the United States" (2010). What does this mean? In examining the root word 'sovereign', it has several meanings. The adjective form of sovereign describes a state or country that is independent and not under the authority or control of any other country, while the noun describes a person with the highest power in a given country (i.e. a king or queen) (Definition of 'sovereign', 2018). Individual families or groups of sovereign citizens may consider themselves to be an independent or 'sovereign' territory, not under the control of the United States. Some sovereign

groups consider themselves “of the land” and often adopt Native American tribal language in their names and documents.

Why the Concern?

Being a sovereign citizen is a belief and having a belief is not against the law; however, criminal acts are. Sovereign citizens believe that, as a result of being independent and self-governing, they do not have to answer to any government authorities, including tax and motor vehicle departments, courts, and most bodies of law enforcement (Domestic Terrorism, 2010). Due to this disregard for government authority, problems arise from sovereign citizens not paying taxes, using fraudulent currency and checks, and filing frivolous lawsuits and liens against police officers and public officials as a means of harassment (2010) if they feel ‘violated’ in some way (this could be in retaliation to something as simple as being stopped for a traffic violation). Although sovereign citizens are not inherently prone to violence, as with any human being, they possess the potential for it. Sovereign citizens have been known to threaten and physically assault police officers and government officials, commit murder, impersonate officers and officials, and engage in various white-color scams (Domestic Terrorism, 2010).

Purpose of this Publication

Although a few training segments are sometimes presented at law enforcement-related conferences, front-line officers, especially those employed at rural departments, often have little to no training on sovereign citizens and what to do if they are encountered. This document will provide useful information for front-line officers and ranking officials of local agencies, standing in as a ‘guide’ for recognizing sovereign citizens and avoiding compromising situations. Essentially, the question that needs to be answered is: what should be done by a law enforcement officer if a sovereign citizen is encountered during a traffic or criminal investigation to minimize

confrontation and retaliation? This paper will touch on that question; however, as previously stated, training in this area is lacking.

Review of Literature

The Sovereign Mindset & Encounters

The mindset of sovereign citizens is unlike any other ideology one might encounter in extremist or terrorist groups. To set the tone, here are a few direct quotes from the Sovereign Citizenship (n.d.) website:

“When enough people agree on an idea, it becomes part of the culture itself!”

“Become one of more than 300,000 ‘Sovereign Citizens’ in America”

“The government has dumped toxic waste everywhere, and carbon in the Earth’s atmosphere has exceeded sustainable limits!!! Stop contributing to the war machine!”

This website is actively recruiting people with like minds to join the ranks of the Sovereign Citizen Movement. The website boasts about having more than 300,000 members, and espousing some statements close to the ideology of eco-terrorists. Sovereigns consider the United States government a ‘war machine’ and that it is made up not of three (3) branches, but of four (4) branches – the fourth branch being ‘The People’ (“Sovereign Citizenship,” n.d.). According to their website, being a U.S. Citizen is disgraceful and people should aspire to become noble ‘Sovereign American State Citizens’ within their own private nation (n.d.). Sovereigns believe that the biblical ‘Mark of the Beast’ is here, and is being implanted into people by military-run corporations in the form of a subdermal microchip implant, which thereby makes people property of the corporation – and the ‘corporation’ is the United States (n.d.). Their website allows interested parties to purchase various levels of ‘starter kits’ to show them how to become sovereign citizens, and to donate money to the cause. Their handbook “shows

you how to unsubscribe from the system and protect your estate from public exploitation” and “how to stop social workers from stealing your children” (n.d.).

Interview of Michael Hicks

In August 2012, a man by the name of Michael Hicks was driving in Washington State in his truck, which had fraudulent license plates attached. A police officer observed the vehicle with fake license plates and initiated a traffic stop. Hicks’ vehicle had multiple sovereign-esque decals and stickers all over it, including several that said “no trespassing, private property” (Bishop, 2012). Hicks refused to exit the vehicle when asked by officers, citing his reason was because he did not feel safe doing so. At first, he also refused to provide officers with his name. After he was arrested, he told interviewers that he felt as though his rights had been trampled and that he is a sovereign and has sovereign rights (2012).

