

# The Assassination of an Arlington Nazi

BY CHARLES S. CLARK

The political ringleader who had achieved national notoriety was seen doing his own wash at a coin-operated laundromat on Wilson Boulevard. Just before noon on Friday, August 25, 1967, George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party, whose presence for nearly a decade had been an embarrassment to many Arlingtonians, told the proprietor at the Econ-o-Wash that he had to return home to fetch some bleach.

As the 49-year-old Rockwell slid into the seat of his fading blue-and-white 1958 Chevrolet, gunshots rang out from the roof of the Dominion Hills shopping center. Two bullets burst through the windshield, knocking his car into another vehicle as Rockwell fell face up in the parking lot, splayed beside his box of Ivory Snow and a copy of the *New York Daily News*. Bystanders called police, but in minutes, the flamboyant—and ordinarily well-guarded—leader of the modestly sized American Nazi movement had died of a shot through the heart.

Within half an hour, Arlington police would arrest not an anti-Nazi, but a disgruntled fellow Nazi: 29-year-old John Patler, a Greek American and former Marine from New York City. Patler had risen to the number-four slot in the hierarchy of the party faithful, most of whom lived in the fortified “barracks” in a swastika-bedecked old house across the street from the Dominion Hills center. (Today the site is the picnic pavilion at Upton Hill Regional Park.) His subsequent trial and conviction for the murder of the charismatic Rockwell would crimp the American Nazi movement. But Nazi activity in Arlington would stretch on another decade and a half.

## Rockwell's Unlikely Story

Most who lived in Arlington in the late 1950s and 1960s have memories of passing by the various homes the American Nazis used as headquarters, most visibly the one at 928 North Randolph Street (today the site of the Richmond Square high-rise apartments in Ballston), which bore a large wooden sign reading, “White Man...Fight! Smash the Black Revolution Now.” Local teenagers got their thrills by phoning to hear the tape-recorded hate messages delivered by Rockwell associate and white supremacist William Pierce (who would go on to write the “Turner Diaries” novel that in the early 1990s inspired Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh).

The Nazis' magnetic commander, etched into public consciousness by his full name of George Lincoln Rockwell, was born in Bloomington, Illinois, on March 9, 1918. He was the son of vaudeville comedians who counted among their friends Fred Allen, Fanny Brice, Jack Benny and Groucho Marx. Following his parents' divorce, the young Rockwell attended prep school in Lewiston, Maine, before enrolling at Brown University to study philosophy. He soon dropped out and served as a pilot in the Navy during World War II. He then attended the Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn, where he developed the drawing talents he would use to create Nazi fliers. After launching a short career in advertising, Rockwell married and fathered three children. When the Korean War broke out, he was called up and stationed in San Diego. He left his family when he was assigned to a U.S. naval air facility in Iceland. It was there that Rockwell read Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and became obsessed with Aryanism and the worldwide threat of communism. He married an Icelandic woman and honeymooned in Germany (in Hitler's retreat town of Berchtesgaten). He sired more children.

In the mid-1950s, in a move that would estrange him from his second wife and family, Rockwell returned to the United States and conceived the American Nazi Party. He moved to the suburbs of the nation's capital in 1958 to begin his climb to status as a national newsmaker whose name carried shock value. The literature his group printed on its own presses spoke of the "lie" that six million Jews were killed by Hitler. Rockwell was quoted making such inflammatory comments as, "Bring me 15 Jews and we'll make Anne Frank soap."

In spreading his message of hate against Jews and blacks, Rockwell used a variety of publicity-generating tactics. Nazis picketed a visit to Washington, D.C. by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. They demonstrated in front of theaters showing the movie "Exodus" (earning him a mention in a lyric by protest singer Bob Dylan). The Nazis marched at nightclubs that booked black entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. (whose wife was white). After New York City Mayor Robert Wagner banned Rockwell from speaking at a July 4 celebration in Union Square in 1960, Nazis picketed the White House.

Now with branches in several states, the Nazis by the early 1960s were trailing and heckling the civil rights Freedom Fighters marching in the South with Martin Luther King Jr. In 1965 the California Justice Department investigated Rockwell's West Coast followers for threatening violence.