News Report on Eric Holtgard

In November 2013, a man named Eric Holtgard threatened to kill a customer at a Buick Dealership in the Tampa Bay area. Holtgard was arrested but posted bond a short while later. Once out of jail, Holtgard held a lawn-care worker at gunpoint while carrying a paper saying he was a sovereign citizen and was exempt from any government laws (Chambers, 2013). While searching his vehicle, Hillsborough County deputies located several other guns and a stockpile of ammunition, including assault rifles and armor piercing rounds (2013). Of particular interest was an admission by a Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office spokesperson, saying that the agency maintains a database to ‘track’ sovereign citizens (2013).

The Threat is Real

As previously noted, the ‘weapon’ of choice for a sovereign citizen is paper (i.e. fraudulent court papers, liens, etc.); however, as also noted, people espousing this belief can and do become violent, especially after all ‘paper’ avenues have been exhausted. In 1995, a sovereign citizen named Michael Hill pulled a gun on an Ohio police officer during a routine traffic stop. As a result, the officer shot and killed Hill (Sovereign Citizens Movement, n.d.). Another incident occurred in 1997, when Carl Drega shot and killed two (2) officers and two (2) civilians in New Hampshire. Drega eventually killed himself, but not before shooting and wounding three (3) additional officers (n.d.). Doug and Craig Broderick (brothers) were stopped by officers for failing to signal in traffic. Due to the mindset of being ‘above the law’ or immune to it, they shot two (2) officers – one of them survived and the other was killed. Once backup arrived, a gun fight ensued and the brothers were killed (n.d.).

In the first section of this paper, a brief mention of sovereign citizens’ beliefs on land ownership and Native American likeness was made. This belief was taken too far when members of the Abbeville, South Carolina ‘Bixby family’ killed two (2) law enforcement officers during a dispute over a tiny piece of land adjoining their own property (Sovereign Citizens Movement, n.d.). Although sovereigns usually retaliate against officers for routine traffic stops by fabricating exorbitant liens, Jerry and Joseph Kane (father and son) of Arkansas skipped the paper route and went straight to bloodshed. The two shot and killed two West Memphis police officers. Later the same day, the Kanes injured two other officers before finally being slain in a shootout with police (n.d.).

Indicators

There are many visual depictions that may be indicators of a sovereign citizen or someone espousing their beliefs. Some common things to look for (in addition to fraudulent license plates, no trespassing signs, and ‘don’t treat on me’ signs), especially as government officials, police, or officers of the court are:

- Documentation addressed to Secretary of the Treasury Department or Depository Trust Company
- Documentation with ‘Apostille Number’ included
- Phrases, such as ‘Accepted for Value’ or ‘SLS – Sovereign Living Soul’ or ‘Accepted for Value’
- Documents that have been notarized, but are not normally required to be
- Domestic mail using international postage rates with stamps affixed near the bottom
- Name written in all capital letters, with colon separating last name : first name
- Postal codes enclosed in brackets
- Termination, Separation, or Divorcement Affidavits
- Notices of Sovereign Status
- Declaration and Notice of Expatriation
- Uniform Commercial Codes (UCC)
(Sovereign Citizens...2010, pp. 1-3)

During traffic stops, specific indicators may be present that would, at first glance, appear to be ‘normal’ or authentic. Because people who are fully immersed into the sovereign belief do not recognize the U.S. government or any of its laws, they often use or present fraudulent license plates, driver’s licenses, badges, and vehicle registrations (Weber, 2015). If a law enforcement officer performs a traffic stop on a sovereign citizen, chances are that if the officer attempts to

run the tag for vehicle and driver information, there will be no record. Additionally, they may display strange names, such as states or countries that do not exist, made-up embassies, “Republic of...,” UCC statements, or Native American tribal names or combinations of tribal names (2015). Bumper stickers are commonplace in America and other parts of the world, so most people do not give them a second thought. What they do not see is that certain bumper stickers can be indicative of a sovereign citizen – some may say:

- Sovereign Authority
- Don’t Tread on Me (very common, especially with an image of rattlesnake)
- Sovereign Citizen
- Posse Comitatus
- and references to the UCC

(Weber, 2015)

Driver’s licenses and vehicle registrations are popularly falsified by sovereign citizens. In some instances, words such as “Diplomatic Travel Pass” or “Kingdom of Heaven” or “Right to Travel” may be present on these documents (Weber, 2015). Additional indicators could include all capital letters, odd punctuation in the name (i.e. a hyphen between first and middle names, or a semicolon between middle and last names). Some sovereigns may sign their names with “under duress/UD” or “without recourse” or “all rights reserved” along with any of the UCC statute numbers (2015). Because they do not believe they are subject to U.S. laws, sovereign citizens may boast that they have a bible-given right to travel or that they do not fall under ‘your’ jurisdiction (2015).