In Arlington, the Nazis first made news in 1958 with a bomb threat against the Arlington Unitarian Church, where many Jewish congregants gathered. In 1960, they picketed Mario's Pizza House at 3322 Wilson Boulevard for refusing them service while serving blacks. (The Nazi signs castigated "Mario the Jew," a reference to Howard Levine and family, longtime Arlingtonians who still own the pizzeria.)



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**American Nazi Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell addresses a rally with his eventual assassin, John Patler, to his left.**

In July 1961, following several incidents of rock-throwing and insults shouted at the headquarters on Randolph Street, two Nazi storm-troopers were sentenced to a year in prison for assaulting a 13-year-old Arlington boy. Young Ricky Farber and some friends had walked by the headquarters after a dance at Washington-Lee High school. They were grabbed and forced into the Nazi house, where they were handcuffed and submitted to a frightening interrogation by gun-toting stormtroopers.

Rockwell's grinning blond followers wearing swastika armbands became familiar faces at Arlington school board meetings, where they protested newly enacted school integration. One flier read, "You can beat the federal race mixers." In 1965, Rockwell ran for governor of Virginia and garnered 6,366 votes.

By 1966 his promotion of the slogan "White power!" in speeches made him notorious enough for African-American author Alex Haley to interview him for *Playboy* magazine. (In the late 1970s, when Haley's life story was made into the TV series "Roots," Rockwell was portrayed in the sequel by Marlon Brando.) Rockwell told *Playboy* he foresaw serious race riots and that he planned to be

president of the United States by 1972. Rockwell made an unsuccessful attempt to cozy up to conservative theorist William F. Buckley Jr. His associates presented him to Christian fundamentalists as a modern “Saint Paul.”

With his flashing eyes and six-foot-four frame, “Rockwell has all kinds of leadership ability,” said a 19-year-old William and Mary student who a tape-recorded an interview with Rockwell at his headquarters in July 1967. “He never hesitates when he speaks, and he almost glows with confidence. It’s easy to see how he can use his power on ignorant people.”

Ruby Pierce, an employee of the Dominion Hills laundromat who was perhaps the last to converse with Rockwell, said: “He was polite and charming. He was tall and handsome and looked like a businessman.”

Rockwell’s violent rhetoric prompted a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation of him at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington in 1960. He was found to be of sound mind. He later boasted that he’d been arrested 100 times but never convicted by a jury. In 1966, when he appeared in a New York City criminal court on charges of incitement to riot through anti-Semitic remarks, Rockwell wore a bullet-proof vest. He’d been shot at before that fateful day in August 1967, and had sought permission to carry a pistol.

Rockwell’s father (George “Doc” Rockwell), reacting to the news of the assassination, said his son had always known he would die in such a fashion. “I think he would have liked to get rid of the whole Nazi mess,” he told a reporter from his home in Maine. “He was more afraid of his own people than people were of him.”

### **Aftermath of the Shooting**

The defiant and—to many observers—ludicrous behavior of the American Nazi Party was on full display during the controversial effort to bury the slain leader on August 29, 1967. Because he was a military veteran, Rockwell had won a Pentagon ruling that entitled him to be interred in a national cemetery. But military officials refused to allow his followers to use Nazi rituals, uniforms and flags in the ceremony (a position that was challenged on free-speech grounds by the American Civil Liberties Union).

At the National Cemetery in Culpeper, Virginia, Nazis and Defense Department military police faced off in a six-hour “classic comic fiasco,” as then-*Washington Star* reporter Ken Ikenberry recalled in a 2005 interview. In the end, instead of being buried, Rockwell’s body was returned in a hearse to an Arlington funeral home to be cremated. His ashes were last seen with his 33-year-old successor, Matthias Koehl. The Nazis then held a memorial service at the Wilson Boulevard barracks, which drew some 30 admirers from as far away as Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Wisconsin.



Northern Virginia Sun

Arlington Nazis at the house on North Randolph Street made no secret of their message in the early 1960s.

Rockwell's suspected assassin, meanwhile, was sitting in the Arlington County jail. John Patler had been arrested at the intersection of Washington Boulevard and North Inglewood Street as he ran from a bus stop at nearby Harrison Street. Suspiciously running while wiping his head with a towel and with his pants wet to the knees, Patler had been spotted by deputy police chief Raymond S. "Boots" Cole (who knew the regular Nazis by sight), who radioed other officers to make the arrest.