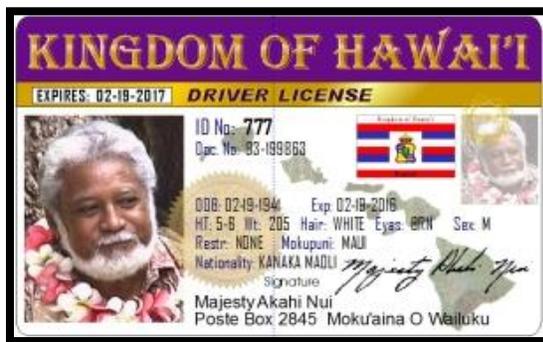
Sample Images of Sovereign Citizen Indicators



Credit: The Sun Herald



Credit: www.whatwouldjackdo.net



Credit: hrmakahinui.com



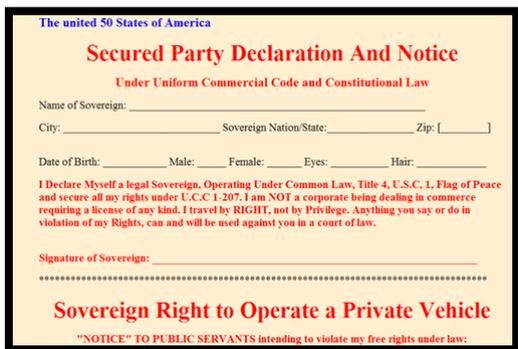
Credit: Southern Poverty Law Center



Credit: Washington Co. Oregon Sheriff



Credit: Knoxville News Sentinel



Credit: www.freedomforallseasons.org



Credit: www.patheos.com

Analysis & Findings

On the preceding pages, information was presented on basic identifiers of sovereign citizens and the threats they posed; also provided was some summarization and commentary from interviews and encounters, in hopes to better explain to readers the mindset of sovereign citizens. This section examines less-traditional informational resources, including but not limited to YouTube interviews, local Florida incidents and encounters, and information found on social media. Ultimately, this section will be concluded with comparisons drawn from the established research provided in the preceding pages to present the “findings” and set the tone for the conclusion.

Social Media

In the current time, it is an age of social media. In 2018, the frontrunners are YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It is an open space for people of all shapes, sizes, and ages to share music, news, contests, and beliefs. Sovereign citizens are not unlike most other people – they change with the times and adapt to use current media outlets. When investigating sovereign activity or looking for behavioral clues and indicators, social media can be an extremely beneficial resource. For the purposes of this document, only two (2) of the social media outlets mentioned above will be included in the analysis.

YouTube

YouTube allows users to post videos on a number of topics and hundreds of thousands of videos are uploaded daily. According to Omnicore, as of January 24, 2018, approximately 300 hours of video are uploaded each minute of every day. Around 62% of YouTube users are males, and 80% of users are from somewhere other than the United States (Aslam, 2018). Ages 35 and up, as well as 55 and up, are the fastest growing YouTube demographic groups (2018). Nearly

one-billion hours of YouTube content is watched daily, with around one-third of all internet users either watching or uploading to YouTube (2018). Another interesting fact – YouTube provides a free “space” in Los Angeles, California for anyone with more than 10,000 subscribers (2018).