What was believed to be Patler's discarded raincoat and baseball-type cap were found in a yard at 1033 North Larrimore Street, behind the Dominion

Hills center. His suspected weapon, a 40-year-old German Mauser semiautomatic pistol that fires 7.63 mm rounds, was recovered by Arlington patrolman Francis Beakes abandoned in Four Mile Run, below a footbridge in Bon Air Park.

In the run-up to the December trial, it emerged that Patler, who had been photographed standing with Rockwell at Nazi rallies, had maintained on-again, off-again membership in the party. A dark-haired “greasy Greek,” as one Nazi labeled him, he was suspected of being a Marxist. But he also pressed to rid the American party of its German trappings. (It was Patler’s idea to change the name from the American Nazi Party to the National Socialist White People’s Party, which was accomplished in January 1967.) After joining during the party’s formative years, Patler had left in 1961 to set up a rival group, then returned a couple of years later. He had split again in April 1967, but a photostatted letter from Patler found in Rockwell’s wallet after the killing suggests that he again was seeking to reconcile with his mentor.

Soon after the arrest, one of Patler’s attorneys, Helen Lane, a controversial former member of the Arlington School Board and longtime Rockwell friend, announced that her client would plead not guilty. Commonwealth’s Attorney William J. Hassan would ask for the death penalty.

At the trial in the court of Arlington Circuit Judge Charles S. Russell, defense attorneys Thomas Harrigan and Thomas Morris argued that Patler was not among the four persons on that August day who reportedly were aware that Rockwell had left the barracks to do his laundry. Instead of being at the Dominion Hills shopping center, the defense said, Patler—who did not drive—was three miles away at his Lyon Village home at 2522 Lee Highway (now the parking lot of Pioneer Motors) until 11:45 a.m. He had run errands with his wife and child, making a purchase at Arlington Paper Supply on Washington Boulevard (now the headquarters of Red Top Cab). Patler claimed he and his wife had quarreled and that he then went out for a walk.

Among the Nazis, only new party leader Koehl testified (a Nazi flier would later accuse him of being the killer).

The prosecution reported having found footprints traced to Patler on the roof of the shopping center. The employees of nearby Tom’s Barber Shop (which is still in business), Tom Blakeney and James Cummings, along with Econ-o-Wash owner J.W. Hancock, all said they tried to chase the killer. A witness named Glenn Hall of 934 North Liberty Street testified that he saw a man fitting Patler’s description running through the residential neighborhood a few minutes after the gunshots, and realized it a couple of days later when he saw his picture in the newspaper. Similar testimony came from Rebecca Middleton, who lived at 863 North Liberty Street, as well as other neighbors along the

killer's escape route, among them Nancy Thoburn, Alma Kilpatrick, and Mrs. Louis M. Burgess. Prosecutor Hassan also set out to prove that the murder weapon had been test-fired on Patler's father-in-law's property in Highland County, Virginia.

On December 15, 1967, the jury of 10 men and two women, after a four-hour deliberation, found Patler guilty of murdering Rockwell. Patler's wife Alice screamed, "No, no no!" The jurors gave him a 20-year prison sentence.

### **Nazi Notoriety and the Press**

One irony of the Nazis' noisy quarter-century presence in Arlington was the division among residents and onlookers over whether the odious group should be scrutinized—or simply ignored. "Most Arlingtonians disregarded them," recalled Jean Mostrom, who heard the sirens in her McKinley Road neighborhood on the day of Rockwell's shooting. Working as a census taker in 1960, Mostrom was instructed not to risk knocking on the door of the house set far back in the woods at the Nazis' Wilson Boulevard location (which some nicknamed "Hatemonger Hill").

U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy declined to put the American Nazi Party on a list of dangerous domestic groups because he didn't want to boost their notoriety. (Similarly, newspapers in Germany, where memories of the Nazi government were still fresh in 1967, gave Rockwell's assassination only brief coverage.) Peak membership in the American Nazi Party probably never reached more than 50-60, according to John Rees, a Baltimore-based author of a newsletter on fringe groups.

Reporters assumed that many of the Nazi "stormtroopers" were actually FBI infiltrators, recalls Ikenberry. (One putative member of the Nazis in 1960 was actually *Washington Daily News* reporter George Clifford, working undercover.) Some reporters were reluctant to venture on the Nazi property for fear of the reputedly vicious German shepherds in the yard (one was named J. Edgar, after FBI director Hoover). Yet Ikenberry says that when he and CBS News reporter Daniel Schorr raced to the barracks on the afternoon of the shooting, the dogs seemed timid.