The statistics and “fun facts” provided above are astounding. Now, factor sovereign citizen beliefs into YouTube, and one is able to quickly realize the potential of spreading their beliefs via uploaded video content. The YouTube channel, “Human Restoration Project,” has 265 subscribers and 15,883 total views as of April 22, 2018. Essentially this means that the channel has grown by 88 people per year and has had 5,294 views per year from its inception date of March 15, 2015. On the channel, the owner never mentions her name; however, her videos are all supporting such movements as “The Unrig Movement,” which is “a movement to bring back government integrity” and certain sovereign beliefs. In her video titled “The ‘Sovereign Citizen’ vs. the Natural Person,” she proclaims her support of the sovereign movement and usage of the UCC, but states that it is “a lot of work” and that reading the papers (likely referencing the ‘starter kit’ referenced in the Literature Review section of this paper), drained her to the point she felt like a “4th Dimensional Archon or something” (The “Sovereign Citizen”..., 2017). The archon reference seems to be a science-fiction belief that some people have, asserting that people were once telepathic beings and were ruled over by something called an archon. Despite the seemingly “out there” mindset of the video uploader, she did say one thing that makes sense: the words “sovereign” and “citizen” are contradictory (2017), as the former indicates a person who is not under the power of any other, while the latter means the person is a member of a state or town with rights and privileges thereof.

Further along in her YouTube post, the owner of the *Human Restoration Project* channel says that the majority of the funds collected from “the people” in the United States go to fund the

“War Machine” (2017), which is a term often used in sovereign correspondence to reference the U.S. government. Ultimately, she exclaims that because the sovereign paperwork was just too much work, she considers herself a free, natural person and that it is time to “stop playing by their [the Federal Government] rules” (2017).

Another video on YouTube, titled *2nd time I’ve caught a hard time about using UCC 1-308* by “TheChrisAndHollieShow,” espouses sovereign belief in using the Uniform Commercial Code and how Chris, the uploader of this particular video, intends to use UCC 1-308 to “reserve his rights” to his newborn son. This channel was created in June of 2016 and has 11,000 subscribers and over 2.4 million total views. In this video, according to Chris, the hospital informed him he would have to pay \$12 to obtain a birth certificate for his son, and sign the document. Chris feels this means he is turning his son into a corporation, so instead of just signing his name, he wrote “UCC 1-308, all rights reserved” under his name (“*2nd time*” . . . , 2017). After being reviewed by a few people at the hospital, Chris was told he would have to resign the certificate with just his name, and no references to the UCC. Chris then went on to state that he attempted to do the same thing at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), but the clerk informed him that it would not be accepted (2017).

Facebook

The only Facebook page that will be discussed here, for sake of relevance, is titled “We Are World Citizens.” This page appears to have started in 2012 and has already garnered over 6.6 thousand likes. The page states that “world citizens are people who transcend the geopolitical divisiveness inherent in the national citizenships of their various sovereign states and countries” (2012). In other words, even though a person may live in the United States, in Florida for example, that is only their physical location and they do not need to claim nor support their

government. The majority of the posts on the page reference the “corporate grip” on the people of the U.S., how the government is bad for free speech, political agendas, and goes on to discredit the “war on terror” (2012).

Social Media Analysis

Based on information from the two (2) YouTube videos provided above, it is easy to see that although some channels do not garner a huge following, some can and do. The first video provides an example of how a person believes it is too much work to become a sovereign citizen, so the next best thing is to settle for being a “natural person” who does not support the government or the “war machine,” but also does not engage in the “paper terrorism” that sovereign citizens typically do. The second video provides a clear example of the inconsistencies and incompetence that surround sovereign citizen ideology. Based on his continued references to the UCC, it is clear that Chris espouses sovereign beliefs; however, at the end of the video, he admits to going to the DMV to pay for a government driver’s license. Sovereign citizens routinely use false driver’s licenses, registration paperwork, and license plates (as mentioned in earlier sections of this paper) because they do not believe in supporting the government or being part of it. In this video, Chris espouses certain beliefs and practices, but either does not conform to all of sovereign beliefs, or feels it is okay to use the government to obtain a driver’s license.

Accounts from Law Enforcement & Presence in Court

Whenever a law enforcement officer encounters a true sovereign citizen, there are a number of things that “could” happen. More times than not, when an officer performs a traffic stop and the subject happens to be a sovereign citizen, they will say things such as:

- “I am not driving, I am traveling” because they feel that they should not have to pay for traveling, because they are free to travel.

- “As a free person, I do not recognize the jurisdiction of...” since they believe by exclaiming they are free of legal constraints, the law does not apply to them.
- “Speeding is not a crime, a crime requires an injured party” because there is no “victim.”