The journalist who took the Nazis most seriously was Herman J. Obermayer, editor and publisher of the *Northern Virginia Sun*. (Its offices for decades displayed the daily's nameplate on Washington Boulevard at the gateway to Clarendon; its current descendent is the weekly *Sun-Gazette*.) In an oral history conducted by the Arlington County Library staff in 1987, Obermayer said: "The American Nazi Party in Arlington, I felt, was a terrible blur on the community, and that their activities should be fully reported." The three other daily newspapers, the *Washington Post*, the *Star*, and the *Daily News*, all fol-

lowed a policy of “quarantine.” “I always thought [the Nazis] stayed here because they were welcomed here,” said Obermayer, who is Jewish. “I really believe that if you made them miserable enough, they would have left.”

As he declared in *Sun* editorials and in an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Obermayer wanted authorities to more aggressively investigate whether the Nazis paid their business taxes and maintained licenses for their printing operations. And he spoke of a baby girl he heard had died while living in the Nazi barracks, which the Commonwealth’s Attorney never investigated. (When he retired, Obermayer donated a collection of 1,150 American Nazi-related clippings, fliers, brochures, party newspapers, photos and negatives to the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University.)

One group of Arlington residents who decided to take on the Nazis was an organization called Citizens Concerned. In 1961, some 50 local activists began meeting at the Pershing Drive home of Charles and Carolyn Planck. They included Rev. George Yount of First Presbyterian Church along with many Jewish Arlingtonians—stepping forward only a decade and a half after the Holocaust—among them Sylvia Nachman, whose family operated the well-known bicycle shop. Under co-chairs Carolyn Planck and Clarence Salisbury (vice president of the Arlington Civic Federation), they shared information on the Nazis compiled by the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington. And they warned of Nazi indoctrination of local high school students.

Citizens Concerned eventually approached Commonwealth’s Attorney Hassan with requests for public education campaigns and an investigation into possible Nazi violations of zoning ordinances. After studying the American Nazi articles of incorporation, the group approached the Virginia State Corporation Commission and successfully lobbied it to revoke the party’s charter. In 1962, the Virginia General Assembly declared Rockwell’s group an enemy of the state.

### **Funding the Arlington Properties**

The financing of Rockwell’s band of underemployed and marginalized agitators has always been murky. But funding quite likely was one reason he chose Arlington as headquarters for a party that would eventually form chapters in Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Dallas (as well as links to counterparts overseas). According to historian Frederick J. Simonelli, the struggling Rockwell depended on his mother for income for all of his life. Once famous, he made money from campus speaking fees. And he had some wealthy benefactors among far-right Christian groups in Dallas and in California (though the Dallas connection may have been exaggerated). It also was



rumored he received money from Arab governments angered by the creation of Israel.

Yet another source of direct support was a Baltimore heir and white supremacist named Harold Noel Arrowsmith Jr., who owned a house in Arlington and lent it to the Nazis in the late 1950s. So began a series of secretly shifting Nazi headquarters and dormitory locations that would play host to numerous public skirmishes.

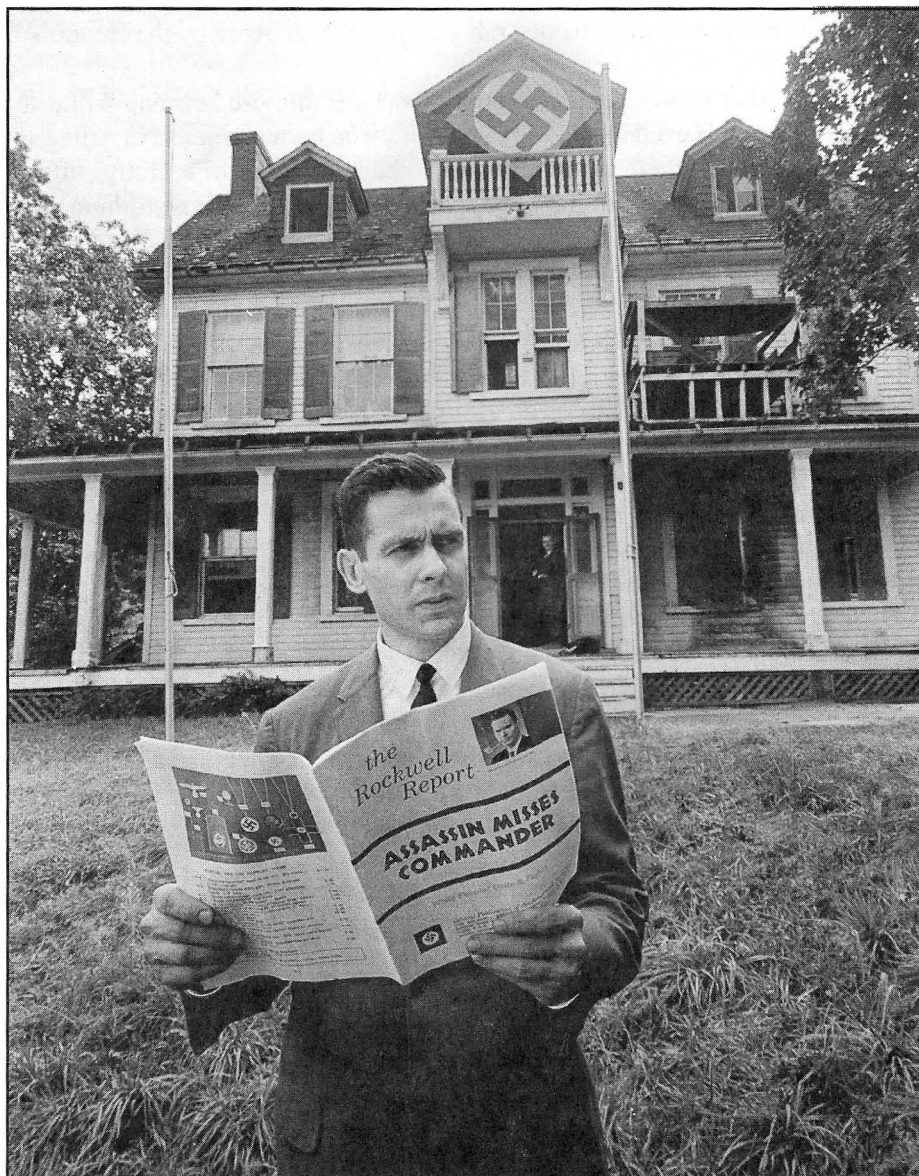
In 1959, Rockwell was known by locals to have set up headquarters in a private home, a rambler at 6512 Williamsburg Boulevard, near the intersection with Sycamore Street. On the evening of April 21, Arlington police and Commonwealth's Attorney Hassan, armed with a search warrant, raided the home, finding a pistol, a revolver, rifles and 10,000 anti-Jewish pamphlets. Some 100 neighbors looked on as Nazis marched in and out of the home giving the "Sieg Heil" salute. Police charged various Nazis with disorderly conduct and maintaining a public nuisance.

In late 1960, a backer named Floyd Fleming, of Southeast Washington, bought an Arlington house for Rockwell to use at 928 North Randolph Street. To help with monthly payments, the top floor was rented to the Virginia Mental Health Association and the local bus drivers union. The presence of the Nazis, however, prompted insurance companies to refuse to insure the house. So the mental health group and the bus drivers moved out, and real estate broker Rose Hall, having felt deceived by the surprise Nazi tenants, announced to reporters her plan to foreclose on the deed of trust and auction the home. But within a week, the Nazis managed to raise the money to buy the property outright, negating the need for insurance.

Five years later, however, in December 1965, the Internal Revenue Service locked the party out of the Randolph Street headquarters for nonpayment of taxes of \$7,000. After the IRS confiscated their printing equipment, the Nazis moved their printing operations to a plant outside Fredericksburg.

Meanwhile, since 1960 Anna Kern, the widow of Arlington Admiral Willis Kern, had been renting the party a large old home on Wilson Boulevard for \$200 a month. Some 16 of the most important Nazis lived in the three-story wooden house at the end of a winding driveway. They decorated it with a large swastika on its roofline. Within months of Rockwell's assassination, the owner reclaimed it to sell to developers, and the windows were seen boarded up, its swastika-bedecked gatepost thrown on its side, and a Star of David painted on its driveway.