They may also ask if they are being detained, because most do not know the difference between being detained for questioning and being arrested for a crime (Uniform Stories Staff, 2015).

Since the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995, what has been considered the seed for domestic extremist groups such as the Sovereign Citizen Movement, 32 law enforcement officers have been killed by domestic extremists (as of 2010). The West Memphis story was mentioned earlier in this paper; however, the account in the succeeding sentences is based on the statements made by one of the officers’ fathers, who is now the West Memphis Police Chief. On the tragic day of May 20, 2010, two (2) officers of the West Memphis Police Department in Arkansas conducted what they thought would be a routine traffic stop on Interstate 40. Unfortunately, this was anything but a routine traffic stop – neither officer knew, on that day, they would not be going home again. Officers Brandon Paudert and Bill Evans stopped a white caravan occupied by Jerry and Joe Kane (father and son). After speaking with the occupants for a short while, reading over fraudulent sovereign paperwork and trying to determine why the license plate looked odd, the officers were shot dead after Joe (the son) exited the vehicle firing an AK-47. A short while later, both subjects died in a shootout with police in a Walmart parking lot (Sovereign Citizens and Law Enforcement, 2010). The West Memphis Police Chief states that “maybe if they had known what to look for, my son and his partner might still be alive” (2010).

In 2014, defendants Eshleman and Rosondich were arrested for resisting when both of them refused to exit their vehicle during a traffic stop. They told the officers they were on a religious pilgrimage, and then told them they wanted to be lawyers. When the prosecutor asked

why they did not exit the vehicle, they proclaimed that they were not given due process and continually told officers to “go look the code up” (‘Sovereign Citizens’ Appear in Court, 2014).

Conclusion & Recommendations

Sovereign citizens have the potential to be deadly – perhaps even more-so than international terrorists. Despite various group classifications, true sovereign citizens are terrorists and extremists in every sense of the words. They are more dangerous to law enforcement officers than the average, run-of-the-mill criminal, given the “unknown factor.” Unless law enforcement officers are properly trained on how to recognize a sovereign citizen and what to do when one is encountered, they will never be truly prepared. The Alachua County Sheriff’s Office in Florida sponsors the Sheriff Explorers program, where youth who are interested in pursuing a career in law enforcement can go through a modified training academy. In 2015, the Alachua Explorers were filmed while doing a mock traffic stop on a deputy pretending to be a sovereign citizen. The occupant handed the Explorer the expected fraudulent paperwork, then proclaimed that by being in his vehicle, he was in his personal property and had no legal obligation to exit the vehicle, despite the Explorer’s commands to do so (Sovereign Citizen Traffic Stop, 2015).

The program mentioned above is perhaps the best form of training anyone can receive – hands-on training to recognize the indicators of a sovereign citizen in order to take precautions to ensure the safety of everyone involved in the encounter. The Police Chief of the West Memphis Police Department stated, in a roundabout way, that prior to the 2010 tragedy that killed his son and another officer, there was no formal training on sovereign citizens at that department. They did not recognize the tell-tale signs of a couple of sovereign citizens or their vehicle. Based upon everything outlined in this research document, it is absolutely paramount that law enforcement agencies in all jurisdictions throughout the United States receive both instructional and hands-on

training on how to recognize sovereign citizens and sovereign activity. Further, it is the recommendation of this author that law enforcement agencies establish working guidelines for encounters with sovereign citizens (for instance, when an officer reasonably suspects that a vehicle he just stopped has sovereign markings – fake license plate, sovereign bumper stickers, etc. – they are required to call for backup prior to exiting their vehicle). It is also the recommendation of this author that as part of the aforementioned working guidelines, agencies institute protocols for documenting sovereign citizens who have perpetrated a criminal act. Reflecting on the first-person accounts from law enforcement personnel, deaths of the heroes in blue (and green), and statements from people who espouse sovereign beliefs, it is crucial that training on sovereign citizens become an integral part of all law enforcement academies and on-the-job training, as well as criminal justice academia. There are multitudes upon multitudes of training courses available for criminal gangs because they are so deadly. As this paper illustrates, sovereign citizens are willing to die for what they believe in – and take law enforcement officers with them!

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