In 1968, some 10-12 Nazis moved into a temporary headquarters in a shoddy two-story wooden house at 806 Taylor Street—unbeknownst to the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Long, who lived two houses up. (The site is now



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**Matt Koehl, general secretary of the American Nazi Party, standing in front of the party barracks on Wilson Boulevard ("Hatemonger Hill") as he talks to reporters about the succession to the slain leader's post. He is holding a report about a previous attempt on Rockwell's life.**

the building owned by the National Rural Electric Cooperation Association.) Later that year, with great secrecy, the group took up residence in a brick building at 2507 North Franklin Road, just off Wilson Boulevard in Clarendon. (It currently is a café and arts center called the Java Shack.) Displaying a “White Power” sign across the facade, the Nazis would share that building with dentist and former County Board member Lucas H. Blevins, who told the *Northern Virginia Sun* he found the arrangement “nauseating.”

Observers who glimpsed the inner sanctum of Rockwell’s headquarters were impressed most by its utter banality. New York City Police investigator Tony Ulasewicz (later famous from the Watergate scandal) visited Rockwell in late 1961 and recalled in his memoirs: “What greeted me was a grubby haunted house....Clearly, this was no showpiece that would attract membership into Rockwell’s party. His glowing, published accounts of his party’s progress had been nothing more than a pack of lies. As I looked around, I noticed that bullet holes punctured all the walls of the house...I also saw a pack of unpaid bills high on a table. Rockwell’s electricity had been turned off, and he used kerosene lamps to light the place.”

Disgust at Rockwell’s domestic habits was expressed even by one of his own. In a typescript memoir acquired by the Arlington Public Library, a former Nazi housemate noted wryly that “Link,” as Rockwell was called, “as usual” took the largest bedroom. “Link would usually sit around and read or sleep away most of the day while the rest of us would work or look for work,” he wrote. “Many sympathizers would bring food over to the headquarters during the winter months, and Link would take the choicest food and hog it up and leave the scraps for everyone else.”

### **An Underwhelming Legacy**

In his estate, Rockwell left behind \$257 in cash, his trademark corncob pipe and various writings. Successor Koehl tried to further the movement, but was no match for Rockwell as a rabble-rousing speaker.

Newspapers in subsequent years would report sporadic feuds—even gun battles—by, against, and between Nazis. In 1976, during Arlington’s Bicentennial Independence Day parade, the Nazis marched with a swastika-decorated drum corps, and in 1977, some 30-40 anti-racist protestors threw rocks and eggs at Nazi headquarters on Franklin Road. On the tenth anniversary of Rockwell’s shooting, Koehl led a commemorative ceremony at the spot where Rockwell died, displaying a wreath and a swastika painted on the pavement.

John Patler, while still free awaiting an appeal of his murder conviction, in 1969 won a \$15,000 libel ruling against a Nazi official who had told the FBI that Patler had stolen the gun used to kill Rockwell. After losing an appeal to

the Virginia Supreme Court, Patler served four years at a camp near Martinsville, Virginia. He was paroled in August 1975, but parole violations would land him back in prison until the early '80s. In 1977, he had announced he would change his name back to its Greek original, John Christ Patsolos (he had chosen the anglicized name Patler for its resemblance to Hitler). He reportedly went on to launch a Spanish-language newspaper, but after it failed, became a commercial artist.

In 1982, Martin Kerr, an organizer at the Franklin Road headquarters, announced that the organization was changing its name to New Order and moving to the Midwest (later settling in New Berlin, Wisconsin). Before the group dispersed, Koehl in 1983 won permission to celebrate "White Pride Day" with members of the Maryland Ku Klux Klan at a controversial ceremony at Yorktown High School. Authorities permitted the event on free-speech grounds, though some anti-Nazi protesters were arrested for trespassing.

Another Arlington-based Nazi, Harold Covington, who shows up in local newspaper photos in the mid-1970s, moved back to his home state of North Carolina and set up a Nazi training camp near Raleigh, later running unsuccessfully for state attorney general.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rockwell's legacy was being carried on by the National Socialist White Peoples' Party headed by Covington (who uses the name Winston Smith). The group sells Rockwell's writings and audiotaped speeches on Web sites. But when Arlingtonians tell the story of their hometown, the name George Lincoln Rockwell is seldom mentioned.

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Charles S. Clark is a longtime Arlingtonian, local columnist, and writer specializing in education. He would like to thank the archivists and librarians in the Virginia room of the Arlington Public Library for their help with this article.

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